

Psychedelic Drugs and the Problem of Experience*

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Over fifty years since the criminalization of LSD brought medical research on the drug to a halt, researchers in Europe have reopened investigations into the possible therapeutic benefits of the controversial substance.¹ This might come as something of a surprise to those who remember the public outcry against psychedelic drugs in the 1960s, when the American media echoed with sensational stories of LSD-induced violence and psychosis.² But before it became ‘the nation’s newest scourge’, LSD was hailed as a ‘wonder drug’ by medical researchers and psychotherapists convinced of its therapeutic potential. This paper investigates how and why psychedelic drugs made the remarkable transition from medical tool to countercultural sacrament, and from panacea to medical, legal, and cultural pariah.

Jordan Goodman, Paul Lovejoy, and Andrew Sherratt have already done much to demonstrate the fluidity of the boundary between licit and illicit drug use. They argue for the need to deconstruct the dominant western discourse on drugs, which artificially distinguishes between nutritional, medicinal, and recreational drug consumption. Instead, they look to ‘the social contexts in which particular substances are consumed’ in order ‘to understand the meanings which they have for their users’.³ Deconstructing the prevailing drugs discourse, however, requires more than replacing hegemonic definitions of drugs use with the meaning it has for consumers, as this meaning is itself highly contested and far from ideologically neutral.

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¹ ‘LSD: Acid Tests’, *Economist* (23 Jun. 2011).

² This paper will employ the term ‘psychedelic’ to refer to a category of psychoactive substances including, but not limited to, LSD (acid), mescaline, peyote, and psilocybin.

³ Jordan Goodman, Paul E. Lovejoy, and Andrew Sherratt (eds), *Consuming Habits: Drugs in History and Anthropology: Global and Historical Perspectives on How Cultures Define Drugs*, 2nd edn (New York, 2007), 4.

Rather than asking which definition comes closest to encapsulating the true drug experience, this paper instead focuses on how various stakeholders describe this experience, for the cultural power of drugs lies in the various and competing ways they are represented. It is here, at the level of discourse, that we can glimpse the crucial role these substances play in the articulation of cultural distinctions which ramify well beyond the world of drugs—distinctions between the natural and the artificial, truth and illusion, interiority and exteriority, or self and other. Discourse on drugs thus not only reflects the broader historical or cultural context it inhabits, as Sherratt et al. have shown, but also helps to shape it.

While recreational drug use has long been identified with illusion, artifice, and toxicity, leaders of the 1960s psychedelic counterculture sought to turn these epithets back against the ‘non-drug’ culture itself. It was mainstream American society, they argued, which was unnatural, inauthentic, and dangerous, while psychedelic drugs provided access to a more authentic and liberating realm of experience.⁴ Rather than questioning the nature/artifice, reality/illusion binaries which underwrote mainstream approaches to drug use, countercultural leaders simply inverted them and appropriated their positive terms for the drug experience. To the extent that both the pro- and anti-drug discourse remained beholden to this same set of hierarchical distinctions, they thus shared a ‘common metaphysics’ and ‘general logic’, as Jacques Derrida put it in his essay on ‘The Rhetoric of Drugs’.⁵ I shall have recourse to Derrida’s work throughout this paper, as it provides critical insight into the way psychedelics were used to both uphold and destabilize metaphysical hierarchies. In particular, Derrida’s notion of ‘supplementarity’ aptly encapsulates the paradox that these drugs could be treated both as artificial and dangerous supplements to the natural body, and as ‘apt for the liberation of this same ‘ideal’ or ‘perfect body’ from social oppression, suppression, and repression’.⁶ The rhetoric of drugs thus functions to erect boundaries between nature and artifice, essence and accident, interiority and exteriority, but because psychedelics invariably inhabit both sides of these boundaries at once, they can also be used to undermine them. This helps to explain why the drugs have been so polarizing, but also so flexible in their capacity to acquire a wide range of cultural meanings.

⁴ The use of drugs as vehicles for a critique of modern society dates at least to the early nineteenth century and runs through much modern literature, including the work of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Benjamin, Artaud, and Michaux.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, ‘The Rhetoric of Drugs’, *Points. . . : Interviews, 1974–1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf et al. (Stanford, 1995), 247–8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 244.

Whereas scholars have tended to focus on the legal or anti-drugs discourse, this paper will concern itself with the countercultural discourse on psychedelic drugs and the way it negotiated the aporias, or paradoxes, outlined above. While countercultural leaders claimed the psychedelic experience as a vehicle for spiritual transcendence, communal harmony, and psychosocial liberation, their accounts nevertheless reveal that the experience defied any categorical separation between liberation and control, self and other, or nature and artifice. Indeed, this was a tension inherited from the medical engagement with psychedelic drugs and it helps to explain the continuities between the two contexts. Already in the 1950s, North American researchers had begun to realize the extent to which reactions to psychedelic drugs varied enormously with the individual subject's disposition and the environment in which they were administered—what Leary would later term 'set' and 'setting'. As a result, medical researchers acknowledged a space for the drug 'experience' which mediated between its chemical make-up and subjective effects.

I shall argue that it was precisely this ambiguous experiential space which enabled psychedelics to be mobilized for such disparate ends—as both a cause and a cure for mental illness; both a medical tool and a countercultural agent. Faced with these aporias, proponents of the drugs sought to distance their benefits from their limitations, rooting the authenticity of the experience in its ability to transcend the specificities of race, class, and gender. Even as the counterculture vaunted the emancipatory power of psychedelic drugs, it thus occluded the way certain power relations shaped its own engagement with the drugs. This aspect of the discourse on psychedelics, I argue, is particularly significant for the theory and practice of history more broadly. The paper accordingly concludes with an argument for the suggestive parallels between the psychedelic counterculture's appeals to the rhetoric of 'experience' and those of historians who have made this a paradigmatic term since the 1960s.

