

Sara Black

Research Abstract and Job Talk Description

My current book project, *Psychotropic Society: The Medical and Cultural History of Drugs in France, 1840-1920*, traces the ways in which the everyday consumption of psychotropic substances blurred the lines between objective science and subjective stimulation, calculated therapeutic practice and chemically induced self-discovery. It focuses on opium, morphine, ether, chloroform, cocaine, and hashish—all substances used both to control pain and to produce pleasure, at a time when the boundaries between “medical” and “recreational” drug use were ill defined and permeable. I argue that between 1840 and 1920 an explosion in medical and scientific knowledge production surrounding psychotropic drugs precipitated the emergence of a new social norm: the chemical enhancement of modern life. Doctors, pharmacists, and the state sought to mobilize these substances to relieve pain in the birthing room and on the battlefield, to restore sanity in the asylum, and to shore up their own authority over the bodies of citizens. Yet research on the therapeutic potential of psychotropic substances was intertwined with doctors’ self-experimentation, global exchanges of medical knowledge and goods, bohemian recreational drug use, self-medication, and popular fascination with the increasingly common figure of the “addict.” My research emphasizes the centrality of these varied and seemingly liminal uses of drugs to the emergence of France’s psychotropic society. It examines the processes through which the pharmaceutical management of the miseries and discomforts of modern life became possible, desirable, and, eventually, indispensable.

“From Agony to Anesthesia: Medical Self-Experimentation and the Right to Freedom from Pain in Nineteenth-Century France”

This talk will explore how doctors’ self-experimentation with anesthetic ether at the French Academy of Sciences in 1847 sparked a revolution in surgical practice and the formation of new expectations regarding a patient’s right to freedom from pain. This topic is drawn from my current book project, *Psychotropic Society: The Medical and Cultural History of Drugs in Modern France, 1840-1920*, which argues that during the nineteenth century an explosion in medical and scientific knowledge production surrounding psychotropic drugs precipitated the emergence of a new social norm: the chemical enhancement of modern life.