

# Psychedelic Feminism

## A Radical Interpretation of Psychedelic Consciousness?

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*Nature is not only all that is visible to the eye. . . . It also includes the inner pictures of the soul.*

—Edvard Munch

*The reality of magic exists somewhere between the ontology of structure and the inscription of meaning.<sup>1</sup>*

—Bonnie Glass-Coffin

## Introduction

Psychedelic feminism is a recent idea developed by cultural activist Zoe Helene to describe the ways psychedelic psychospiritual practices can empower women. This article seeks to explicate the ways psychedelic feminism is grounded in ecofeminism, third-wave feminism, and the French feminist idea of *écriture féminine* (writing the feminine). The historical context of Western psychedelic-assisted therapy reveals the ways psychedelic experiences can facilitate psychospiritual transformation and shed light on contemporary

psychospiritual practices as ways to cultivate subjectivity, imagination, and participatory consciousness as elements of psychedelic feminism.

Psychedelic experiences are theorized as innately feminist, which expands the concept of psychedelic feminism and interprets it as a feminist practice that is not based in biological gender. This is an introductory exploration, with the hopes that I'll be able to present more concrete evidence and broader analysis in a future study. The ideas and descriptions are based on participant observation and interviews with sixteen women who work with psychedelics for personal and spiritual growth<sup>2</sup> and all direct interview quotes originate in that primary source data. Although there are many ideas to flesh out, two main points are discussed. Psychedelic feminism empowers women by encouraging participatory consciousness, in which individuals engage in a meaning-making process. Agency is encouraged via intuitive ways of knowing, intentionally valuing subjectivity, and engaging the imagination to create meaning and re-engineer the self. In the process of delving into the subjective psychedelic experience, psychedelic feminism also promotes experiential knowledge of interconnectivity, a feeling of being connected to realms beyond oneself. These elements of participatory consciousness and connectedness are foundations of psychedelic psychospiritual work, revealing that psychedelic feminism is the core of psychedelic psychospiritual work.<sup>3</sup> Although especially important for women, this feminist core functions regardless of the gender of participants.

## Psychedelic Feminism

*Psychedelic feminism* is a term coined in the last decade by Helene, an advocate for psychedelic journeys for personal and spiritual growth. Helene describes psychedelic feminism as “a sub-genre of feminism that embraces the transformational and inspirational power of psychedelic healing, transformation, self-liberation, and mind/body/spirit exploration in altered states of consciousness—[and] encourages women to explore the wilderness within, where they can learn more deeply about themselves, in part to face core feminist issues in fresh and exciting ways.”<sup>4</sup> In 2007, Helene founded a company called Cosmic Sister specifically to empower women in the psychedelic community. It originated in an ecofeminist organization which she had formed to address

various ecological issues. Her goals for Cosmic Sister are twofold. First, she seeks to support the voices of women in the psychedelic community, which she sees as a male-dominated arena. Second, her organization provides grants for women to participate in reputable ayahuasca retreats with indigenous Shipibo people in a specific part of the Peruvian Amazon where ayahuasca is legal.<sup>5</sup> Some of the retreats are women-only and aim to create a physically and emotionally safe environment for women to (as Helene claims) “get our power back by purging the accumulated harm of abuse in our culture.”

Medicine retreats offer ritualized, ceremonial work with psychedelic substances. The retreats include events called “medicine ceremonies,” or “medicine work,” because the consciousness-altering, plant-derived substances are called “plant medicines.” Although Western women may travel to Peru to legally participate in ayahuasca retreats, some women also participate in underground ceremonies in the United States with a variety of psychedelic substances. The beginning point to define *psychedelic feminism* is a practice by which women consume psychedelic substances, and “work with” the psychedelic experiences to recreate and empower themselves. Although the retreats sponsored by Cosmic Sister are ayahuasca retreats within the Shipibo tradition, many variations of psychedelic medicine retreats exist. Women may work with other psychedelic substances, some of which are plant medicines, while others are synthetic. The medicine ceremonies are configured in many different ways. Although the differences between the various types of psychedelic substances and retreats are worthy of analysis, this truncated study uses the simplified terms of *psychedelics*, *psychedelic medicine*, or *plant medicines* to refer to categories of psychoactive substances used for personal and spiritual growth.

Whether women participate in women-only ceremonies or mixed-gender ceremonies, or work alone, the ways psychedelic psychospiritual work empowers women are embedded within broader themes of subjectivity and connection: connecting to others, connecting to nature, connecting to the cosmos, and connecting to an inner voice through the value of subjectivity and the agency to create meaning. When an intense psychedelic experience entails an overriding sense of being one with the cosmos, psychedelic researcher William A. Richards calls the experience a sense of “unitive consciousness.” Others have used the phrase “radical unity and interconnectivity.” Sometimes it is an experience felt in a specific medicine ceremony and sometimes it

develops over a period of time working with psychedelic substances, which are sometimes called “entheogens,” or substances that manifest the Divine within.<sup>6</sup> Like many others in the psychedelic renaissance, Helene considers consciousness-altering “sacred plant” medicines to be entities that can aid healing. Helene considers ayahuasca and other sacred plant medicines “nature’s evolutionary allies.”<sup>7</sup> When specific plant medicines are intentionally taken as part of rituals officiated by Shipibo healers and shaman, they induce non-ordinary states of consciousness that facilitate what Helene calls healing work, or the “evolutionary work” of “identifying subconscious social programming within us so we can consciously select what is life-affirming, and work with what harms us or holds us back.”<sup>8</sup> This agency, claims Helene, is engendered by the important psychospiritual work of “re-uniting mind, body, and spirit.”<sup>9</sup>

According to Helene, because most women exist in cultures that are sexist and abusive toward women, medicine retreats held specifically for women are a potent venue for psychedelic healing and empowerment for women. Psychedelic feminism seeks to harness the potential of psychedelic experiences to empower women as individuals and to increase awareness of feminist ways of moving through the world. Helene considers ecofeminism the foundation for psychedelic feminism, because psychedelics can help us “see that we’ve separated ourselves from nature”<sup>10</sup> and help us have deeper respect for the delicate ecological balance of our ecosystem. Briefly situating psychedelic feminism within the context of several pertinent feminist concepts illuminates compatibilities among elements of psychedelic feminism, psychedelic experiences, and particular feminist ideologies, and confirms the importance of subjectivity and unitive consciousness to psychedelic feminism. Additionally, understanding the potential for an experience of radical interconnectedness within psychedelic psychospiritual work lays a groundwork for understanding the inherent feminist nature of psychedelic experiences.

## Feminist Contexts

Feminism has many faces and voices, and feminist contexts important to psychedelic feminism include ecofeminism, the French feminist theory of *écriture féminine* (literally “writing the feminine,” also implying creating the

feminine self), and third-wave feminism. Central ideas include claiming the agency to create one's identity and ultimately participate in creating one's own reality and exploring how humans interpret their relationship to nature (including the human psyche, human imagination, and the cosmos).

Foundations of ecofeminism date to Simone de Beauvoir's recognition in 1952 that the logic of patriarchy associates women with nature and marginalizes both. In the early 1970s, Françoise d'Eaubonne coined the term *l'éco-féminisme*, while one branch of feminism linked the domination of women with exploitation of the environment and called for a "unification of feminist and ecological interest in a vision of society transformed from values of possession, conquest, and accumulation to [the values of] reciprocity, harmony and mutual interdependence."<sup>11</sup> Rooted in a nonhierarchical, democratic vision, ecofeminism recognizes that humans have no exceptional place in nature and exist within a moral framework that includes earth, plants, animals, and humans as equally important parts of the ecosystem. A core tenet of ecofeminism maintains that an overarching logic of domination exploits nature for its resources, and simultaneously oppresses people by associating them with nature based on gender, race, class, sexuality, and physical disability. Ecofeminist activism aspires to end all of the oppressions that result from the logic of domination and spark a shift in values. The ecofeminist moral stance values relationships and "presupposes that environmental ethics will benefit from creating a theoretical space for human relations to nature, personal lived experience, and a vocabulary of caring, nurturing, and maintaining connection."<sup>12</sup> Ecofeminism places a premium on care, trust, reciprocity, and understanding ourselves in relation to others (human and nonhuman), and as a result, sees personal narrative as a vehicle for creating connection and caring and therefore a moral community.<sup>13</sup> Personal narrative is a way to avoid dualism and abstract categories, by exploring difference based in the specifics of lived experience.<sup>14</sup> Ecofeminism values subjective knowledge revealed by personal narrative, and considers it an avenue of connection.

Ecofeminism overlaps with third-wave feminism in some areas. The desire to transcend hierarchies and dualisms echoes through the third wave feminism of the 1990s and onward.<sup>15</sup> Third-wave feminism introduced fresh "tactical moves" in response to perceived gaps in second-wave feminism. Resisting a monodimensional category of womanhood, third-wave feminists emphasize inclusiveness and diversity. Third-wave tactics foreground "personal narratives

that illustrate an intersectional and multi-perspectival version of feminism.” Influenced by postmodernism, third-wave feminism rejects grand narratives and declares that “there is no one way to be a woman.”<sup>16</sup> Like ecofeminism, third-wave feminism values subjectivity, which is entwined with the belief that a woman has the agency to create herself as she wishes.

Many third-wave feminists feel alienated from second-wave feminism and are sometimes reticent to adopt the term *feminism* due to the media backlash to the women’s movement in the 1980s and 1990s that depicted feminists as dogmatic, militant, and man-hating. Third-wave feminists seek to redress what they perceive (rightly or wrongly) as the shortcomings of second-wave feminism by adopting flexible, situation-based stances that accept complexity, contradiction, and paradox; highlight a multiplicity of views; and address contradictions between theory and lived experience. Crucially, third-wave feminism defies easy categorization or definition as it rejects ideological rigidity. Various aiming to be accessible to nonacademics and inclusive of class, race, and gender-fluid individuals, it often seeks to highlight individual differences and personal narratives with the goals of embracing “a multiplicity of identities, accept[ing] the messiness of lived contradiction, and eschew[ing] a unifying agenda.”<sup>17</sup>

Third-wave feminist texts that create meaning, whether through language, fashion, art, music, or a myriad of other venues, often strategically employ contradictions to allow “for possibilities of self-determination, transcendence, and counter-imaginings that embody and foster a sense of agency.”<sup>18</sup> In ways that echo French feminist *écriture féminine*, discussed below, third-wave texts “function to create an alternate space where writers and readers can engage in self-determination and self-definition through the disruption of traditional definitions, stereotypes, and identities. As illustrated by their refusal to adopt expected labels and their use of polyvocal terms, these authors’ choices demonstrate an agential orientation that embodies self-determination. Instead of outright rejection of patriarchal ideas and language, these writers simultaneously resist and engage in these rhetorical strategies” of contradiction.<sup>19</sup> This strategy of self-presentation as complex and multilayered *and* feminist might be signified by wearing a vintage 1950s prom dress with fake glitter eyelashes and combat boots, or (as one woman I interviewed had done) cultivating a career as a sex worker as a way of exploring her relationships with men. Third-wave feminists allow feminists

to be “fun, feminine and sex-positive.”<sup>20</sup> As they refuse dualisms and seek complex interpretations, they acknowledge that they are “creating their own reality” and that what they do has repercussions beyond themselves. They shoulder the responsibility of “agency as a communal effort that builds upon itself [and] reveals new possibilities for others who feel constrained by the prescribed choices of traditional society.”<sup>21</sup>

Ensnared within third-wave feminism is concern for environmental issues, although the beginnings of ecofeminism predate the third wave. The growth of the environmental movement in the 1960s quickened with the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) and paralleled the rise of the counterculture, the antiwar movement, the civil rights movement and the women’s movement. Early critics of the ways modern consumer culture was wreaking havoc on the environment highlighted the need to protect the environment as a public good. By the end of the 1960s, environmentalist rhetoric had become more radical and linked pollution to capitalist power structures that undermined democracy and equality. Adam Rome, a historian of the environmental movement in the United States, argues that localized campaigns for environmental causes at the grass roots level “depended on a volunteer corps of women.” These women eco-activists were more often than not white and middle-class. Some of them described concern for the environment as an extension of their traditional caretaking roles and labeled it “global housekeeping,” even while women activists stepped outside of the bounds of traditional women’s roles in the home and into the political and public spheres.<sup>22</sup>

Women’s grassroots involvement in the environmental movement in the United States charted a pragmatic course to engage with nature. French feminism took a more intellectual route and laid a groundwork for the conceptual foundations of ecofeminism.<sup>23</sup> Understanding the ways third-wave feminism and *écriture féminine* embrace complexity and acknowledge women’s ongoing participation in creating reality can bolster our understanding of how psychedelic feminism subverts normative discourse.