I

Before they became the focus of a cultural conflict that split the nation, psychedelics were promising new compounds being tested for their medical value in North American labs. The post-war period saw a dramatic expansion of the mental health profession and a veritable revolution in psychopharmacology, fuelled largely by the development of 'major' and 'minor' tranquilizers such as Thorazine and Miltown.⁷ The result was not only a massive rise

⁷ On the psychopharmacological revolution, see David Healy, *The Creation of Psychopharmacology* (Cambridge, MA, 2002); Andrea Tone, *The Age of Anxiety: A History of America's Turbulent Affair with Tranquilizers* (New York, 2009).

in drug prescriptions for the treatment of psychological ailments, but also that such drug consumption became increasingly normalized and mainstream. In 1965 alone, for instance, American doctors prescribed twenty-four million doses of amphetamines and 123 million doses of tranquillizers.⁸ In this context, the scientific profession played a key role in arbitrating between 'legitimate medicines' and 'dangerous narcotics'. Yet, because psychedelic drugs elicited 'widely disparate subjective effects', medical opinion was deeply divided over their value.⁹

After accidentally discovering d-lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) in 1942, the Swiss company Sandoz Pharmaceuticals began shipping the substance to American scientists in 1949, advertising that its peculiar properties would deepen scientific understanding of the biochemistry of mental illness. Such claims were based on a view, current at the time, that hallucinogenic substances like LSD and mescaline gave rise to a temporary 'model psychosis' akin to schizophrenia. This approach, known as the 'psychotomimetic model', would dominate the psychedelic research agenda through the 1950s.¹⁰ A characteristic medical manual from 1959, for instance, recorded that subjects under the influence of LSD experienced "'illusions, hallucinations, paranoid delusions of reference, influence, persecution and grandeur"'.¹¹ It was findings such as these which inspired the CIA's research into the drug's potential military value as an interrogation tool and agent of chemical warfare.¹² Launched in 1953, 'Operation MK-ULTRA' presupposed that LSD induced terror and psychosis.

The medical association between psychedelics and madness would likewise underwrite public policy after the drugs attracted controversy in the mid-1960s. As early as 1962, Sidney Cohen and Keith Ditman—two of the leading medical authorities on LSD—issued a report warning of newly discovered dangers associated with the drug, including long-term psychosis and suicide, and of the risks posed by an emerging black market that allowed for

⁸ Jay Stevens, *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream* (New York, 1987), 306.

⁹ Rick Strassman, 'Hallucinogens', in Mitch Earleywine (ed.), *Mind-Altering Drugs: The Science of Subjective Experience* (Oxford, 2005), 54.

¹⁰ Healy, *Creation of Psychopharmacology*, 178–91. See also, Robert M. Yoder, 'Help for the Living Dead', *Saturday Evening Post* (22 Oct. 1955).

¹¹ Quoted in Erika Dyck, *Psychedelic Psychiatry: LSD from Clinic to Campus* (Baltimore, 2008), 69–70.

¹² See Martin A. Lee and Bruce Schlain, *Acid Dreams: The Complete Social History of LSD: The CIA, the Sixties, and Beyond* (New York, 1992).

psychedelic experimentation without medical supervision.¹³ By 1966, a widespread moral panic had taken hold under the influence of sensational media reports of LSD-induced mental breakdowns, culminating in the criminalization of LSD and effective termination of scientific research in 1968.¹⁴ It is nevertheless crucial to differentiate the earlier psychotomimetic research model, which understood psychedelic psychosis as a temporary and artificial simulation of true mental illness, from the reports that such substances could actually trigger real and lasting mental breakdowns, which gained currency in the media during the later backlash against LSD. According to the former, psychedelics offered an artificial simulation of the “‘experiential world of the schizophrenic’”, while the latter claimed that psychedelics rendered their consumers permanently insane.¹⁵

Although the ‘model psychosis’ paradigm initially dominated the psychedelic research agenda, by 1957 psychiatrists began to argue that it fell short of accounting for the substances’ therapeutic potential. Arthur Chandler and Mortimer Hartman, for instance, had begun to employ LSD as a “‘facilitating agent’” in psychotherapy, claiming that it provided access to the repressed material stored in a patient’s unconscious.¹⁶ Meanwhile in Canada, Abram Hoffer and Humphry Osmond were using high doses of LSD to cure chronic alcoholics who had failed AA treatment, attributing their success to the drug’s ability to elicit ‘a single intense experience’ of personal insight capable of altering entrenched behaviours.¹⁷ By 1959, LSD was at the height of its medical legitimacy, hailed as a ‘wonder drug’ with therapeutic potential for conditions as diverse as alcoholism, autism, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and terminal illness.¹⁸

What is particularly significant about these cases is that researchers did not ascribe the drug’s therapeutic potential to its pharmacological effects, but rather to the experience it elicited. As Hoffer put it, “‘we considered not the chemical, but the experience as a key factor in therapy—in fact, we used a sort

¹³ Donald Janson, ‘Doctors Report a Black Market in Drug That Causes Delusions’, *New York Times* (14 July 1962).

¹⁴ See, e.g., ‘The Dangers of LSD’, *Time* (22 Apr. 1966); Bill Davidson, ‘The Hidden Evils of LSD’, *Saturday Evening Post* (12 Aug. 1967); Tom Buckley, ‘The LSD Trigger: Crystal Palaces and Absolute Horror’, *New Republic* (14 May 1966).

¹⁵ Humphry Osmond, quoted in Dyck, *Psychedelic Psychiatry*, 60.

¹⁶ ‘The Psyche in 3-D’, *Time* (28 Mar. 1960).

¹⁷ Dyck, *Psychedelic Psychiatry*, 8.

