

Troubling hope

Review of 'Psychedelic Justice: Towards a Diverse and Equitable Psychedelic Culture', Edited by Beatriz Caiuby Labate and Clancy Cavnar, Santa Fe: Synergetic Press, \$9.99 £11.99 €12.99.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Troubling hope

Review of ‘Psychedelic Justice: Towards a Diverse and Equitable Psychedelic Culture’, Edited by Beatriz Caiuby Labate and Clancy Cavnar, Santa Fe: Synergetic Press, \$9.99 £11.99 €12.99.

‘Grandmother,’ as some call it, is not meant to be yet another medicine that gets plucked from the forest to enrich pharmaceutical companies and leave ... true guardians of the sacred medicine ... behind ... [O]ur people ... have been lied to ever since the White man landed on our shores some 500 years ago.

– Leopardo Yawa Bane, (transcribed and translated by Chris Dodds)

Profiteering shortcuts, scientific hegemonization, colonial territorialization of local world-views, ecocide, sexual abuse – all of these things haunt our world, and psychedelics are no inevitable antidote to these injustices, nor are they themselves exempt from them. *Psychedelic Justice*, a printed essay collection, edited by San Francisco based Brazilian anthropologist, Beatrice Labate and clinical psychologist, artist and counsellor Clancy Cavnar, and in collaboration with Synergetic Press and Chacruna, looks at ways in which such intersectional injustices are sustained in contemporary human relationships with psychedelics, harming the poor, women, queer folk, and ethnic minorities. But it also looks at ways in which the reverse can happen: how (1) injustices can become visible through particular relationships with psychedelics and (2) how stronger will and motivations can, even with psychedelics as catalysts, stimulate the structural change to end these injustices.

The essays are bitesize enough to be filled with new information and important ideas without the clunkiness often found in traditional academic texts. They average six-and-a-half pages and range from three to ten pages, with well-spaced lines for dyslexics and the hard-of-sight (including myself). The book also practices what it preaches in terms of the inclusion of a diverse range of authors from the minority groups under consideration. The editorship on these fronts renders the book very useable in its style as well as its substance.

The essays are clearly written and often well referenced, to allow one to scurry down the necessary rabbit holes: I say ‘often’ because there are occasions where more referencing might be apposite. For example, claimed statistics about childbirth safety are mentioned. That the referencing could be a little thicker does not detract from the timeliness and importance of the book and all its contents at this point in history. Regardless of one’s discipline or field of interest, there is wisdom in here for everyone: from anthropologist to historian, from chemist to practitioner, from seeker to finder.

The thread which ties the book’s rationale together can be found in Ericka Dyck’s preface: that although ‘psychedelics *alone* will not vaccinate us against a pandemic of isms’ (my emphasis), they do offer an ‘intellectual passport to visit these sites of injustice’ (pp.xiv + v). For, as Ashley Murphy Beiner forcefully states, ‘if we don’t take a proper look at ... the long term implications of what’s happening now, this movement will slip through our fingers, turning into something hollow ... losing sight of the values psychedelics first revealed’ (p. 100–101). How can psychedelics be partnered with forms of kind-solutions that heal not only individual trauma but address socio-cultural injustice, as well as the multivariate collective guilts and shames in these injustices?

If, as Melody Hayes so powerfully states, '[p]rivilege means being able to turn away from the suffering of others', and coupled with this, 'stories are medicine', then this book can serve to awaken the privileged among and within us: do we really want to be 'returning to a set and setting of oppression' (pp. 42 ff.)? A book that can change one's mind about this deserves the epithet, 'psychedelic'.

But the volume concerns more than the critical theorist's offering of a series of problems in an attempt to change consciousness – it offers a practical guide with real solutions to those concerns. There are six clear sections: 1 Inclusion, Diversity, Equity; 2 Cultural Appropriation, Colonialism, and Globalization; 3 Western Culture; 4 Queer Culture; 5 Sex and Power; and 6 Sustainability, Policy and Reciprocity. Through these, I counted in total six step-by-step guides in various avenues of communicative action. These will conclude the review lest we rhetorically frame it as solutions in search of issues: for the pain is real.

In section 1, it is made clear that people of colour are still punished far more harshly for the same drug-related crimes, have a history of being treated differently in drug trials (pp. 1–7), and that research conferences are disproportionately white (pp. 15–19) – this is despite some of the greatest theological innovators of ayahuasca being of African descent in a recently post-slavery world. In a fascinating essay on Mestre Irineu, the founder of Santo Daime, De Assis reminds us that while much is made of Irineu's Christianization of ayahuasca, which can serve to make the whole religion palatable to a Western audience, 'What is left unsaid is that he also "Africanized" Christianity, giving it new ... meanings for poor people on the rubber plantation ... a decolonial Christianity' (p. 11). Emphasizing Daime's Africanity is worth lauding not just for its factual accuracy but because it rightly casts those of African descent as theological innovators in the field, rather than mere handers-down of tradition. Irineu was also much more than a religious founder or run-of-the-mill prophet, he established political alliances with the local catholic church and important politicians, and his 'cosmopolitan diplomacy also included plants, animals and nature' growing not only into a saint – 'who can remain unrecognised or ostracised in their own time' but a 'regionally respected citizen' (p. 12).