French feminism analyzes the symbolic structures that undergird thought patterns, cultural values, and social institutions that create reality, and calls attention to “deep structures of feminine repression in the symbolic oppression of women’s subjectivity, body, and desire in the logocentrism of Western knowledge.”<sup>24</sup> In contrast to American second-wave feminism (“Women’s

Studies”) that sought to recover and illuminate women’s experiences within history and culture, French feminism theorizes about the mysterious feminine that had been repressed and misrepresented in Western ways of knowing, necessitating a journey into the deep recesses of the psyche to develop new epistemological frameworks.

French feminism conceives of “feminine” as everything that had been exiled from the “phallocratic discourse” built on Enlightenment thinking that reified logic, rationality, empiricism, linearity, individualism, and bounded, goal-oriented processes of efficiency. Phallocratic (“masculine”) discourse seeks to tame, conquer, colonize, penetrate, dominate, and get to the point as quickly as possible. The symbolic feminine (a concept, not a gender) is everything that has been repressed, misrepresented, or marginalized by the Western narrative of progress.<sup>25</sup> The symbolic feminine encompasses what has been excised as unnecessary, a threat, or excess: irrationality, the unconscious, emotion, imagination, play, mystery, and pleasure without purpose or closure. Feminine discourse is similar to the Bakhtinian carnivalesque that subverts the established order and revels in the messiness of the “grotesque body” that is always in flux and cannot be contained. Like Bakhtin’s grotesque body, the female body has ambiguous boundaries and is therefore a threat to phallocratic order. French feminism interlaces the biological female body with the symbolic interpretation of the feminine to claim that the difference between masculine and feminine discourse is grounded in uniqueness of the female body. The female body, they claim, experiences pleasure in manifold ways, in contrast to the male orientation around phallic pleasure and the closure of orgasm. Due to the physical ability to bear a child, the female body has a capacity for “libidinal fusion” with others that threatens the concept of bounded individuality. While acknowledging that the female body is also culturally constructed, the crucial claim of the French feminists is that the female body and its ability to experience pleasure and connection with others cannot be defined, controlled, or contained by phallogocentric discourse. It will always overflow.

Reconceptualizing the body, and particularly women’s bodies, is primary to the task of defanging the patriarchal logic of domination. The idea of the female body as what feminist scholar Elizabeth Grosz calls a “model of seepage”<sup>26</sup> examines bodily boundaries and replaces dichotomies of self and other with ambiguous boundaries. Grosz describes the pregnant woman, the lactating woman, and the menstruating woman as challenging duality and



separateness. It is a model in which, as French feminist philosophers remarked, “feminine structures of embodiment where Self and Other are contiguous in pregnancy, childbirth and nursing.”<sup>27</sup> Instead of viewing the dissolution of boundaries as pathological, French feminism imbues the fluidity between self and other with enjoyment and interprets it as an erotic expansion of self.

*Écriture féminine* expresses the feminine in ways that resist the strictures of phallographic discourse and embodies metaphor, wordplay, and a fluid dance of biology and cultural inscription. In other words, *écriture féminine* attempts to mirror the boundless eroticism of the female body and embrace ambiguity. It is a subversive call to open the door to other kinds of writing, thus other kinds of thinking, thus other ways of being and creating one self. While *écriture féminine* is an attempt to creep closer to the symbolic feminine and embody it in language, because language is limited, it will never fully mediate the mysterious, complex, infinite feminine.

In an essay entitled “Earthbody and the Personal Body as Sacred,” ecofeminist Charlene Spretnak weaves *écriture féminine*, ecofeminism, and spirituality together. By rejecting the dualisms of male and female and grounding spirituality in the lived, subjective experience of the body, inseparable from nature’s ecology of which it is a part, Spretnak offers a way to upend the patriarchal logic of domination: “One of the most deeply challenging dimensions of feminism is the development of a spiritual orientation that rejects the patriarchal nightmare and embraces both the Earthbody and the personal body—as manifestations of divine creativity in the cosmos. The movement called ‘Women’s spirituality’ is vital and diverse, [and has] proven to be a potent antidote to the negation of the female so central to patriarchal culture.”<sup>28</sup> Building on the belief that the body and the environment are contiguous and urging a deepening of that connection rather than a rejection of it opens the door first to accepting the lived experience of the female body, then to moving beyond physical gender and even beyond a consciousness bounded by the physical body. “Feminine” is a stance rather than a set of physiological characteristics. Rejecting a patriarchal stance in which compartmentalization and hierarchy allow for domination, an ecofeminist spiritual stance seeks expansion and infinite inclusiveness, echoing the psychedelic “unitive consciousness.” The ecofeminist awareness of the body as contiguous with nature intersects with the psychedelic experience of individual consciousness as contiguous with cosmic consciousness.

Does an earth-based ecofeminist spiritual view essentialize women by claiming women are inherently more nurturing and closer to nature than men? The debate remains vexed. Those who defend ecofeminism against essentialism propose that rather than essentializing women, it invites men into a new paradigm and calls for a new role for all humans, in which the tasks of nurturing and caretaking are shared by all, and ultimately refuses dualisms of male vs. female or humans vs. nature.<sup>29</sup> Parallel to third-wave feminism, French feminism skirts essentializing women by “refusing to posit a unitary, sealed or universal model of femininity and by underscoring instead women’s boundlessness, polyphony and diversity.”<sup>30</sup>

This symbolic view of the feminine opens a space to conceive of psychedelic consciousness as quintessentially feminine, where “feminine” is a concept rather than a sexed or gendered characteristic, and as a subversive text that exists outside of phallogocentric discourse and challenges it. This feminist interpretation of psychedelic experiences rests on a claim that they can be read as psychobioculturally constructed texts and psychospiritual texts that resist being tamed by language. Like the female body posited by the theory of *écriture féminine*, they have biological, symbolic, and interpretive dimensions that can’t be wholly contained by the linear and limited tool of language.<sup>31</sup> Again and again, scholars have noted the limitations of language to express ineffable psychedelic experiences that overflow with irrationality, images from the unconscious, emotion, and imagination. Any attempt to achieve closure with words fails. Psychedelic experiences offer infinite possibilities for libidinous fusion: with other humans, nature, spirits, ancestors, and the cosmos. Altered states of consciousness challenge our culturally constructed concepts of the body, individuality, gender, time, and every other bounded category structured by linear human thought. Discussion of consciousness, like the body, is always mediated by text and yet cannot be contained by it. A foray into expanded consciousness is a plunge into the realm of the symbolic feminine which will always be in excess of language. The ability of psychedelic states to replace the phallogocentric discourse with one of mystery and infinite connection and complexity is what makes psychedelic experiences fundamentally feminist. Psychedelic feminism, then, is a cornerstone of all psychedelic experiences. Exploring altered states of consciousness presents the possibility to remake the self, and proposes new lexicons beyond our current cultural tools, even while recognizing that the mystery of consciousness will

always overflow our capacity to understand it. Expanding “nature” to include “cosmos” is to infinitely expand our view of nature and our place within it. Psychedelic feminism recognizes embodied consciousness as connected to cosmic consciousness.

Recognition of human intelligence as merely one intelligence among many in the ecosystem enables us to accept a humble position of not valuing human intelligence above other intelligences and accords ontology and epistemology equal footing. It also allows us to relinquish rational, prefrontal cortex control to the fluidity of unfinished processes. Ecofeminism acknowledges itself as always “in-process;” “it may never have the closure of a complete and finished theory.”<sup>32</sup> Third-wave feminism surfs the contradictions inherent in lived experience and gives credence to their subjectivity. *Écriture féminine* relishes the mysteries of the unconscious and the dynamic experiences of embodiment that can’t be boxed into patriarchal linearity. A short history of psychedelic experiences as potent agents of psychospiritual transformation reveals the ways psychedelic psychospiritual experiences resist a patriarchal logic of domination by facilitating subjective experiences of unitive consciousness and cultivating the agency to create meaning.

### **Brief History of Psychedelic Experiences as Tools for Transformation in the United States**

Although many cultures around the world have traditions of working with substances that induce non-ordinary states of consciousness, modern, Western cultures in the New World have much narrower history of working with psychedelic substances for healing and growth. This section furnishes a brief history of psychedelic-assisted therapy that began in the postwar years in the United States to provide a context for contemporary psychedelic transformational work. Many published sources offer satisfactory historical recaps as well as informative views of the ways psychedelics have been used as tools for transformation since LSD was first discovered to be psychoactive in 1943. Classic historical accounts include Jay Steven’s detailed social history of psychedelics in the United States, *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream* (1987) and Martin A. Lee and Bruce Shlain’s *Acid Dreams: The Complete Social History of LSD: The CIA, the Sixties, and Beyond* (1985).<sup>33</sup> *LSD Psychotherapy* (2001) by Czech psychiatrist

Stanislav Grof provides an account of the history of western psychedelic therapy and his own refinements of therapeutic use of psychedelic experiences, while in 2016 Richards published a compendium of thirty years of his research entitled *Sacred Knowledge: Psychedelics and Religious Experiences*.<sup>34</sup> An excellent and very readable account of recent research is presented by journalist Tom Schroder in *Acid Test: LSD, Ecstasy and the Power to Heal* (2014), while therapist Rachel Harris presents her own psychedelic experiences working with the Amazonian brew ayahuasca and a therapist's view of the importance of helping clients integrate their psychedelic experiences (2017).<sup>35</sup> More recently, popular writer Michael Pollan has captured publicity for his foray into psychedelic exploration with the publication of *How to Change Your Mind* (2018),<sup>36</sup> which contains a detailed account of interest in psychedelics in the recent past.