¹⁸ See Steven J. Novak, ‘LSD before Leary: Sidney Cohen’s Critique of 1950s Psychedelic Drug Research’, in Sarah W. Tracy and Caroline Jean Acker (eds), *Altering American Consciousness: The History of Alcohol and Drug Use in the United States, 1800–2000* (Amherst, MA, 2004), 359–62; Lee and Schlain, *Acid Dreams*, 89–90, 57.

of psychotherapy made possible by the nature of the experience”¹⁹. Similarly, when Sidney Cohen and Betty Eisner began administering LSD to psychotherapy patients and recorded an unprecedented 73 per cent improvement rate, they attributed it to an LSD-induced ““integrative experience. . . wherein the patient accepts himself as he is””²⁰. Then a psychologist teaching at Harvard, Timothy Leary likewise framed his project to treat criminal recidivism with psilocybin in terms of a drug-induced ““visionary experience”” of personal insight inspiring behavioural change.²¹ Experiential approaches such as these drew upon both the anti-psychiatry movement associated with R. D. Laing and the emerging ‘humanistic’ psychology of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow. In opposition to the dominant behaviourist and psychoanalytic paradigms, Maslow and Rogers sought to ‘return conscious human experience to the center of psychology’.²² Indeed, Maslow explicitly singled out psychedelic drugs as promising agents of therapeutic ‘peak-experiences’.²³ By 1965, 30,000 to 40,000 patients had received LSD in a therapeutic context.²⁴

Despite their apparently contradictory agendas, the therapeutic and psychotomimetic approaches to psychedelic drugs were in fact bound together by the same logic. Yet, how could the psychedelic experience be capable of at once simulating and curing mental illness? The answer, for many researchers, was that the therapeutic value of psychedelics lay in their very ability to replicate the symptoms of psychosis. For instance, R. D. Laing held that ‘freaking out’ during an LSD trip often heralded a positive breakthrough in working through repression.²⁵ Hoffer and Osmond accounted for their success in curing alcoholism by theorizing that ‘the traumatic drug experience resembled the delirium tremens (DTs) of hitting bottom’, a harrowing experience that shocked alcoholics into changing their lives.²⁶

Such accounts reveal the aporia at the heart of the medical debate over psychedelic drugs, as researchers did not simply claim that psychedelics were

¹⁹ Quoted in Dyck, *Psychedelic Psychiatry*, 59.

²⁰ Quoted in Novak, ‘LSD before Leary’, 359.

²¹ Quoted in Robin M. Wasserman, ‘Tuning In: Timothy Leary, Harvard, and the Boundaries of Experimental Psychology’ (Harvard Univ. A.B. thesis, 2000), 59.

²² *Ibid.*, 16. See also, R. D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience and the Bird of Paradise* (New York, 1967).

²³ Abraham Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences* (New York, 1964), 27.

²⁴ Jill Jonnes, *Hep-Cats, Narcs, and Pipe Dreams: A History of America’s Romance with Illegal Drugs* (Baltimore, 1996), 228.

²⁵ Lee and Schlain, *Acid Dreams*, 64.

²⁶ Novak, ‘LSD Before Leary’, 360.

either therapeutic or toxic and psychotomimetic. Rather, many considered them to be therapeutic precisely because they elicited feelings of terror and psychosis. Even the initial psychotomimetic paradigm was premised upon the notion that the ‘model psychosis’ induced by psychedelic drugs would help scientists to understand and treat mental illness. Yet in order for psychedelic psychosis to yield such insights, it necessarily had to be both temporary and artificial. In other words, it was precisely because these drugs were artificial supplements that they could offer fundamental therapeutic insight into the functioning of the natural body. Psychedelic drugs, as the 1950s medical discourse understood them, thus typify the Derridean notion of the *pharmakon*—that which is conceived as ‘both antidote and poison’.²⁷ This interdependence between toxicity and therapy was effectively silenced by the late 1960s, when the public outcry over psychedelic drugs blamed them for triggering real and permanent psychological damage.

By then, psychedelics had moved far beyond the purview of medical science. Because of the enormous publicity it garnered, Timothy Leary’s dismissal from Harvard in 1963 has come to represent the decisive moment in this symbolic shift, when psychedelics became identified with the values of 1960s cultural rebellion rather than investigative science. It is nevertheless important to recognize that these substances had long inhabited a murky borderland between science, religion, and art. Although largely unpublicized in the media, a small coterie of artists and intellectuals had already begun to congregate around psychedelics in the 1950s, led by figures like Aldous Huxley and Gerald Heard. Huxley became fascinated with the drugs after reading one of Humphry Osmond’s articles on mescaline in 1953, and famously recounted his own quasi-mystical psychedelic experience (under Osmond’s supervision) in *The Doors of Perception*. Although Huxley’s approach remained relatively peripheral during the 1950s, the line between science and religion was never very clear when it came to these drugs. Huxley in fact lectured the New York Academy of Sciences on the prospect of a psychedelic revolution uniting the forces of religion and pharmacology, while some researchers even devised scientific experiments to demonstrate the drugs’ capacity to induce mystical experiences.²⁸

Perhaps no one embodied this ambiguity better than Leary. While the Harvard psychologist initially framed his research on psilocybin in scientific-experimental terms, he quickly realized that ‘the nature of the [drug]

²⁷ Derrida, ‘The Rhetoric of Drugs’, 235.

²⁸ See, e.g., Walter N. Pahnke and William A. Richards, ‘Implications of LSD and Experimental Mysticism’, *Journal of Religion and Health*, v (July 1966).

experience depends almost entirely on set and setting'.²⁹ It was therefore ill-suited to the growing emphasis on experimental controls in pharmacological research, which were designed to isolate a drug's intrinsic effects from any external variables. For Leary, it was 'meaningless' to talk about psychedelics in terms of 'the "effect of the drug"', as they simply did not produce replicable results that could be isolated from the context in which they were taken.³⁰ He thus became increasingly disenchanted with what he called the "'science game'", perceiving it as an obstacle rather than an aid to getting the 'deepest experience out of the drugs'.³¹ Meanwhile, Leary's colleagues grew uneasy with the "'anti-intellectual atmosphere'" and "'outright attacks on science'" emanating from an academic who seemed less concerned with scientific research than with spreading a cultural revolution.³²

The dismissal of Leary and his colleague Richard Alpert, along with the advent of a black market in LSD, effectively broke the scientific community's monopoly over the supply and cultural meaning of psychedelic drugs. In the months before he was fired, Leary had already begun to cast himself more explicitly as a prophet and revolutionary, by advancing the cause of psychedelics as a religious, political, and civil-liberties issue. To this end, he established the International Foundation for Internal Freedom (IFIF) as an advocacy group promoting the freedom of all "'to undertake research into the expansion of their own consciousness'", and eventually headquartered himself with his followers at Millbrook Farm.³³ Leary's dismissal and subsequent activities helped shift media attention decisively to the non-medical applications of psychedelic drugs.³⁴ Despite a growing legal crackdown, recreational use of the drugs skyrocketed through 1966 and 1967, as young people flocked to hippie enclaves like San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district. Ken Kesey—author of *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*—and his quirky band of 'Merry Pranksters' played a key role in this popularization, staging mass LSD sessions known as 'Acid Tests' and shuttling across the country in a Day-Glo

²⁹ Timothy Leary, Ralph Metzner, and Richard Alpert, *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Secaucus, NJ, 1964), 11.