Research and discussion of psychedelic experiences are becoming more visible. While psychedelic substances are still illegal in the United States and research is tightly controlled, U.S. regulatory agencies, including the Food and Drug Administration, began approving limited research in the 1990s and publications and conferences have proliferated.<sup>37</sup> In the past five years, New York University psychiatrists have published groundbreaking studies detailing the ability of psychedelic-assisted therapy to diminish anxiety in terminally ill patients, and Johns Hopkins University researchers have explored how psychedelic states can illuminate the neurology of spirituality and facilitate wellness. Columbia University and Yale University psychiatrists have received multi-million-dollar grants to study the effects of psychedelic experiences on addiction and other mental health problems. Every week, popular media covers stories about micro-dosing with psychedelic substances and the consciousness-altering substance ayahuasca. National publications like the *New Yorker* and *Rolling Stone* have published major stories about both licit and illicit use of psychedelics to alleviate emotional suffering and improve mental health.<sup>38</sup> Interest in shamanic healing techniques and how they intersect with non-ordinary states of consciousness has also increased. Notably, although early psychedelic research sometimes attempted to fit psychedelic experiences within a medical model or traditional talk therapy model, the ability of psychedelics to prompt transcendent spiritual experiences led to the development of psychospiritual approaches, which echo today.

Although illegal in the United States for the past fifty-something years, psychedelic substances continue to intrigue many people. Statistics from the

Department of Justice reveal that by the late 1990s, 14 percent (almost one in six) of all Americans had experimented with psychedelic substances at some time over the course of their lifetimes and the 2015 *National Survey on Drug Use and Health* stated that 1.2 million Americans currently use “hallucinogens” (the term used by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, which publishes the report).<sup>39</sup> Attendance at conferences like Psychedelic Science and Horizons: New Perspectives in Psychedelics is skyrocketing and many media outlets report on these conferences. The renewed discussion and visibility of psychedelic research in the last decade or so has been labeled a psychedelic renaissance.<sup>40</sup> The psychedelic renaissance is informed by past explorations and a brief survey of previous research follows as a context for working with psychedelics as tools for transformation. While limited to a sample of the historical research and specifically limited to Western models, the ideas can help us understand how psychedelic research helped spawn a new alternative psychospiritual approach for working with psychedelic substances.

When Albert Hoffman discovered the psychoactive properties of LSD in 1943, a new chapter in the exploration of consciousness launched. What galvanized American interest was Aldous Huxley’s small book describing his mescaline experience, *The Doors of Perception*, published in 1953.<sup>41</sup> Huxley’s interest piqued when he read a 1952 article by Humphrey Osmond and John Smythies published in the *Journal of Mental Science*.<sup>42</sup> Osmond and Smythies, both psychiatrists in Canada, had experimented with mescaline hoping to understand the world of their psychiatric patients. In their article, they report that, because the hallucinogenic effects they experienced from mescaline seemed to mimic the symptoms reported by their patients who had been diagnosed with schizophrenia, there was the possibility that mental illness had a biochemical component. This intriguing, and at the time very original, idea promised to help Huxley understand the connection between mind and body as well as the relation between brain chemistry and consciousness. Huxley’s book helped spark a Western psychospiritual approach to psychedelic experiences.

The conversation Huxley initiated acknowledged positive and negative dimensions of psychedelic experiences and popularized ideas researchers had been pursuing since 1947 when psychiatrist Walter Stoll published the results of his Swiss study of the effects of LSD<sup>43</sup> and 1949 when the first U.S.

medical research on psychedelic substances was conducted by Max Rinkel at the Boston Psychiatric Hospital in Massachusetts.<sup>44</sup> Posing trenchant questions and building on his erudite knowledge of religious traditions, Huxley prompted readers to consider his mescaline-induced experience a mystical experience and as a glimpse of madness, as well as an experience that might help scientists learn about schizophrenia. Huxley's stature as a public intellectual prompted serious debate about the possible value of his experience and inspired scientific and psychiatric research with mescaline and LSD and many other lesser-known mind-altering substances. In 1957, Gordon Wasson's article on psilocybin mushrooms appeared as a cover story for *Life* magazine and interest increased. Notably, Harvard psychologist Timothy Leary, intrigued by Wasson's article, tried "magic mushrooms" while on vacation in Mexico and began his research with psilocybin at Harvard University in the early 1960s.<sup>45</sup> Leary and his coresearcher Richard Alpert brought a great deal of attention to the use of psychedelics for spiritual and personal growth in the 1960s.

Before LSD was delegalized in 1966, and before Nixon introduced the Controlled Substances Act of 1970 that categorized consciousness-altering substances as Schedule 1 drugs (those that pose a high risk of abuse with no medical value), thousands of research papers explored many aspects of psychedelic experiences. The range of interest in the 1950s and early 1960s was enormous. Spurred by the idea that the USSR was developing mind-control techniques, the U.S. military conducted secret experiments to test LSD as a truth serum and brainwashing weapon.<sup>46</sup> At the Rockefeller Institute in New York, a chemist recognized that LSD and serotonin had similar molecular structures and developed a theory about the biochemical basis of mental disorders.<sup>47</sup> In Canada, Osmond and Abrams were exploring the use of psychedelic experiences as part of a therapeutic program to combat alcoholism, while in the United States, medical doctor Sidney Cohen and psychologist Betty Eisner, pursued similar hopes. They believed psychedelic experiences could help patients access their unconscious psyche and developed psychedelic therapy techniques and ways to measure behavioral change in their patients.<sup>48</sup> Both teams were influenced by the pioneering efforts of layman Al Hubbard, whose systematic use of music and images to guide the psychedelic experience are acknowledged by Stevens as the "first testing ground for psychedelic therapy."<sup>49</sup> Later, in the 1960s and early 1970s, Mexican

psychiatrist Salvador Roquet combined sound and images, LSD and ketamine, group therapy, and other techniques, including those he adapted from the healing rituals of indigenous traditions in Mexico, to help psychodynamic material surface.<sup>50</sup> In California, psychiatrist Oscar Janiger specialized in administering psychedelics to artists in order to study creativity, while Art Kleps, who eventually founded the Neo-American Church, probed the relationships between religion and altered states of consciousness.<sup>51</sup> Other researchers examined how psychedelic experiences might help people deal with pain or help terminally ill patients cope with their imminent death.<sup>52</sup> The plethora of psychedelic studies in the 1950s and 1960s deserve an entire article; however, a brief introduction will have to suffice here to illustrate some Western ideas about psychedelics as tools for personal and spiritual growth.

### Psychedelic-Assisted Therapy

Before LSD was made illegal in the United States in 1966, many Western psychiatrists and psychologists were developing psychedelic therapy techniques, often using LSD, although other psychedelic substances were also used. Researchers developed two main branches of therapy using LSD: psycholytic therapy and psychedelic therapy.<sup>53</sup> Psycholytic therapy used a low dose (25–100 mcg LSD) over the course of many sessions and was more common in Europe, but also practiced in the United States. A low dose would be administered to the patient as an adjunct to other therapeutic techniques. In 1965, Harold A. Abramson, a research psychiatrist who conducted LSD research for many years at the New York state psychiatric hospital in Islip, described the goals for patients of psycholytic therapy as “greater maturity, with increasing social and physiological adaptive mechanisms.”<sup>54</sup> Hanscarl Leuner, a German psychiatrist who headed the Psychotherapeutic Department at the University of Gottingen in 1965, aimed for “cure through restructure of personality in the sense of a maturing process and loosening of infantile parental bonds, requiring several months.”<sup>55</sup> In his study, patients were carefully selected and treated in a special therapeutic community by personnel trained in therapy techniques. Psycholytic therapy considered the psychedelic experience as fitting within a traditional paradigm of talk therapy, in which the psychedelic substance enhanced the therapeutic process.

Many variations of psycholytic therapy existed and practitioners drew on a variety of psychotherapeutic techniques and theories that mostly maintained traditional methods and structures of psychodynamic therapy. Patients were usually offered a great deal of individual attention during the LSD sessions, as well as supportive group therapy, art therapy, and/or individual therapy sessions between LSD sessions. Patients were expected to discuss the LSD experience and the material it uncovered in depth. Some practitioners administered Ritalin during the LSD sessions in order to prompt more intense abreaction, while others used it to lessen anxiety in their patients.<sup>56</sup> Some practitioners stressed the crucial role of the patient–therapist relationship and resulting transference as the core of the “relearning process.”<sup>57</sup> Some therapists favored a “high degree of warmth and motherliness” as they developed rapport with patients, while others stressed the “importance of resuffering and reliving frustrated regressions” as the most important factor in success.<sup>58</sup> The target patients for psycholytic therapy, according to Leuner, included those with “classical indications for psychotherapy: neuroses, psychosomatic cases . . . psychopaths, sexual perverts, [and] border-line cases.”<sup>59</sup> Results were often not apparent until months after the psycholytic sessions had ended. Leuner noted there was always the risk of decompensation during the process, including reactions so severe that a patient might need to be hospitalized due to the power of the psychic material stirred up during the sessions. Experienced therapists would be able to handle the crisis and overall the risks were low in Leuner’s assessment. Carried out in a structured, clinical setting, he considered it safe and useful, even “preferable to other psychotherapeutic methods.”<sup>60</sup>

Another type of psychedelic-assisted therapy, called “psychedelic therapy,” decentered the authority of the therapist by relying much less on the expertise of the therapist or any particular therapeutic technique. Psychedelic therapy, more often used in the United States than in Europe, differed in several ways from psycholytic therapy. Practitioners administered high doses, typically 400 mcg but reaching much higher at times, designed to induce “cosmic-mystic experiences.” For example, researchers treating problems with alcohol favored high doses to provoke a “peak psychedelic experience,” which was considered a crucial element of the process.<sup>61</sup> The goal was a single, overwhelming, transcendental experience that would produce a monumental change in behavior and personality. Leuner described the goal as not “adaption to reality,” but rather “the fixation of the psychedelic experience” which would



lead to “a change of behavior.”<sup>62</sup> The hope that the psychedelic peak experience would be transformational exemplifies the lofty goals early psychedelic pioneers envisioned for this high-dose psychedelic therapy. Peak psychedelic experiences to facilitate therapeutic change often aimed beyond adaptation or managing psychological problems, to core transformation of a person. Transformation, however, is not derived only from the skill of the therapist or even the therapeutic structure. The process emphasizes the subjective experience of the patient as seminal to transformation. The peak psychedelic experience decentered the therapeutic process and resisted the authority of the expert therapist.

In the 1950s, Cornelius H. van Rhijn, a Dutch psychiatrist, developed a procedure which entailed settling the patient in a dark room for the duration of the LSD session, accompanied by an attendant who would exert a calm, quiet, unobtrusive presence, available to help if asked. The patient was otherwise left to his own devices during the experience. Afterwards, the individual wrote notes on the session and worked out the meanings of the experience on his own, unless he requested help from the therapist. While traditional Freudian practice was based on the authoritative expertise of the psychoanalyst, LSD therapy as posited by van Rhijn trusted the patient’s ability to heal himself: “the role of the therapist could be so much reduced that by means of LSD stimulation the patient could work out his problem largely by himself.”<sup>63</sup> Noting that this alternative kind of psychedelic-assisted therapy was both more efficient and cheaper than long-term therapy, van Rhijn explicitly based his optimism on the Jungian theory of the transcendental function.<sup>64</sup> Jung’s idea of the inherent ability of the psyche to cultivate a dialogue between the conscious and unconscious and reach new levels of synthesis to grow and heal, even when not directly referenced, echoes throughout much of the historical and contemporary discussion of psychedelic therapy.

Charles Savage, a psychoanalyst who conducted LSD research at the Spring Grove State Hospital in Maryland in the 1950s, theorized in 1964 that a crucial element in psychedelic therapy was a subjective experience of feeling intensely connected, which, if intense enough, approached a mystical experience, similar to that felt during a religious conversion experience. He posited that this transcendent (“peak”) experience provoked a new self-awareness and a pivotal change in outlook: “The artificial distinction between subject and object, self and world, conscious and unconscious, ego, id and superego are all

abolished. The person is at one with the universe. In his mystic selflessness he awakens with a feeling of rebirth, often physically felt, and he is provided with a new beginning, a new sense of values. He becomes aware of the richness of the unconscious at his disposal; the energies bound up in and by repression become available to him.”<sup>65</sup>

The peak experience was a crucial factor in therapeutic change, and several characteristics ascribed to a typical psychedelic experience were enlisted by researchers and therapists to explain the value of psychedelic-assisted therapy to re-engineer the self. In 1966, Robert Masters and Jean Houston published a now-classic compendium called *The Variety of Psychedelic Experiences* in which they outlined typical psychedelic experiences. According to their observation of 206 drug sessions and interviews with 214 individuals who had taken psychedelics, changes in sensory perception were often accompanied by heightened sensitivity to nonverbal communication and feelings of increased capacity for communication. Importantly, Masters and Houston also observed frequent “upsurge of unconscious material” and “an apparent nakedness of psychodynamic processes” that revealed the psychic interior of the person under the influence of the drug.<sup>66</sup>

Someone under the influence of LSD might feel a loosening of his ego boundaries, in which “ego” was interpreted as identity, persona, or self. In extreme cases, the user might feel that his boundaries had been so loosened that his ego “dissolved” and he was momentarily freed from his preconceptions of himself, similar to the way Huxley described his mescaline-induced liberation from his cerebral self which so constantly defined him. If the experience of letting go of one’s identity and ego was intense enough, a psychologist might call it “depersonalization” or “ego-death.” This is one of the characteristics that made the drug so attractive to the CIA, and also what made it attractive to therapists. Note however, that because this experience is subjective, it resists definition or empirical methods of study or measurement, especially since any description of the experience is hampered by the limitations of language. Entering the murky, untamable realms of the unconscious as a venue for healing work, rather than considering consciousness a frightening arena to be shaped or controlled with expertise or intellectualizing, echoes the French feminist idea that those mysterious marginal realms, considered the realm of the feminine, need to be embraced and that subjectivity is valuable exactly because it includes what the logic of domination excludes. Part of its value

is that it exists in excess of the confining boxes of linearity, language or even personhood. Under the influence of psychedelics, “subconscious thinking can be revealed without the censorship of the conscious mind. This capacity of the drug to dissolve the barriers between conscious and subconscious was often noted by researchers as its one incomparable accomplishment.”<sup>67</sup>

Peak psychedelic experiences often occasioned the most profound changes in people. One example was presented by Ruth Fox, the medical director for the National Council on Alcoholism, who relayed a 1962 study in which twenty alcoholics were treated for their drinking problems with LSD therapy.<sup>68</sup> In the study, the ideal psychedelic experience produced a “transcendental experience” in which the patient recognized he was part of “cosmic consciousness” and felt “whole, clean, grateful, and joyous, and loves all things animate and inanimate.”<sup>69</sup> Fox compared this experience to Abraham Maslow’s “peak experience” and William James’s description of religious or mystical conversion experiences. Such a powerful and ideal transcendent experience was highly correlated with changes in behavior and attitude of the patient. Although Fox noted that not all patients had such transformational moments, 55 percent of the twenty patients showed marked improvement and 25 percent showed moderate improvement as judged by a decrease in drinking and “improvement in the individual’s intrapsychic and interpersonal relationships.” At a three-year follow-up, 80 percent continued to show improvement.<sup>70</sup> As Lee and Shlain aptly note, successful psychedelic therapy allowed a person “to cut through a lot of psychological red tape.”<sup>71</sup> Psychedelic experiences, many researchers were claiming, could facilitate transformation. Psychedelic experiences helped clear a path through the chatter of the conscious mind and the ways it constructs ego, to dig into the precognitive unconscious, unearth habitual assumptions that constructed self identity, and allow for new constructions of the self.

Psychedelic-assisted therapy techniques often deviated from traditional therapy in a major aspect. Instead of relying on the expertise of the therapist to help interpret the unconscious material that surfaced during a session, the interpretive locus shifted to the patient. Although the therapist, or sometimes team of therapists and assistants, provided prior support and aftercare, the psychedelic session itself was unhampered by external input unless the patient requested it. The patient was allowed to feel, speak, and react freely with minimal response from others. A 2017 book about healing

with the assistance of MDMA emphasizes the importance of an open, nondirective attitude in the facilitator or attendant as crucial in the healing process.<sup>72</sup> Based on years of underground work with MDMA, the author (writing under the pseudonym Anne Other) charts the stories of many people whose lives changed due to MDMA sessions undertaken for the purposes of overcoming trauma. Noting that “MDMA enables an enormous expansion of consciousness” and emphasizing how important it is to let the person in MDMA therapy sink into her own internal landscape, the author states, “The attendant’s role is supportive, not prescriptive.” The person under the influence of MDMA should feel free to remain silent, or engage in conversation, and the attendant should be present, but minimally conversant as “any conversation may inadvertently be at cross-purposes” if initiated by the attendant.<sup>73</sup> The attendant must purposefully stay on the edges, rather than position him or herself as the authority or agent of healing, and risk misdirecting the session with a well-meaning interpretation or comment.

Contemporary psychedelic medicine ceremonies amplify this step toward decentering authority and focusing on the subjective psychedelic experience. Although the results of medicine ceremonies may be therapeutic (and the facilitators may even be therapists), ceremonies are not presented as a form of therapy presided over by therapists. While indigenous traditions with substances that induce non-ordinary consciousness are often very important to medicine ceremonies conducted outside the United States, or those presided over by a shaman from another culture, in this discussion I focus on medicine ceremonies attended (and often run by) Westerners. A discussion of how the ceremonies are influenced by indigenous traditions, although very important, is outside the scope of this article. Facilitators may be trained in specific therapeutic or somatic techniques that they employ during the ceremony, or over the course of a several days of a medicine retreat, but the rhetoric employed by facilitators often stresses that healing comes from the wisdom of the medicines and the participant, and may not even be known to the participant. As one psychedelic medicine facilitator noted: “whatever healing needs to happen, will happen.” Additionally, the recommendation usually given to participants is to come into the ceremony with an intention and then let go of it to vanquish expectations and allow a wisdom greater than one’s own mind take over. The function of the facilitator is to create and maintain a physically and emotionally safe environment for

the participants so they can explore the psychedelic experience guided by their own internal compasses. In the most extreme examples, the ceremonies function without a main facilitator in charge. In some cases, an element of ongoing community provides fertile ground for developing and deepening relationships, which may be seen as one of the goals of the retreat. This nonhierarchical approach and step toward connection signifies deep values which fit well within ecofeminist paradigms.

## Psychedelic Psychospiritual Transformation

Much of the historical psychedelic research confirms that new constructions of the self, facilitated by carefully orchestrated psychedelic experiences, especially peak psychedelic experiences, often included a sense of spiritual transformation or spiritual awakening. Renewed interest in religion in the United States in the postwar years provides context for these awakenings. In *Stairways to Heaven: Drugs in American Religious History*, religious studies scholar Robert C. Fuller recognizes American interest in psychedelic experiences for spiritual growth as belonging to a persistent strain of American “nature religion” that eschews church authority and revels in direct experience of Divine forces. He traces the use of entheogens as part of “the quest to penetrate mystery, to make momentary contact with the divine kingdom thought to surround us.”<sup>74</sup> A resurgence of interest in religion in the postwar 1950s soothed American Cold War anxieties and offered hope for “peace of mind and confident living.”<sup>75</sup> A persistent strain of American interest in nature religion reveals itself in psychedelic spirituality, and began to resurface in the 1950s and 1960s.

During the cultural turmoil of the 1960s, American interest in religion moved from interest in religion to interest in spirituality. Religion scholar Robert S. Ellwood characterizes this change as a shift from modern to postmodern attitudes. Modernity’s acceptance of a grand narrative and belief in the authority and tradition of religious institutions, gave way to a postmodern propensity to individualize religious beliefs and practices, eschew institutional authority, and hold multiple, even competing narratives at the same time. Many people preferred to create personal systems of belief and practice they called “spiritual” rather than religious. This shift was

accompanied by a new conception of the self as fluid and customizable and a quest for that elusive self.<sup>76</sup> Psychedelic exploration has been one venue in the postmodern spiritual lexicon.

Religious scholar and early psychonaut Huston Smith claims that psychedelic experiences can provide entrance into the “sacred unconsciousness” a deep mysterious spiritual reality described by many religions.<sup>77</sup> Detailed examples and theories of these states of consciousness and how to facilitate them have been proposed by various psychedelic researchers. One example is the Czech psychiatrist Stanislav Grof, who spent decades investigating non-ordinary states of consciousness induced by psychedelics or by breathwork techniques he called holotropic breathwork. His research led him to transpersonal psychology, a branch of psychology that integrates spiritual elements beyond the individual human psyche or history, similar to Jungian psychology. His theory of psychospiritual healing maintains that, within psychedelic experiences, a patient’s non-ordinary states of consciousness progress through three major stages. In the first stage, the patient works through her unique, unfinished psychodynamic conflicts which originate in her life experiences. Once these conflicts are resolved (or perhaps overlapping with the second stage), the patient reframes what had previously been seen as personal as experiences common to all humans, or perhaps all living beings and connected to a larger universality of being in the world. In this second stage, the patient typically experiences birth, death, suffering, and trauma unrelated to his or her singular life history, but experienced as a collective memory or engagement shared by all humans or all sentient beings. A third stage (which might overlap with preceding stages) adds profound religious or mystical consciousness. In other words, psychedelics could lead to transpersonal awareness and deep spiritual insight which go far beyond a person’s ego self, or waking-life identity. In the third stage, “the phenomena with which the subject identifies are not restricted to humankind or even to the living forms. They are cosmic, having to do with the elements and forces from which life proceeds, And the subject is less conscious of himself as separate from that which he perceives. To a large extent the subject-object dichotomy itself disappears.”<sup>78</sup> One focuses less on one’s unique personal identity and experiences consciousness interrelated with all else in the cosmos.

Psychologist Richards, who trained with Hanscarl Leuner in Germany, and conducted psychedelic research with Savage and Grof at Spring Grove

Hospital in Maryland before becoming a major researcher at Johns Hopkins University, is perhaps the foremost current researcher into the ways psychedelic substances facilitate psychospiritual insights. In his 2015 book, *Sacred Knowledge: Psychedelics and Religious Experiences*, he offers insights from thirty years of observing psilocybin sessions with volunteers. His research builds on the insights of those before him who valued a peak experience as pivotal for transformation. Although Richards uses the term “mystical” when he describes a peak psychedelic experience, his findings elaborate on many of Grof’s previous findings. Although Richards explains six categories of spiritual insight that typically emerge from high-dose psilocybin sessions, the two most relevant for this article are what he terms “emerging wisdom,” or intuitive knowledge, and interrelatedness. Many of his subjects had noetic or mystical experiences from which they concluded that they possessed a deep inner, intuitive wisdom.<sup>79</sup> They often also experienced a sense of interrelatedness, or unitive consciousness, experienced as an “ultimate unity or oneness at the core, or at the ultimate source of Being.”<sup>80</sup> While ecofeminism offers a theoretical model for interrelatedness, psychedelic experiences offer experiential felt knowledge of interrelatedness. Although not every psychedelic experience offers an all-encompassing experience of unitive consciousness, quieter glimmers of connection and the boundlessness are common. This experience of libidinal fusion dismantles the bounded, compartmentalized logic of domination which is rejected by French feminists and ecofeminists. This felt knowledge of boundlessness, as Helene and others have noted, provides a foundation for healing the perceived rift between humans and nature.