³⁰ Timothy Leary, 'Foreword', in Alan Watts, *The Joyous Cosmology: Adventures in the Chemistry of Consciousness* (New York, 1962), xii.

³¹ Jonnes, *Hep-Cats, Narcs, and Pipe Dreams*, 229; Untitled article, *Boston Globe* (28 May 1963), Harvard University Archives, Cambridge, MA, HUG 300.

³² Herbert Kelman, quoted in Robert E. Smith, 'Psychologists Disagree on Psilocybin Research', *Harvard Crimson* (15 Mar. 1962); David McLelland, quoted in Wasserman, 'Tuning In', 71.

³³ Quoted in John Kobler, 'The Dangerous Magic of LSD', *Saturday Evening Post* (11 Feb. 1963), 35.

³⁴ See, e.g., 'Psychic Drug Testers Living in Retreat', *New York Times* (15 Dec. 1963).

bus to spread the word about acid. By 1967, the notion of a 'psychedelic movement' or 'psychedelic revolution' had gained widespread currency.³⁵

II

Both Leary and the medical researchers who preceded him had observed the way psychedelics subverted the boundary between interiority and exteriority—between internal drug effect and external environment, or between the natural body and the artificial chemical supplement. It was paradoxes such as these—much like the way medical researchers derived therapeutic benefit from the drugs' toxic properties—which likewise underwrote the countercultural engagement with psychedelic drugs and help to account for the continuity between the two contexts.

These aporias are evident, for instance, in the way countercultural leaders styled the drugs as religious sacraments offering an experience of transcendence. In doing so, they drew upon the precedent set by Huxley as well as a growing fascination with Native American traditions that had long employed peyote and psilocybin for religious purposes. The heightened feeling of significance so frequently invoked by psychedelic users seemed to lend itself quite naturally to a spiritual interpretation. Studies such as Walter Pahnke's 'Good Friday' experiment, for instance, claimed that psilocybin elicited 'intense mystico-religious responses' in 75 per cent of subjects when taken in a 'supportive setting'.³⁶ Books exploring psychedelic spirituality also proliferated, including one by the theologian and Zen popularizer Alan Watts, who claimed that there was 'no essential difference' between the LSD experience and 'the illuminated consciousness of the mystic'.³⁷ Leary was thus by no means alone in describing the psychedelic trip as 'the deepest religious experience of my life'.³⁸ He was so impressed with the drug's spiritual powers that he founded his own church, the League for Spiritual Discovery (LSD), based around the sacramental use of psychedelics. Yet, none conveyed the spiritual transfiguration associated with these drugs as eloquently as Aldous Huxley, for whom mescaline fulfilled the Blakean

³⁵ Gladwin Hill, 'Turn On, Tune In and Drop Out: LSD Users Describe their Experiences during a Psychedelic Trip', *New York Times* (23 Feb. 1967), 43; Malcom W. Brown, '9 Experts on LSD Urge More Study', *New York Times* (19 Oct. 1967).

³⁶ Timothy Leary, 'The Religious Experience: Its Production and Interpretation', in Gunther M. Weil, Ralph Metzner, and Timothy Leary (eds), *The Psychedelic Reader: Selected from the Psychedelic Review* (New York, 1971), 192.

³⁷ Watts, *Joyous Cosmology*, 17. See also William Barrett, 'Accept Life and Live', *New York Times* (18 Dec. 1960).

³⁸ Timothy Leary, *The Politics of Ecstasy* (Berkeley, 1998), 13.

promise that “‘if the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite’”.³⁹ Much more than a mere medical tool for the treatment of mental illness, these figures credited the psychedelic experience with offering hidden insights of fundamental value to healthy individuals.

Any transcendent experience achieved through recourse to psychedelic drugs, however, could not divorce itself from the materiality of the sacrament itself—a problem which tended to frustrate the claims of its apostles. If psychedelics enabled people to transcend the material world, this was nevertheless achieved through recourse to a material substance—one artificially produced in a laboratory. Critics of psychedelic spirituality were quick to point out this apparent contradiction. They disparaged Leary and his cohort for relying upon a ‘Drugstore for the Soul’ that afforded little more than “‘false . . . Instant mysticism’”.⁴⁰ Given that mystical experience is traditionally defined as a gift of grace bestowed by a higher power or as the result of great spiritual labour, many felt it ‘illegitimate to take a short-cut to enlightenment by popping a pill’.⁴¹ Clearly sensitive to charges like these, Watts explicitly denied that the mystical psychedelic experience was ‘spurious or artificial in contrast to those that come through religious discipline’, on the grounds that ‘mystical insight is no more in the chemical itself than biological knowledge is in the microscope’.⁴² Leary adopted a similar line of reasoning, arguing that the drug ‘merely acts as a chemical key. . . [that] frees the nervous system of its ordinary patterns and structures’.⁴³ According to this logic, the drug was at once merely an instrument—and therefore ancillary to the spiritual truth of the psychedelic experience—as well as a necessary instrument—one required in order to free the brain from the perceptual structures preventing humans from experiencing the world ‘as it is, infinite’. The experience of reality in its truest form was thus parasitic upon something artificial—an external technical supplement added on to the natural body only to reveal and substitute a lack at its very heart. The countercultural mobilization of psychedelic drugs thus represents a classic case of the

³⁹ Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell* (New York, 2004), epigraph.