Some current psychedelic researchers base their work in sophisticated models of psychospiritual healing, influenced by past psychedelic research, and elements gleaned from ethnomedicine or indigenous approaches. Raquel Bennett, a psychologist and ketamine specialist who works with a medical team that administers ketamine (legally) to treat severe depression and is the founder of the KRIYA Institute to study the potential of ketamine, uses a tripartite psycho-spiritual-biological model to explain the effectiveness of ketamine treatment.<sup>81</sup> Although it is a synthetic chemical (classified as a dissociative anesthetic), ketamine has intense psychedelic effects at lower-than-anesthetic intramuscular or intravenous doses, which are high enough to render the patient immobile. Bennett’s procedure entails preparatory therapy sessions, careful dosing, and a thoughtful ceremony that includes

ritual preparation by the patient. The patient may take a ritual bath, fast, and set intentions for the event, and then take part in an opening circle that draws on a variety of spiritual traditions. For example, the opening may include Native American prayers and prayers from Tibetan Buddhism. The spiritual ceremonial elements (and the physiological effects of ketamine, which Bennett calls a “visionary medicine”<sup>82</sup>) place Bennett’s therapeutic of ketamine use squarely within the realm of psychedelic work that considers set and setting important to (loosely) guide the experience. In the following days and weeks, the patient then works with the team to construct meaning from the experience.

Bennett’s three-part model includes biological, relational, and spiritual components. The treatment team (which includes a medical doctor) considers the biological effects and administers an appropriate dose to induce an intense altered state of consciousness in which the patient may experience visions and unitive consciousness. The psychedelic experience takes place within a strong alliance between the therapist and the patient, who have developed a relationship of trust and rapport. This relational component is crucial for allowing psychospiritual material to emerge within the therapeutic process. Finally, the approach of interpreting visions invites the patient to participate in creating meaning. This is also a crucial part of the process, as it encourages the patient to exercise imagination to enter and shape the healing process.<sup>83</sup> This invitation to create meaning is a crucial part of the transformative process and echoes shamanic healing practices or magic practices that transform consciousness by empowering the patient: “the goal of magic is to bring about a set of emotional, affective responses that cause a change in consciousness—that allows participants to switch to a more participatory view of the world.” This move toward “participatory consciousness” is a crucial shift to valuing subjectivity and imagination and encouraging them as foundational to the meaning-making process.<sup>84</sup> Dawn, a facilitator at the Casa Shipibo ayahuasca retreat in Peru, also acknowledged the choice to participate and the way it engenders agency and respect for one’s own imagination and subjectivity as an important component of healing in ayahuasca sessions: “when someone decides to participate, that is part of the healing process. The decision to participate in one’s own healing opens the person up.” Likewise, ketamine treatment considers the physiological effects of a medicine, experienced within a carefully developed, safe therapeutic



relationship, and expands to encourage the patient to create a personal, unique world of meaning. This process of promoting agency and self-empowerment is a core part of the treatment process. As I discuss below, participatory consciousness is an important element of psychedelic medicine work for the women I interviewed as well.

## Women and Psychedelic Psychospiritual Transformation

Serious discussion of ways in which women explore non-ordinary states of consciousness induced by substances has been largely absent from academic discourse and popular culture. With the exception of one anthology (*Sisters of the Extreme: Women Writing on the Drug Experience*, originally published in 1982) serious scholarship has been virtually absent on the topic of women's experiments with altered states of consciousness.<sup>85</sup> In her 2009 book, *Daughters of Aquarius: Women of the Sixties*, culture scholar Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo discusses this dearth of analysis and representations in popular culture. Psychonauts brave enough to venture to the frontiers of consciousness are typically depicted as men. We can remember countercultural heroes and outlaws Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper in the film *Easy Rider* (1969), while women's experiences with mind-altering substances are often trivialized, stereotyped, or presented as a morality tale of girl-next-door gone bad.<sup>86</sup> As recently as 2003, Requa Tolbert, a pioneering MDMA researcher, described the "macho attitudes" within the world of psychedelic exploration in which women's relationships with psychedelic medicines were often ignored or ghettoized, while men, who made up the bulk of scientific investigators, reveled in taking heroic doses and understanding pharmacology.<sup>87</sup> Fortunately, more and more women are becoming visible in the psychedelic community of research and experimentation.<sup>88</sup>

While their experiences have been less documented than men's experimentation, many women of the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s explored non-ordinary states of consciousness.<sup>89</sup> Lemke-Santangelo presents oral histories of some of the women who sought transformation and spiritual development and conveys the results, which ranged from disenchantment with mainstream norms, to reshaping their sexuality, to actively forming intentional communities. Like many in the counterculture, these women often woke to

a rejection of “violence, intolerance, overconsumption, and despoliation of the planet” and continued on spiritual journeys that included “a dazzling array of alternatives . . . such as Tibetan and Zen Buddhism, Sufism, Native American spiritual traditions, variants of Hinduism and Sikhism, paganism, Wicca, and Christian and Jewish revival movements. . . . The tarot, kabbalah, sweats, peyote rituals, vision quests, alchemy, yoga, meditation, encounter groups, magic, crystals, fortune-telling, and Jungian psychology, were tools for recovering the authentic self or for aligning the self with divine forces.”<sup>90</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s, themes of “controlling, channeling or integrating masculine and feminine energy” and (ironically) often a pervasive essentialism of women as more intuitive, attuned to emotions, and connected to nature were also present.<sup>91</sup>

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to untangle the threads of mythology, religious history, literature, and anthropology that chart women’s participation in psychedelic psychospiritual realms, women have always taken many roles including as herbalists, healers, witches, shaman, goddesses, oracles, priestesses, teachers, psychonauts, and more recently in the West, therapists, anthropologists, and full-time researchers. A woefully incomplete list of women taking part in the psychedelic realms includes Houston, Tolbert, Helene, Circe, Eve, Hathor, Isis, Maria Sabina, shaman in the Mazatec, Huichol, Shipibo and Shur traditions and other indigenous traditions, Valentina Wasson, Ann Shulgin, Kat Harrison, Marcia Moore, Betty Eisner, Bonnie Golightly, Anais Nin, Laura Archera Huxely, Marlene Dobkin de Rios, Gracie (of Gracie and Zarkov), Anne Waldeman, Nina Graboi, Rosemary Woodruff Leary, Grace Slick, Joan Halifax, Amanda Fielding, Mariavittoria Mangini, Raquel Bennett, Alicia Danforth, Bia Labate, Julie Holland, Janis Phelps, Katherine MacLean, Erika Dyck, Evgenia Fotious, Nese Devenot, Annie Oak, Annie Harrison, and numerous others including women who work anonymously underground.<sup>92</sup>

The remainder of this article draws on my participant observation and interviews with women who take part in medicine ceremonies to offer a glimpse of psychedelic feminism in action. Due to the necessity of maintaining privacy and confidentiality, all names are pseudonyms unless the women agreed to be identified as public figures and some details are left vague to avoid identifying people or locations. I present the information I’ve gathered

from my own participation in medicine ceremonies and interviews with sixteen women as a composite narrative.

A description of contemporary medicine work illuminates the ways women work with psychedelic substances for personal and spiritual growth and reveals the ways working with psychedelics embody feminist theories presented earlier. The ways medicine retreats attended by only women create safe space for women and reify connection among women is an important topic to be considered in depth elsewhere. Here, there is only space to flesh out how medicine ceremonies embody psychedelic feminism and empower women by cultivating subjectivity and encouraging them to create meaning, often couched within their psychedelic experience of unitive consciousness or interrelatedness. The ceremonies do this in two ways. First, although there is often a set format, and one or more facilitators in charge of the event, each participant takes part in whatever way she chooses and, like in van Rhijn's therapeutic process, experiences the psychedelic journey without interpretations imposed on it by others. She makes meaning of it on her own unless she asks for assistance. The shift to actively making meaning, a shift toward participatory consciousness, happens in many ways, including the integration circle in which each participant shares what she wishes of her psychedelic experience. Secondly, while not every participant may have a discrete experience of unitive consciousness, connection and interrelatedness (of all things) often presents as a theme during the experience of the ceremony or the retreat.

Although medicine ceremonies and retreats vary, a typical format follows the dictum that the facilitator creates and "holds" a structure or "container" for the evening by creating an event in which participants feel physically and emotionally safe. Creating safe space is complex and multifaceted, and at minimum the facilitator in charge interviews each participant to understand past psychological history, physical health, past experience with psychedelic substances and the participants motivations for attending and establish a connection with the participant to create a sense of trust. The facilitator is responsible for the general sequence of the event: how the ceremony will open, when it will end, music and ground rules (for example asking the participants not to talk to each other or touch each other during the ceremony). Prior to the week of the ceremony, the facilitators offer recommendations for dietary restrictions to prevent potentially dangerous interactions with the

medicine and allow for a more powerful psychedelic experience. Typically, participants are asked to avoid alcohol, spicy food, processed food, greasy or heavy foods, caffeine, and salt for at least three days before the ceremony. They are also often asked to avoid sexual interaction for these days. Engaging in the restrictions is promoted as part of establishing a serious intention to “work with” the medicine experience for psychospiritual growth. Many facilitators recommend following the restrictions for three days after the ceremony as well, to aid in “processing” the experience. Morgan Shipley, a scholar of psychedelic history, reiterates what many pioneers of psychedelic exploration claimed, that the “set and setting” (mindset and environment) are important to guiding the experience. Although the physiological effects of the medicine are important, the expectations, intentions, and structure of the experience also shape the experience, which is why what Shipley terms “psychedelic mysticism” (the use of psychedelic substances in the west for psychospiritual growth) has often drawn on a vast array of religious and spiritual systems and practices.<sup>93</sup> Along with how the facilitator sets up the ceremony or retreat weekend, the spiritual beliefs and practices individual participants bring into the experience affect their psychospiritual work.

The composite narrative I offer combines elements of many ceremonies and stories told to me.<sup>94</sup> The intent is to give a feel for the way ceremonies take place, the kinds of things participants experience, and the unique kinds of work each participant undertakes with psychedelics, rather than a detailed, accurate picture of one specific ceremony. It makes no claim to being representative of all ceremonies. This is a very small sample of data from interviews and, although many questions remain, the themes of participatory consciousness and connection surface here.

## **Contemporary Psychedelic Medicine Work: A Glimpse**

At around four o'clock in the afternoon, the participants begin to arrive at the location designated for the ceremony. This particular ceremony is a small gathering of ten people, most in their mid-thirties to late-fifties, all white, all roughly middle-class. One woman is much younger. Half are men. Half are women. Most of them have attended medicine ceremonies once or twice a year over the course of three to eight years. They come from mostly Christian

and Jewish backgrounds, although one woman was raised in a Jehovah's Witness family. Almost all of them have studied various religions, including Buddhism and Hinduism, and are familiar with meditation practices and somatic spiritual practices like yoga, reiki, and chakra work. The facilitators are both therapists. One has trained with a Peruvian shaman, the other in Brazil within a Brazilian medicine tradition. The medicine tonight is ayahuasca, and in interviews with participants, the facilitators have been very careful to ask about the motivations and physical and psychological health of each person to be attentive to possible interactions with the medicine. They have sent out emails detailing dietary restrictions and how to best prepare for the experience. Attendees have brought sleeping bags and pillows, and food to share at the end of the evening. In a large room, they arrange sleeping spaces, laid out roughly in a circle. During the ceremony, they will sit or lay down, while the facilitators, also taking places within the circle, stay watchful, ready to assist anyone who needs assistance.

These ceremonies differ from talk therapy that considers the therapeutic alliance a seminal part of the process. Although the facilitator or facilitators act as a focal point for setting the tone and may offer a verbal introduction, they are not the focal point of the healing itself. Participants may have individual consultations with the facilitator(s) but the level of therapeutic alliance varies. Sometimes there is almost none; sometimes a personal relationship develops over the course of many ceremonies. Prior to the medicine ceremony, contact between participant and facilitator is typically limited to a handful of conversations, including a two-hour interview. Follow-up talk sessions are available at the request of the participant. Akin to the model van Rhijn developed, facilitators check on participants and are available to offer help if requested, but otherwise leave participants alone

When everyone has arrived, the circle gathers. The facilitators issue simple instructions and answer last minute questions. No talking, no touching. After the ceremony is "opened" with prayers, the first dose of medicine is offered. After one hour and each hour after that, another dose is offered for anyone who wants it. Small buckets are provided if anyone needs to vomit and if anyone needs any kind of help—for example, with getting up to go to the bathroom or dealing with a distressing period—they are told to please raise their hand to ask for assistance.

The facilitators ask participants to share intentions. No one is obligated

to speak, but most people do. Intentions range from very specific (“to meet my totem animal”; “to communicate with the Divine”; “to see parts of myself I haven’t recognized yet”) to very general (“to surrender to the medicine and let whatever healing needs to happen, happen”). One woman wants to “have a conversation with ayahuasca and hear what ayahuaca has to tell me.” A small altar sits between the facilitators. It is a table covered with a white cloth with several lit candles and objects from a variety of spiritual traditions: pictures of Indian gurus, small Buddha statues, a picture of Jesus, crystals, and other amulets, as well as fresh flowers and photos of loved ones. Some participants have also laid out small altars near their sleeping spaces using similar spiritually significant objects including photos, feathers, seashells, and crystals. Also in the room are several musical instruments: guitars, drums, rattles, singing bowls, and chimes. Some participants have also brought drums, flutes, and guitars for later in the evening.

Opening prayers take about an hour, and participants may be invited to share prayers and songs. The prayers spoken make reference to deities from various religious traditions. A prayer song is sung to ayahuasca to thank it for its help. The facilitator explains that the song is much more than a prayer to ayahuasca: “the prayer is asking for help and support and giving thanks for the life we’ve been given by the universe. I’m singing ‘thank you’ to the spirit of God and nature and ayahuasca for showing me I need to continue my healing in mind, body, and spirit, and for showing me the energy that is everything in the universe, and for the energy of awakening. The prayer says ‘thank you’ for the unconditional love of the universe, ultimate love, and connection.” The “essence” of the psychospiritual healing, the facilitator says, comes from “knowing you are loved unconditionally by the universe.” “Feeling connected to the love of the universe is part of the healing” and the opening ceremony offers gestures, symbols, and prayers to develop spiritual relationships and perhaps even libidinous fusion (or unitive consciousness) between participants and the world of sentient plants, spirits, and nature.

The opening ritual deepens the psychospiritual set and setting for the participants, who also bring their own spiritual beliefs and practices to the ceremony. One of the facilitators offers prayers to the four directions (north, east, south, west) and all participants stand and turn in the appropriate direction as the invocation is spoken. Some of them raise their arms with open hands as if asking for blessings, while others press their hands together in

prayer position, and others simply stand. The prayer calls in energies of each direction and the elements of nature (earth, air, fire, water), perhaps certain animals or symbols associated with each direction, and physical landmarks of local geography. At the end of each spoken piece, the facilitator sprays Florida water, a scented alcohol-water mix that is used in some spiritual traditions for its reputed spiritual cleansing properties, from his mouth. At the end of the prayers he also approaches each participant and sprays Florida water lightly in his or her direction. During the night, one of the facilitators may repeat this, or perform a *limpia* (cleansing) with tobacco or sage smoke, in which the smoke is lightly wafted over a person's body to clear or redirect energy.

One by one, each person approaches the altar and one of the facilitators asks if she is very sensitive to the medicine and whether she is looking for a strong, intense experience or a light experience. After hearing the answer, the facilitator takes a moment to intuitively feel how much ayahuasca to pour out. The participant drinks the dose that may be anywhere from a quarter to a half cup in volume and then goes back to her space. When everyone has been served, the next phase begins.

The first hour is quiet. Some participants sit in meditation postures, while others cover their eyes and lay down. They begin to feel the effects of the medicine within ten to sixty minutes and at some point during the five- to six-hour session, some participants may become nauseous and vomit. The second through fourth hours (more or less) are accompanied by music played and sung by one or both facilitators. Although recorded music is also used sometimes, this night the music is a mix of traditional *icaros*, a genre of songs sung in indigenous healing ceremonies in the Amazon which come to the shaman through working with ayahuasca and Brazilian songs dedicated to various deities (or *orisha*) from the syncretic African-Brazilian tradition of Umbanda. Once in a while, led by intuition, one of the facilitators may also sing a folk song or popular song. Later in the evening, when the most intense effects of the medicine have worn off, people may sit up and join the singing, or stand up and dance. The very end of the evening is open to anyone who wants to offer a poem or song, play guitar, flute, drums, or share whatever talent they wish to share.

About two hours into the ceremony, the much-younger woman began to cry, feeling tremendously distraught. Her sobs lasted nearly an hour and one of the facilitators quietly approached to sit next to her silently for

a few minutes, just within reach, but without touching or speaking. When the emotional pain subsided, the woman felt herself in a “place of light”: “I felt like a flower and my petals were opening up. . . . I felt like I was in the womb, a place of infinite creation. I was infinite love. I realized I had been there before. Every molecule in my body said yes!” She later said it was the most profound experience of her life and that she gained an experiential understanding of the Buddhist concept of interconnection: “there is no going back once you’ve seen behind the veil of illusion that we are all separate.” Although she had previously studied both Hinduism and Buddhism, she had only understood the concept of cosmic connection intellectually prior to her ayahuasca experience. She also described her experience of ayahuasca as an experience of feminine energy: “psychedelics are feminine because they open you up to the emotional body” and “awaken you to the inner feminine spirit, [which is] intuitive [and] knows it is part of something bigger, that has empathy and feeling for people because we are not separate.” In other words, she interpreted the feeling of boundlessness within the Buddhist idea of interconnection and also within ideas of the feminine as symbolic of all-embracing connection. She interpreted her experience of unitive consciousness as an experience of unbounded feminine energy. This particular woman, who was eighteen years old, did not consider herself a feminist and claimed she had never really thought about feminism. It is doubtful she had even been exposed to the ideas of French feminism, even though her sentiments described the all-embracing mysterious feminine that the French feminists posited. Expressing her frustration with the limits of language to capture her experience, she commented, “It is like trying to squeeze the ocean into a water bottle.”

Another woman, who called herself Nicole, had been diagnosed with endometriosis and had been having chronic back pain related to the condition. She felt a somatic and energetic shift during the ceremony. The facilitator, who had been singing traditional *icaros*, started to rattle near her. She heard the rattling as the sound of insects and “felt the insects in my womb cleaning out the tissue so it could be resorbed.” She felt an immense physical clearing, which lasted for three days after the ceremony. Later in the ceremony, she had a vision of a bejeweled snake. At first, she was riding it; then, she became the snake and felt “a strong sense of feminine power.” This thirty-nine-year-old woman, who had been brought up in a strict Jehovah’s Witness family, described herself



as not having much “identification as a woman, certainly not as a Jehovah’s Witness woman” before her ayahuasca work, which she had been pursuing for eight years. Over a period of time, she began to realize how much she had “ingratiated herself” to the Jehovah’s Witness stance toward women, even though she had left her family of origin at the young age of sixteen, because she felt that if she stayed she “couldn’t have a voice, a sense of independence, dreams” or even an education. Eventually, over a course of years of working with ayahuasca, she began to see that she had always been a strong woman and “didn’t have to be my parents or my grandparents.” The ayahuasca work “has helped me forgive them [and] forgive myself.” As part of the process she constructed a different identity for herself as part of the cosmos. Over the course of her ayahuasca work she felt a “deep sense of connecting with people, earth, the universe, [and] a sense that all of it has meaning . . . and I am a piece of that. There is a sense of awe, for this thing I am part of.”

A woman who called herself Sara also offered an articulate overview of how working with psychedelics influenced her worldview. She ascribed her outlook to taking “copious amounts of LSD” as a teenager: “psychedelics offer the opportunity to map a different route through your brain.” She described one experience that had especially shaped her spiritual beliefs. While in high school, she and three friends took a hiking trip and, after taking LSD one night, spent time staring up at the stars. She had the ability to “really see all of the patterns, all the geometric patterns that we see in nature. It all came together in an aha! moment. Once you’ve had those experiences, [and other similar] experiences, it gives you connectedness as a frame of reference.” Finding it easier to feel the sense of connectedness when in nature, she preferred to work with psychedelics when outside. For her,

Spirituality is about being in nature, connected with the life force which runs through everything, [which is] Spirit. . . . It’s all energy in different states of being. . . . That energy flows through everything in the universe; it is all connected; [the energy is] breaking the barrier between self and other. . . . It is hard to explain. It allows an ability to empathize [and a way of moving through the world that is] more gelatinous. It can be scary, it’s a lot of vulnerability, losing sense of self, but [it means you are] able to put yourself more into other people, feel like you flow into other people.

Her experiences of psychedelic unitive consciousness had shaped her world view.

Sara's psychedelic spiritual view echoes ecofeminist ideas, as she described her belief that because everything is energy, all of the states of energy form "community, and we have a responsibility to the Commons, a responsibility to take care of it, not in the sense that we are superior, but in the sense that we're part of it. There is no hierarchy. Not in the sense that we are dominant, but because we're part of it, so we have a responsibility to respect it." Sara also enjoyed solo ceremonies in which she set an intention and created a ritual for her psychedelic experience. Her many years of experience with psychedelics allowed her to consciously make choices during her journeys: "I feel like I can hit the pause button if I need to function. I can redirect the experience." She expressed a strong sense of agency when working with psychedelics and exclaimed, "Don't let the experience drive you! Make choices!"