⁴⁰ Stuart Hampshire, quoted in Charles M. Holmes, *Aldous Huxley and the Way to Reality* (Bloomington, IN, 1970), 171; Arthur Koestler, quoted in Ken Goffman and Dan Joy, *Counterculture Through the Ages: From Abraham to Acid House* (New York, 2004), 252.

⁴¹ Nicholas Murray, *Aldous Huxley: An English Intellectual* (London, 2002), 401.

⁴² Watts, *Joyous Cosmology*, 19, 26.

⁴³ Leary et al., *The Psychedelic Experience*, 11.

Derridean supplement—of that which is ‘at once accidental and essential. Like any good parasite, it is at once inside and outside’.⁴⁴

This inseparable relationship between interiority and exteriority likewise disrupted countercultural claims that the psychedelic experience brought individuals into greater communion with one another. For those who came of age in a post-war climate of racial tension and Cold War conflict, promises such as these resonated deeply. While mainstream America seemed to be a society of estranged individuals, these barriers appeared to melt away under the influence of psychedelic drugs, leading many to hail them as a panacea for the social ills bedeviling American society. Allen Ginsberg claimed that LSD allowed individuals to merge with “‘the vastness beyond our conditioned selves’”.⁴⁵ For Tom Wolfe, it gave rise to ‘the *experience* of the barrier between the subjective and objective, the personal and the impersonal, the *I* and the *not-I* disappearing’.⁴⁶ Many strove to translate this experience of radical self-transcendence into new forms of communal living and interpersonal engagement. Such was the vision informing Leary’s project of forming a ‘transpersonative community’ in which members ingested psychedelics with the goal of jettisoning their egos and merging into a ‘group mind’.⁴⁷ It was likewise central to the Merry Pranksters’ project to ‘re-negotiate social space’ with ‘Acid Tests’.⁴⁸ Watts was particularly optimistic about the social possibilities suggested by these drugs, predicting that they would replace the ‘imaginary, socially fabricated’ ego with a ‘strong sensation of oneness with others. . . a far better basis for social love and order than the fiction of the separate will’.⁴⁹ The psychedelic vision thus held out the promise of a cure for the diseases of alienation and individualism rampant in mainstream America—a vision intimately allied with the hippie values of peace, love, and social harmony.

Although this quest for self-transcendence was central to the countercultural discourse on psychedelics, it paradoxically emerged from an emphatically internal and incommunicable experience occurring at the level of individual consciousness. Again and again, psychedelic users spoke of

⁴⁴ Derrida, ‘Rhetoric of Drugs’, 234.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Ann Charters (ed.), *The Portable Sixties Reader* (New York, 2003), 329.

⁴⁶ Tom Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (New York, 1999 [1968]), 45. Italics in original.

⁴⁷ Stevens, *Storming Heaven*, 185, 198.

⁴⁸ David Farber, ‘The Intoxicated State/Illegal Nation: Drugs in the Sixties Counterculture’, in Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle (eds), *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and ’70s* (New York, 2002), 24.

⁴⁹ Watts, *Joyous Cosmology*, 96.

‘experiences for which our language has no vocabulary’, which utterly transcended ‘the narrow limitations of words and concepts’ and therefore could not be communicated to those without first-hand experience.⁵⁰ By figuring the psychedelic experience in these terms, countercultural leaders could claim a special expertise and authority to speak about the drug experience that could be wielded against the drugs’ critics (most of whom had never themselves ‘experienced’ the drugs). For leaders of the New Left, however, the ineffability of the LSD experience made it an escapist distraction that ‘drew persons inward, removing them “from the arena of social consciousness”’.⁵¹

Yet such critiques failed to grasp the extent to which the psychedelic vision of outward social harmony depended upon the very interiority and ineffability of the drug experience. Only by using drugs to jettison the ‘tyrannical verbal brain’, could people realize the “‘original identity’” of all beings ‘which ordinary language . . . so completely conceal[s]’.⁵² The experience of an internal reality prior to the artificial imposition of ego or language thus became the (paradoxical) precondition for outward communion. Not surprisingly, the very incommunicability of the drug experience inspired a particularly strong sense of kinship between fellow psychedelic initiates. But it did so precisely by alienating them from the uninitiated masses of ‘straight’ America, spawning exclusive cliques like the Pranksters or Leary’s Millbrook coterie. The criminalization of LSD only widened this gulf by creating a vast ‘illegal nation’ of marginalized drug users defined as fundamentally alien to mainstream society.⁵³ The countercultural discourse on psychedelic drugs thus reveals the way in which an internal, pre-discursive experience can paradoxically serve to ground a communal identity, although it necessarily does so by defining this community against another. In other words, psychedelics were mobilized to both erect and to subvert boundaries between interiority and exteriority, identity and difference.

While proponents of psychedelic drugs often eschewed traditional political activism, this was not because they were apolitical. Instead, many considered psychedelics to be more revolutionary than any organized political movement, for they served to liberate individuals from the inside. Such an approach sought the roots of the nation’s social and political problems within human consciousness and was by no means exclusive to the psychedelic drug culture, or indeed, to the 1960s. Leary thus drew upon a common countercultural trope when he argued that America’s institutions of authority had

⁵⁰ Leary, ‘Foreword’, in *ibid.*, ix, xii.

⁵¹ Timothy Miller, *The Hippies and American Values* (Knoxville, TN, 1991), 49.

⁵² Watts, *Joyous Cosmology*, 68.

⁵³ See Farber, ‘Intoxicated State/ Illegal Nation’.

corrupted the natural state of the human mind, conditioning consciousness into ‘artificial, repetitive sequences’ that promoted intolerant, competitive, and consumerist behaviours.⁵⁴ Many—including, most notably, Herbert Marcuse—shared Leary’s faith that psychedelics could act as a “‘cultural detoxicant’”.⁵⁵ By suspending pernicious conditioning and ‘re-imprinting . . . new belief systems and attitudes about others and society’, these substances would engender ‘a profound revolution in consciousness’ with vital sociopolitical ramifications.⁵⁶ Countercultural leaders thus appealed to the physical brain as a site of counter-hegemonic re-inscription, mobilizing it to resist an oppressive subjectivity artificially imposed from without. From the liberated individual brain, they argued, a healthier social body would emerge.

Despite the emancipatory role the counterculture attributed to these substances, however, it soon became clear that they possessed an equally great oppressive potential. At a very basic level, the liberating and controlling elements of the psychedelic experience were inextricable because the very liberation it was meant to bestow required ‘handing over [one’s] cortex to a drug company’.⁵⁷ Yet such a criticism presupposes the natural self-sufficiency and enclosure of the individual body, to which the drug would necessarily be external and supplementary, as well as attributing undue agency to the drug’s chemical properties. No such rigid distinction between interiority and exteriority was possible in the case of the psychedelic experience, as it both amplified the consumer’s own disposition and rendered him or her more vulnerable to external suggestion. This problem became painfully evident when hippie enclaves like the Haight-Ashbury were inundated with teenagers, for they also attracted a slew of predators seeking to take advantage of the suggestibility of the psychedelic state.⁵⁸

Neither were psychedelic propagandists innocent of employing the drugs for the purposes of social control. The countercultural project to deploy psychedelics as revolutionary political tools was at times eerily reminiscent of the CIA’s plan to mobilize the drugs as weapons of chemical warfare capable of manipulating consciousness on a mass scale. While the CIA sought to programme trips in such a way as to consistently incapacitate their consumer,

⁵⁴ Leary, *Politics of Ecstasy*, 222.

⁵⁵ Miller, *Hippies and American Values*, 35.

⁵⁶ Ibid.; Timothy Leary, ‘Tim Leary’s Magic Bullet’, *Psychology Today* (July 1983), Harvard University Archives, Cambridge, MA, HUG 300.

⁵⁷ Martin Mayer, quoted in Leary, *Politics of Ecstasy*, 73.

⁵⁸ See Goffman and Joy, *Counterculture Through the Ages*, 270–1; Farber, ‘Intoxicated State/Illegal Nation’, 35.

Leary instead designed a guidebook for the psychedelic trip that would elicit a reproducible spiritual experience. This he justified with the logic that an already 'free consciousness' liberated by psychedelics nevertheless remained dependent on the guidebook's teachings 'in order to be liberated'.⁵⁹ Kesey would likewise 'order and shape' the Pranksters' trips and manipulate the audio-visual equipment at the Acid Tests so as to control the group experience, even as he encouraged his followers to 'freak freely'.⁶⁰ All this points to the remarkably coercive tendencies at work within the communities around Leary and Kesey, focused as they were upon a charismatic leader with virtually unchecked authority over the supply, method, and meaning of drug use. It also suggests that both Kesey and Leary were themselves aware that the psychedelic experience had to be controlled in order to liberate—another of its aporias. It was not enough to de-condition inherited norms through recourse to psychedelic drugs; new ones had to be supplied to take their place.

In many ways, the medical discourse had set the conditions for these paradoxes precisely by figuring the psychedelic experience as an experience, rather than as a determined and replicable drug-effect. Rooted in the amorphous category of experience, psychedelics could accrue a wide range of contradictory discursive associations whose aporias frustrated any exclusive appropriation. While critics denigrated the drugs as dangerous, artificial supplements that invaded the natural self-sufficiency of the body and drew users into an unreal world of hallucination, countercultural leaders appealed to the rhetoric of experience to reverse this argument. They did so, moreover, by appealing to the very same naturalist metaphysics as their opponents, remaining bound to the same hierarchical distinctions between nature and artifice, inside and outside, medicine and poison. Countercultural discourse simply re-appropriated the psychedelic experience as in fact more natural and authentic than mainstream social life, branding the latter as itself the unnatural pathology in need of a cure. The rhetoric of experience was central to this authorizing project, as it allowed the drugs' proponents to divert attention away from the artificial nature of the drug and onto the experience of truth to which it purportedly gave rise. In doing so, they did not dispute the metaphysical binaries at the heart of the mainstream culture they criticized, but instead reinforced the privilege it placed on nature over artifice, truth over illusion, essence over accident, and identity over difference.

⁵⁹ Leary et al., *The Psychedelic Experience*, 12.

⁶⁰ Elliot M. Zashin, 'Political Theorist and Demiurge: The Rise and Fall of Ken Kesey', *The Centennial Review*, 17: 2 (1973), 211.

In order for the psychedelic experience to be identified with these privileged qualities, its aporias had to be effectively silenced. Either psychedelic drugs provided access to a more fundamental and beneficial set of truths, or they were merely artificial hallucinogens. Psychedelic activists therefore consistently downplayed both the ambivalence of the drug experience and any other internal differences which threatened to disrupt its claims to universality. In order for the psychedelic experience to be truly authentic and universal, in other words, it necessarily had to occur at a level more fundamental than differences based on race, gender, and class. Allen Ginsberg, for instance, claimed that LSD transcended all human boundaries, ‘particularly black and white, particularly square and hippie . . . particularly Birchite and faggot individualist’.⁶¹ Because spiritual transcendence, communal harmony, and personal liberation affected ‘man at the very center of his nature’, the psychedelic crusaders assumed these substances to be universally valuable, and that their goal ‘“was Every Man’s”’.⁶² Such sweeping claims to universality concealed, however, the distinctly white, male, middle-class bias within the countercultural discourse on psychedelics, obscuring how certain power relations and forms of difference affected it.

This experiential rhetoric of universality masked, for instance, the psychedelic counterculture’s appropriation of non-white cultural markers. Even though psychedelic drug use attracted a predominantly white demographic, proponents tended to associate the drugs with non-white cultures in order to trumpet the authenticity of the psychedelic experience, over and against the artificiality of western norms. Drawing upon a long orientalist tradition, these propagandists identified their cause with the exotic Other, presenting it as the source of truths undiscovered by western culture. Nowhere was this clearer than in the relationship between the counterculture and Native American traditions. Most psychedelic drugs aside from LSD—such as peyote, mescaline, and psilocybin—were imported from an indigenous cultural setting, which allowed psychedelic activists to present their movement as the heir to an age-old Native tradition of sacramental drug use. Leary compared his own campaign to legalize LSD, for instance, with the plight of Southwestern tribes who had struggled against colonial priests seeking to deprive them of their sacred plants.⁶³ Yet, few Native Americans themselves identified with the psychedelic counterculture and the accounts of Native psychedelic rituals

⁶¹ Allen Ginsberg, *Spontaneous Mind: Selected Interviews, 1958–1996*, ed. David Carter (New York, 2001), 91.