The way participants engage with psychedelic psychospiritual work is embedded within their prior spiritual experiences, practices, and beliefs. One woman, who chose the name Karina, acknowledged a keen awareness of her agency to create meaning, which she had gained through familiarity with Buddhist ideas and many years study of yoga philosophy. During the ceremony, she had a distinct experience of dying by strangulation. Although the sensation was vivid, she felt "detached" from it and decided not to ascribe any particular meaning to the experience. She explained her choice not to leap to an interpretation: "some people say you can direct your journey. I've never done that. I learned from my yoga practice to let the meaning rise. The meaning hasn't come to me yet. I don't want to make something that is not there. I am waiting until another clue comes. . . . This was a curious thing that came up. I'm trying not to add a meaning on." She was quite aware that she had the agency to construct a meaning, and intentionally chose not to. She relied on an intuitive sense to guide her toward a meaning and "nothing truthful has come up." While she acknowledged the agency to create meaning, she purposefully refrained from an interpretation. This example of participatory consciousness exemplifies the power to make choices to construct meaning, while valuing an intuitive sense of the rightness of the meaning. Karina had honed her ability to listen to her inner voice to direct her agency.

In the fourth and fifth hours, when the effects of the medicine begin to wear off, participants begin to sit up, offer poems or songs, or play the instruments they have brought. After many hours, the facilitators question participants to check on them and see if they are still feeling the medicine.

If the journeys have ended, the facilitators announce that the ceremony has ended. Some attendees go to sleep, others gather to eat food that has been set out in the kitchen for those who are hungry, while others sit at the kitchen table talking and sharing their experiences.

The next day, people slowly rise and make breakfast. When everyone has had a chance to eat, an integration circle, or sharing circle, begins. One by one, each person is invited to share whatever he or she wants about the previous night. Some people say one or two sentences, others talk longer; some cry as they share very personal stories of their lives and insights they had during their medicine journey. The facilitators may offer comments, ask questions, or stay silent. Often, the comments offer information or models or metaphors for the participants to work with, while refraining from interpretation. When a man says he had a great deal of discomfort in his upper abdomen during the evening, the facilitator offers the idea that the third chakra is located in the solar plexus and explains what emotions link to that chakra. Sometimes one of the facilitators offers a song in response. When one woman says she felt a deer come and lay down next to her, the facilitator asks what associations she has with deer and proposes that she bring the deer a gift. One of the women explains that she felt the presence of a lot of masculine energy in the ceremony and that it felt strong and steady but also gentle, which was unexpected. In response, one of the facilitators brings over a cigarette made from a special tobacco which she explains as a masculine medicine plant. Without saying anything else, she gently blows the tobacco smoke on the women's hands and feet. The facilitators offer suggestions for the next few days: write in a journal, continue to follow the dietary restrictions, let yourself cry if you feel like crying, and call if you want to process the experience with one of us. If you are staying for the rest of the retreat, take a shower and a nap to be ready to reconvene in the late afternoon for another ceremony.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Participatory consciousness, relevant to the previously described ketamine ceremonies and therapeutic MDMA work, is also crucial to these ceremonies. As participants begin to explore their psychedelic experiences, they are

empowered to author themselves in the same way third-wave feminists choose to playfully configure themselves while admitting incongruity and contradiction and relishing postmodern pastiche of identity and the same way French feminists author themselves via their imaginative use of text that rejects patriarchal rules and draws on metaphor and symbols that remain ambiguous. In psychedelic medicine work, the text is (1) the psychedelic experience itself, which dismantles Enlightenment rationality by inducing non-ordinary states of consciousness and allowing the imagination free range to explore infinite possibilities and (2) what gets created as participants engage in the opening of the ceremony, the integration circle the next day, and by constructing their own meanings from the experience. The decision to actively create meaning from the visions that arise in the realms of psychedelic imagination “begins the process of healing” according to one of the facilitators. The facilitators described above offered gestures, songs, metaphors, images to the participants as tools to continue the interpretive process, rather than as final meanings. Although there is verbal discussion, a great deal of the process of creating meaning is nonverbal, intuitive, unspoken, and somatic. Its symbols and meanings expand in excess of language and in excess of what can be categorized by traditional therapy techniques. Although the structure held by the facilitators is important, the meanings of the psychedelic text are ultimately mysterious and exist dynamically within the subjectivity of the participant. The insects Nicole felt cleaning her womb may or may not have physically healed her endometriosis, but her involvement in creating the meaning of the sound of the rattle empowered her in a larger sense of acknowledging the power of her subjectivity. When Karina refrained from interpreting her death experience, she was aware of her ability to shape meaning and choose how to participate in that process. This process of engaging their own agency empowers women to make choices about themselves and re-envision their world and their place in the world.

When attendees immerse themselves in non-ordinary states of consciousness within a set and setting that encourages psychospiritual work, they choose to participate in a process that accepts non-ordinary states of consciousness as tools for developing their sense of self, subjectivity, and imagination, which in turn they use to reconstruct their identities and worldviews. Whether or not the participants believe the visions they experience are “real” or “caused by” the psychedelic substance or only “in their own minds,” they enter a world

of possibilities. It is possible they have an experience of unitive consciousness or of becoming a flower or a snake. It is possible they have visions of angels or spirits or their own death, or of animals who communicate with them. As the participants sit down in the ceremony circle, they are moving one step closer to a mysterious world of elements that have been excluded by the logic of domination that is structured by rationality, hierarchy, linearity, and categories, and rejects intuitive ways of knowing, irrational visions, and fluid or absent boundaries between humans and other inhabitants of the cosmos. Instead, psychedelic “medicine work” embraces all of these elements as tools in emerging wisdom and encourages participants to exercise their own agency in creating meaning for the symbols, visions, and connections they experience. The French feminists reclaimed wild and untamed worlds that had been rejected by the logic of domination as the realm of the feminine and sought rejuvenation and self-authorship through them. In doing so, they sought to restructure themselves and the symbolic systems which determine cultural values and human thought. The end result of this process is a remaking of reality itself. By reclaiming what has been shuttled to the margins by patriarchal paradigms, psychedelic feminism follows in this path.

How these psychospiritual experiences manifest as feminist ways of moving through the world remains to be seen. However, because the ceremonies invite participants to value their subjective experience, listen to their own emerging wisdom, and embark on creating their own meanings, they engender agency and a path to reconstructing oneself. Diving into psychedelic psychospiritual work begins a process of resisting a logic of domination, because psychedelic experiences open up realms of connection and boundlessness. Psychedelic feminism exists as a potential in every psychedelic experience and offers the possibilities of rearranging how participants relate to nature, the cosmos, their own identities, and thought structures that create reality. This agency of participatory consciousness empowers participants.

Many people who experimented with psychedelics in the 1960s were interested in both self-discovery and working with altered states of consciousness as paths to spiritual growth.<sup>95</sup> While mainstream science and American culture were not fully accepting of subjective experience as a valid path to knowledge in the 1950s or 1960s, countercultural shifts began to make room for experiential knowing and allowed subjectivity to garner respect.<sup>96</sup> Many researchers honed the techniques for facilitating peak psychedelic

experiences and in the 1960s and 1970s and these techniques, along with many other spiritual practices and indigenous traditions, inform contemporary practices with plant medicines. The contemporary psychedelic renaissance indicates that many Americans hunger for a psychospiritual awakening embedded within subjective experience. The experiences of women who work with psychedelic substances for personal and spiritual growth offers a glimpse of how psychedelic psychospiritual work can be interpreted within feminist frameworks that encourage women to author themselves in a kind of psychedelic *écriture féminine* that springs from subjective experiences of unitive and participatory consciousness.

How will psychedelic feminism evolve? Will a psychedelic feminism shift of consciousness translate into social or political action? Religion scholar Shipley offers the example of Stephen Gaskin as model for how a radical shift in consciousness can be embodied in concrete ways that aim for social transformation. Gaskin, a 1960s psychedelic pioneer, reoriented his entire life based on his experience of unitive consciousness. He left a life as a college professor at San Francisco State College, ensconced in the paradigm of individual consciousness and capitalist, consumer culture, to found an alternative living community called The Farm in 1971. The Farm (still extant in Summertown, Tennessee) strives to put the insights of spiritual oneness into action in daily life. Shipley's analysis of Gaskin points out the connection between individual transformation and social change and claims a role for "consciousness and the place of mystical insight in directing an active, utopian engagement with the social world."<sup>97</sup> By offering individual women the chance to partake in empowering and consciousness-shifting ayahuasca retreats in Peru, Helene's Cosmic Sister organization also seeks to engage a process of social renewal. When women experience the empowerment that comes from reconfiguring their identities, in relationships, as women, as human beings, and reorient toward a view of the world as a place in which all things are interconnected, and humans are included in the vast world of nature, and seek their own potential along the way, they embody psychedelic feminism. This shift in consciousness envisions a world of radical connectedness and a radical agency, with infinite possibilities for the future.

## Notes

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- 1 Bonnie Glass-Coffin, "Reflections on the Experience of Healing: Whose Logic? Whose Experience?" in *Healing Logics: Culture and Medicine in Modern Health Belief Systems*, ed. Erika Brady (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2001), 192.
- 2 Due to the necessity to maintain privacy and confidentiality, all names are pseudonyms unless the women agreed to be identified as public figures, and some details are left vague to avoid identifying people or locations. Thank you to the SUNY Empire State College Institutional Review Board for approving my protocol for the interview procedures and study protocol.
- 3 *Psychospiritual* refers to practices that consider the role of spirituality in psychological health and healing.
- 4 Zoe Helene, "Psychedelic Feminism," from her personal website, <http://www.zoehelene.com/psychedelic-feminism>.
- 5 Ayahuasca is a brew or tea that has psychoactive properties. Several indigenous cultures in the Amazon work with it for healing. It is legal in Peru, where several retreat centers cater to Westerners seeking ayahuasca ceremonies for physical and psychospiritual healing. It has become more and more popular in the West as well, although it is illegal so the ceremonies remain underground.
- 6 Johns Hopkins psychologist and researcher William A. Richards uses these terms in his book, *Sacred Knowledge: Psychedelics and Religious Experiences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). Richards traces the term entheogen back to Bob Jesse's use of the term. See also Richards, "Entheogens in the Study of Religious Experiences: Current Status," *Journal of Religion and Health* 44, no. 4 (2005): 378. For an articulate overview of gender and psychedelics that uses the terms "radical unity and interrelatedness" as core components of psychedelic experiences, see Nese Devenot, "Psychedelic Drugs," in *Macmillan Interdisciplinary Handbook: Gender*, vol. 7, *Nature*, ed. Iris van der Tuin (New York: Macmillan, 2016), 361–78.
- 7 Zoe Helene, interview with author, 12 November 2017.
- 8 Helene, interview.

- 9 Helene, interview.
- 10 Helene, interview.
- 11 Trish Glazebrook, "Karen Warren's Ecofeminism," *Ethics and the Environment* 7, no. 2 (2002): 12-13.
- 12 Roger J. H. King, "Caring About Nature: Feminist Ethics and the Environment," *Hypatia* 6, no. 1 (1991): 76.
- 13 King, "Caring About Nature," 84.
- 14 King, "Caring About Nature," 78.
- 15 Hawkins provides a useful description of the ways *dualism* (versus *dichotomy*) implies radical separation, hierarchy, and oppression as she describes five characteristics of dualism. Ronnie Zoe Hawkins, "Ecofeminism and Nonhumans: Continuity, Difference, Dualism and Domination," *Hypatia*, 13, no. 1 (1998): 161. I've tried to carefully use the word *dualism* where appropriate and the word *dichotomy* where appropriate.
- 16 R. Claire Snyder, "What is Third-Wave Feminism?" A New Directions Essay," *Signs* 34, no. 1 (2008): 175, 185.
- 17 Snyder, "What is Third-Wave Feminism?" 177.
- 18 Valerie R. Renegar and Stacey K. Sowards, "Self-Determination, Transcendence, and Counter-Imagination in Third Wave Feminism," *Hypatia* 24, no. 2 (2009): 4.
- 19 Renegar and Sowards, "Self-Determination, Transcendence and Counter-Imagination," 8.
- 20 Snyder, "What is Third-Wave Feminism?" 179.
- 21 Renegar and Soward, "Self-Determination, Transcendence and Counter-Imagination," 16.
- 22 Adam Rome, "'Give Earth a Chance': The Environmental Movement and the Sixties," *Journal of American History* 90, no. 2 (2003): 537, 539.
- 23 Glazebrook, "Karen Warren's Ecofeminism," 12.
- 24 Arleen B. Dallery, "The Politics of Writing (the) Body: *Écriture Féminine*," in *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, eds. Alison M. Jagger and Susan R. Bordo (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 61.
- 25 Dallery, "The Politics of Writing (the) Body," 53.
- 26 Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).
- 27 Dallery, "The Politics of Writing (the) Body," 54.
- 28 Charlene Spretnak, "Earthbody and Personal Body as Sacred," in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, ed. Carol Adams (New York: Continuum, 1993), 272.
- 29 Glazebrook, "Karen Warren's Ecofeminism," 20.



- 30 Dani Cavallaro, *French Feminist Theory* (London: Continuum, 2003), 120.
- 31 Although language is the tool I must use in the academic sphere to try to tame these ideas.
- 32 Glazebrook, "Karen Warren's Ecofeminism," 22.
- 33 Jay Stevens, *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1987); Martin A. Lee and Bruce Shlain, *Acid Dreams: The Complete Social History of LSD: The CIA, the Sixties, and Beyond* (New York: Grove Press, 1985).
- 34 Stanislav Grof, *LSD Psychotherapy* (Sarasota: Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies, 2001), 24; Richards, *Sacred Knowledge*, 2016.
- 35 Tom Schroder, *Acid Test: LSD, Ecstasy and the Power to Heal* (New York: Blue Rider Press, 2014); Rachel Harris, *Listening to Ayahuasca: New Hope for Depression, Addiction, PTSD and Anxiety* (San Francisco: New World Library, 2017).
- 36 Michael Pollan, *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches us about Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression and Transcendence* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018).
- 37 An extensive article in the February 9, 2015 issue of the *New Yorker* offers an overview of contemporary psychedelic research within the medical field. Michael Pollan, "The Trip Treatment," *New Yorker*, 9 February 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/02/09/trip-treatment>. Hundreds of books on the topic of using psychedelic substances or entheogens for spiritual and healing purposes have appeared in the years previous to the publication of this article.
- 38 Michael Pollan, "The Trip Treatment"; Ariel Levy, "The Drug of Choice in the Age of Kale," *New Yorker*, 12 Sept 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/09/12/the-ayahuasca-boom-in-the-u-s>; Mac McClelland, "The Psychedelic Miracle," *Rolling Stone* 9 March 2017, <http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/how-doctors-treat-mental-illness-with-psychedelic-drugs-w470673>.
- 39 *Key Substance Use and Mental Health Indicators in the U.S.: Results from the 2015 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration* (Washington, DC: United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2016), 12. The 2015 survey is difficult to compare to previous surveys as it included ketamine, DMT, and salvia divinorum in the category of "hallucinogens" for the first time.
- 40 In 2008, Erika Dyck called the renewed interest in therapeutic use of psychedelic substances a "revival." Erika Dyck, *Psychiatric Psychiatry: LSD from Campus to Clinic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 139. Her book was one of the first in a growing body of publications signaling renewed interest in psychedelics. See also Ben Sessa, "Shaping the Renaissance of Psychedelic Research," *Lancet* 380 (July 2012),

- 200–201; Nicolas Langlitz, *Neuropsychedelia: The Revival of Hallucinogen Research since the Decade of the Brain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).
- 41 Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953).
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- 43 Stanislav Grof, *LSD Psychotherapy*, 24.
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- 46 Lee and Shlain, *Acid Dreams*, 17. See also John Marks, *Search for the Manchurian Candidate* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979).
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- 49 Stevens, *Storming Heaven*, 176.
- 50 Stanley Krippner, “Salvador Roquet Remembered: An Innovative Psychedelic Therapist in 1060s Mexico,” *Chacruna*, 1 March 2017, <http://chacruna.net/salvador-roquet-remembered/>.
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- 55 Hanscarl Leuner, “Present State of Psycholytic Therapy and its Possibilities,” in *The Use of LSD in Psychotherapy and Alcoholism*, ed. Harold A. Abramson (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), 102.
- 56 Leuner, “Present State of Psycholytic Therapy and its Possibilities,” 103, 108.
- 57 Leuner, “Present State of Psycholytic Therapy and its Possibilities,” 103.
- 58 Leuner, “Present State of Psycholytic Therapy and its Possibilities,” 103.
- 59 Leuner, “Present State of Psycholytic Therapy and its Possibilities,” 102.

- 60 Leuner, "Present State of Psycholytic Therapy and its Possibilities," 116.
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- 62 Leuner, "Present State of Psycholytic Therapy and its Possibilities," 102.
- 63 Harold A. Abramson, introduction to *The Use of LSD in Psychotherapy: Transactions of a Conference on d-Lysergic Acid Diethylamide (LSD-25) April 22, 23 and 24, 1959*, ed. Abramson (Madison: Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation, 1960), 13.
- 64 Abramson, introduction to *The Use of LSD in Psychotherapy*, 14.
- 65 Charles Savage, "LSD, Alcoholism and Transcendence," *Psychedelic Library*, excerpt of *LSD: The Consciousness Expanding Drug*, ed. David Solomon, (New York: Putnam, 1964), <http://www.psychedelic-library.org/savage.htm>.
- 66 A brief summary list of effects noted by Masters and Houston reads: "changes in visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory, and kinesthetic perception; changes in experiencing time and space; changes in the rate and content of thought; body image changes; hallucinations; vivid images—eidetic images—seen with the eyes closed; greatly heightened awareness of color; abrupt and frequent mood and affect changes; heightened suggestibility; enhanced recall or memory; depersonalization and ego dissolution; dual, multiple, and fragmented consciousness; seeming awareness of internal organs and processes of the body; upsurge of unconscious materials; enhanced awareness of linguistic nuances, increased sensitivity to nonverbal cues; sense of capacity to communicate much better by nonverbal means, sometimes including the telepathic; feelings of empathy; regression and 'primitivization'; apparent heightened capacity for concentration; magnification of character traits and psychodynamic processes; an apparent nakedness of psychodynamic processes that makes evident the interaction of ideation, emotion, and perception with one another and with inferred unconscious processes; concern with philosophical, cosmological, and religious questions; and, in general, apprehension of a world that has slipped the chains of normal categorical ordering, leading to an intensified interest in self and world and also to a range of responses moving from extremes of anxiety to extremes of pleasure." Robert E. L. Masters and Jean Houston, *The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience* (New York: Dell, 1966), 5.
- 67 W. V. Caldwell, *LSD Psychotherapy: An Exploration of Psychedelic and Psycholytic Therapy* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 5.
- 68 Ruth Fox, "Is LSD of Value in Treating Alcoholics?" in *The Use of LSD in Psychotherapy and Alcoholism*, ed. Harold A. Abramson (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), 479–80.
- 69 Fox, "Is LSD of Value in Treating Alcoholics?" 480.
- 70 Fox, "Is LSD of Value in Treating Alcoholics?" 481.
- 71 Lee and Shlain, *Acid Dreams*, 57.

- 72 3,4-Methylenedioxyamphetamine (MDMA), although not technically a psychedelic, has psychoactive effects that have led to it being used in therapeutic ways similar to those of psychedelics. Its effects are similar to psychedelic substances in some ways and very different in other ways. See also Schroder, *Acid Test*.
- 73 Anne Other, *Trust Surrender Receive: How MDMA Can Release Us from Trauma and PTSD* (Austin: Lioncrest Publishing, 2017), 202.
- 74 Robert C. Fuller, *Stairways to Heaven: Drugs in American Religious History* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), 92.
- 75 Sidney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 955.
- 76 Robert S. Ellwood, *The 60s Spiritual Awakening* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 21.
- 77 Huston Smith, *Cleansing the Doors of Perception: The Religious Significance of Entheogenic Plants and Chemicals* (2000; repr., Boulder: Sentient Publications, 2003), 78..
- 78 Smith, *Cleansing the Doors of Perception*, 80–87. See Grof, *LSD Psychotherapy*, 2001; Grof, *Realms of the Unconscious: Observations from LSD Research* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976).
- 79 Richards, *Sacred Knowledge*, 2015, 54.
- 80 Richards, *Sacred Knowledge*, 2015, 58.
- 81 See the KRIYA website at <https://www.kriyainstitute.com/>.
- 82 Raquel Bennett, interviewed by author, 28 May 2018.
- 83 Bennett, interview.
- 84 Sabina Magliocco, “Beyond Belief: Context, Rationality and Participatory Consciousness,” *Western Folklore* 71, no. 1 (2012): 18.
- 85 Cynthia Palmer and Michel Horowitz, eds., *Sisters of the Extreme: Women Writing on the Drug Experience*, (Rochester: Park Street Press, 1982).
- 86 Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo, *Daughters of Aquarius: Women of the Sixties Counterculture*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 113–14.
- 87 Requa Tolbert, “Gender and Psychedelic Medicine,” *Revision*, 25, no. 3 (Winter 2003): 5–11.
- 88 See also the thorough and articulate literature review that addresses gender and psychedelics in Devenot, “Psychedelic Drugs.”
- 89 Future analysis contextualizing psychospiritual work by women as fitting within the paradigms of feminist spirituality that arose in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s would also be fruitful.
- 90 Lemke-Santangelo, *Daughters of Aquarius*, 123, 124.

- 91 Lemke-Santangelo, *Daughters of Aquarius*, 124.
- 92 This list is a handful of the better-known names; there are many others. One of the few compendiums of women's accounts of their drug experiences is Palmer and Horowitz, *Sisters of the Extreme*.
- 93 Morgan Shipley, "A Necessary but Not Sufficient Condition: Psychedelic Mysticism, Perennial Liminality, and the Limits of the Supernatural Theism," *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural* 3, no. 2 (2014): 391.
- 94 A composite protects the identity of participants by making the event untraceable to an exact location or time. This protection allows individual subjective voices to surface.
- 95 Fuller, *Stairways to Heaven*, 83–85.
- 96 Kim Hewitt, "The 'Feeling of Knowing' Shifting Contexts for Noetic Insight, From Psychedelic to Scientific," *Senses and Society* 6, no. 2 (2011): 187.
- 97 Morgan Shipley, "Hippies and the Mystic Way: Dropping Out, Unitive Experiences, and Communal Utopianism," *Utopian Studies* 24, no. 2 (2013): 244.