⁶² Leary, in Charters, *Portable Sixties Reader*, 343; Michael Hollingshead, quoted in Lee and Schlain, *Acid Dreams*, 99.

⁶³ See especially his entry in Charters, *Portable Sixties Reader*.

upon which it drew were usually penned by outside observers. The Native American Church's ritual use of peyote was also an entirely distinct phenomenon from the hippie 'dope churches' organized primarily for the purpose of drug use.⁶⁴

In articulating the spiritual aspect of the psychedelic experience, countercultural leaders also relied heavily upon the language of eastern mysticism, tending to conflate a variety of disparate religious traditions. For instance, Huxley's description of the mescaline state fused the vocabulary of the Christian 'Beatific Vision', the Hindu '*Sat Chit Ananda*', and the Buddhist 'Dharma-Body' into a single essentialized mystical vision.⁶⁵ Similarly, the atmosphere at Millbrook mingled drug use with Hindu chants, Buddhist meditation, and readings from the ancient Chinese *I Ching*.⁶⁶ Leary's manual for the psychedelic experience, based as it was on the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, appropriated an esoteric religious tradition designed to be passed down from master to initiate, in the service of a public and entirely foreign cultural project. The psychedelic discourse thus relied upon both an affirmation and an overcoming of the cultural specificity and otherness of 'eastern' and Native American traditions.

Likewise absent from the countercultural discourse was an account of the way gender mediated and differentiated the drug experience. While psychedelic activists painted the psychedelic experience as a great emancipator from mainstream social norms, this did not appear to extend to the questioning of traditional gender roles. The poet Diane di Prima published an account of her stay at Millbrook that is instructive in this regard. Despite the unorthodox lifestyle at the mansion, di Prima reveals that female guests were nevertheless expected to cook and care for any children, while the men were freer to engage in drug experimentation.⁶⁷ Moreover, the literature on drug exploration that proliferated in the 1950s and 1960s rarely presented women in an active role. Instead, their stories appeared in the 'passive context' of patient case histories and sensationalized media reports of drug-induced sexual impropriety, or were published pseudonymously. Many of the wives of prominent psychedelic advocates, such as Laura Huxley and Rosemary Leary, actively participated in the psychedelic movement but did so in the shadow of their

⁶⁴ See the discussion in Miller, *Hippies and American Values*, 31–4.

⁶⁵ Huxley, *Doors of Perception*, 18.

⁶⁶ See the account in Charters, *Portable Sixties Reader*, 336–49; Marcus Boon, *The Road of Excess: A History of Writers on Drugs* (Cambridge, MA, 2002), 263.

⁶⁷ Diane di Prima, 'The Holidays at Millbrook—1966', in Charters, *Portable Sixties Reader*.

husbands' fame.⁶⁸ The counterculture's rhetoric of universality thus consistently veiled the particularity of women's engagement with psychedelic drugs.

This rhetoric likewise obscured the mediating role of class. While the drugs' promoters presented their cause as a battle against the Establishment, the psychedelic culture in fact originated within elite social circles and institutions. That psychedelic experimentation began among cultural elites is perhaps not surprising given the substances' initial confinement to the sphere of academic research. Leary and Alpert gained access to the drugs through these official channels, and after realizing their wider potential, Huxley advised the two to target 'the talented, the well-born, the intelligent rich, and others in positions of influence' as the best means of spreading a 'psychedelic revolution'.⁶⁹ Implementing this advice, Leary attracted a following of scientists, artists, intellectuals, and businessmen, just as a circle of cultural luminaries interested in psychedelics had formed around Huxley and Heard a decade earlier. Yet, as the black market in LSD flourished and made it accessible to the masses, tensions between elitism and populism began to emerge within the psychedelic leadership. While Kesey and Ginsberg advocated the popularization of psychedelics on a mass scale, Huxley, Hoffer, and Leary sought to restrict their use to adults with 'special needs and skills', who would undertake 'the experience in a responsible way' under the supervision of trained experts.⁷⁰ Leary thus conceived of his Millbrook coterie as the 'vanguard of a psychic revolution', while Kesey cultivated a more grassroots, working-class sensibility that was openly hostile to Leary's approach.⁷¹ In contrast to Leary's 'high church psychedelic', with its staid piety, scholarly methods, and aristocratic sensibility, Kesey's 'low church psychedelic' prized spontaneity, fun, and shock-value.⁷² Class dynamics thus affected and differentiated the psychedelic culture in critical ways.

III

In demonstrating the various ways the countercultural discourse on psychedelic drugs elided the mediating role of ethnic, gender, and class identities, I do not wish to suggest that the experiences defined by these identities were necessarily more authentic or real than those articulated by countercultural

⁶⁸ See Boon, *Road of Excess*, 253.

⁶⁹ Leary, in Charters, *Portable Sixties Reader*, 340.

⁷⁰ Abram Hoffer, 'The Confrontation between the Psychedelic Experience and Society', *Canadian Dimension* 4 (1967), 7.

⁷¹ Lee and Schlain, *Acid Dreams*, 99; See the account of the meeting between the two groups in Wolfe, *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, 104–7.

⁷² Leary, *Politics of Ecstasy*, 105.

leaders. Instead, I simply aim to illustrate how each appeal to the rhetoric of experience involves a choice as to what is authentic and central to that experience and what is ancillary to it—a choice which can always be challenged by competing claims to experiential authenticity. It is this aspect of the psychedelic discourse which is significant for the practice of history more broadly. I shall therefore conclude by highlighting some of the striking parallels between appeals to the rhetoric of experience on behalf of psychedelic drugs and those of historians who have made ‘experience’ a foundational term in the discipline since the 1960s. In this way, I hope to underscore the wider methodological implications of the history of psychedelic drugs.

Countercultural leaders were neither the first nor the last to appeal to the authority of experience to legitimize their project. Around the same time that psychedelic researchers began invoking the language of experience to open up a space between the drugs’ pharmacology and their subjective effects, a group of Marxist historians in Britain turned to the very same category to provide a mediating space between economic structures and class-consciousness. In 1963, the same year Timothy Leary was fired from Harvard, E. P. Thompson published *The Making of the English Working Class*. In it, he sought to recover ‘the agency of working people’ located in ‘the raw material of [their] experience’—something he claimed was irreducible to the ideology of the dominant class.⁷³ Through the missing term, “experience”, he argued, ‘structure is transmuted into process, and the subject re-enters history’.⁷⁴ In appealing to ‘experience’ as a site of working-class agency and authenticity, Thompson was deeply indebted to Raymond Williams’ holistic understanding of this concept, which he once defined as ‘the fullest, most open, most active kind of consciousness’, in contrast to ‘more specialized or limited states or faculties’.⁷⁵ This powerful experiential rhetoric of authenticity is remarkably close to the language employed by the counterculture to legitimize the psychedelic experience. Both groups invoked ‘experience’ as the source of a communal identity capable of resisting the oppressive norms and structures of the dominant culture. In doing so, moreover, both denuded other identity-based claims upon the authority of experience.

⁷³ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1964), 12, 9.

⁷⁴ E. P. Thompson, ‘The Poverty of Theory or an Orrery of Errors’, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London, 1978), 362.

⁷⁵ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. edn (New York, 1985), 127.

In the decades that followed, Williams and Thompson began to attract criticism for the way their holistic account of working-class experience tended to occlude—just as the psychedelic drug discourse had—differences based on gender, race, or sexuality.⁷⁶ And yet, these critiques frequently appealed to the very same rhetoric of experiential authenticity and agency to ground their claims on behalf of competing identities. In calling for historians to attend to ‘the material conditions of the collective black experience’, for instance, Thomas Holt defended its status as ‘an experience semi-autonomous from and/or contradictory to . . . the dominant discourse of a slave society’.⁷⁷ The notion of experience as an authentic space that resists the ideology of the powerful was here redeployed to ground a racial rather than a class identity, re-inscribing what was previously considered supplementary as in fact the most fundamental aspect of experience. Much like the psychedelic counterculture, historians thus mobilized the rhetoric of experience to underwrite distinctions between insiders and outsiders and ground a shared group identity. Each such appeal necessarily involved both an authorization and a de-legitimation—a choice distinguishing what is real or essential from that which is supplementary or super-structural.

In her 1991 essay on ‘The Evidence of Experience’, Joan Scott took issue with the way these historians have appealed to the experiences of women, the working class, or other marginalized groups as historically ‘uncontestable evidence’. Doing so only naturalizes these differences, she argued, with the result that ‘the evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established’.⁷⁸ Treating identity-based experiences as objective historical data thus serves to authorize a politics based on the primacy of these identities. But it also shores up the historian’s own authority as an objective observer, by obscuring his or her interpretive role in deciding what counts as experience. By presenting ‘women’s experience’ or ‘working-class experience’ as a historical given, Scott argued, such appeals elide the historian’s ‘own role in determining the salience of certain things and not others’—the way he or she ‘excludes whole realms of human activity by simply not counting them as experience’.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ See, e.g., Carolyn Steedman, ‘The Price of Experience: Women and the Making of the English Working Class’, *Radical History Review*, lix (Spring 1994).

⁷⁷ Thomas C. Holt, ‘Experience and the Politics of Intellectual Inquiry’, in James Chandler, Arnold Davidson, and Harry Harootunian (eds), *Questions of Evidence: Proof, Practice, and Persuasion Across the Disciplines* (Chicago, 1994), 395, 391.

⁷⁸ Joan W. Scott, ‘The Evidence of Experience’, *Critical Inquiry*, xvii, 4 (Summer 1991), 777.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 785; On this problem, see Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley, 2005), ch. 6. Jay’s work is a

In other words, experience is never simply given as a historical object; nor does it operate a priori as a site of agency and authenticity. Precisely by mobilizing the category of experience in these terms, however, both psychedelic propagandists and historians have obscured the historicity and the strategic nature of their own appeals to experience. By treating experience as an unmediated source of truth, they have masked the work performed by the appeal to experience itself—the way such appeals underwrite the authority of the speaker and his or her political project. Beyond asking whether historians can recover the evidence of experience, in other words, it might also prove worthwhile to consider how appeals to such evidence underwrite the epistemic authority of the historian, as well as the role they play in policing the boundary between the ‘real’ stuff of history and what is considered epiphenomenal or even irrelevant to it.

It is therefore fitting that the story of psychedelic drugs, which has been (understandably) eclipsed in the historiography of the 1960s by the Civil Rights Movement, second-wave feminism, and the New Left, should serve as a vehicle for these insights into the functioning of a major historical category. If the psychedelic drug culture has been deemed relatively insignificant, this suggests that historians have tended to accept dominant cultural narratives defining non-medical drug use as escapist or artificial, and therefore as historically and politically irrelevant. In accordance with the logic of supplementarity, however, these substances tell us much about the operation of fundamental cultural distinctions—between truth and illusion, inside and outside—which organize discourses far beyond those specifically concerned with drugs. What initially appears to be just a story about hallucinogens thus sheds light on key categories structuring the contemporary writing of history and the inevitable decisions it involves about what counts as historically significant. It also reveals the extraordinary purchase and wide-ranging applicability that the category of experience acquired during the 1950s and 1960s, enabling it to be deployed across registers as diverse as scientific research, countercultural advocacy, and historical writing.

testimony to the wider history of such appeals to the authority of experience, demonstrating how they have been deployed to serve a wide range of political, religious, aesthetic, philosophical, and historiographical ends from antiquity to the present.