In such a telling of history, rather than resorting to the narrative of a colonized people helplessly abused by the techno-scientific paradigm, minority groups become empowered and inspired by a past which is rife with ancient, recent, and current theological innovation. Irineu casted plants and animals into the story of personhood within a folk Catholic paradigm. His combination of African, vegetalista, and folk-Catholic hymn-singing is a myth-ritual innovation which can change (and is changing) people's instincts and attitudes towards nature and each other. A religion founded by a peasant from an oppressed minority group, is continued now by all ethnicities in a global faith: this story needs celebrating.

Nichole Buchanan strongly advocates that psychedelic science organizations should pay speakers of colour due to the history of wealth disparity, underpaid and unpaid labour. Irineu, for example, was a peasant whose parents' generation had been slaves. Her call could easily be extended to other marginalized groups, such as those of working-class heritage.

Erika Dyck's historical analysis of women in psychedelic history feeds into the intersectional stream of the book: 'women were almost always involved in the counselling sessions, recruitment, etc., but are very rarely identified in the published work. The legacy of that history continues to distort our understanding of who does the work and what kind of work is valued ... things like emotional labour are a critical part of this enterprise ...' (Dyck et al p. 17 + 9). The intellectual ferment which leaves emotional labour uncredited does not simply 'go away', the sillage still remains. Undervalued emotional labour is not unique to psychedelic cultures – witness, for example, the status of nurses and social

workers in the place of writing (UK), as well as in many other nations. But psychedelic cultures have not been immune to this prejudicial thinking which would assume some forms of work to be work, and others not to be work. To be intellectually honest and enhance the status of undervalued but important tasks in psychedelic therapy, we should work to broaden the definition of labour. In this way, a more just relationship between power, recognition, and even material benefit can be sought.

Studies of the present in the book include a social media analysis of racism by Labate and Buchanan (pp. 29–35), and insider-views on what appropriation feels like from the perspective of those whose cultures are being used (pp. 71–2). The former leads us through an unsettling and apparently widely held belief in psychedelic culture: the circular argumentative catch-22 that because psychedelics ‘are’ (rather than, as this issue univocally argues, only ‘can be’) a balm to racism, racism cannot exist in its space. Such unfounded idealism and looking-away needs looking-at and these essays provide a microscope to begin doing that.

Distinguishing between respectful epistemics and exploitative epistemics are crucial when it comes to developing a future which it is worth integrating into. In *Staying With The Trouble*, multispecies feminist Donna Haraway, harmonically reminds us that

[our] littermates ... find a rich wallow in multispecies muddles, I want to make a critical and joyful fuss of these matters ... it matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledges know knowledges. It matters what relations relate relations. It matters what worlds world worlds. It matters what stories tell stories ... (2016, 31 + 35)

In *Psychedelic Justice* Leopardo Yawa-Bane consonantly tells us that ‘the forest is our university’ and appropriation is a ‘form of re-traumatisation.’ A collective statement from UMIYAC refers to the ‘arduous lifelong mission’ involved in ‘learning the medicine’ (p. 71): Theological Training College, Med-School, or a Doctorate in Clinical Psychology cannot compare to what the plant teaches one over decades of training. Transposing visionary plants into our culture requires deep learning from the cultures and from the plants themselves, and any attempts without such openness to learn are met with cautionary tales from the genuinely experienced. This lifelong learning is a process wherein ‘charlatans twist in pain on the floor – they cry, they vomit, they soil their pants. Some ask for forgiveness from God. In the morning, very early, with nothing to say, they leave in silence’ (p. 72).

To hear emic insider views in harmony with etic essays which theorize the same in the sassiest terms (and which any Frankfurt Schooler would be ecstatic about) allows the reader’s opinion to be crafted both by reflexive critique of our own culture as well as by indigenous critique: Diana Negrín reminds us, that psychedelia ‘is a buffet of interchangeable ecologies and cultures administered through the hands of people who provide biographical abstracts to assure their capacity to safely officiate ceremonies with these plant and animal medicines ... [on] platforms like Instagram [and] alternative retreat sites... the women are sexy, there are sweat lodges, tipis ... and vegan food ... we desire health and a landscape beyond asphalt ... [but] what does it mean to partake in the buying and selling of these sacred plants?’ (p. 66). If in *The Dawn of Everything*, David Graeber and David Wengrow expose the Enlightenment Politics’ ideological debt to the indigenous critique, this book can be seen as a contemporary example of critique reinvigorated by the perspective of the colonized (Graeber & Wengrow 2022, Chapter 2). These critiques are various and come from different cultures. For example,

Aukwe Mijarez, of the Consejo Regional Wixárika ... moved the audience to tears when she reminded us that, as a Wixárika person, to not find peyote is to face the deepest sadness, the inability to *cumplir*, to meet agreements with the ancestors and provide the foundations for collective livelihoods: ‘More than just a plant, this is about the survival of a people! We do

not want to be dressed up to be an exotic people, and for our culture to be prostituted and sold, but to be defended!’

The book provides ecological and political researchers with pragmatic tools to rise to this very defence, aware of (White) saviourism, and in the full humility of the polyvocality of expertise-as-gift. By this I mean: academic expertise ought not to be used to appropriate but to protect; indigenous expertise ought not to be tokenized but learned from as a parallelly and equally legitimate episteme. In the peyote example, there is a comprehensive list of things that must be known, things that must be done in order to know, and what to do in any eventuality, to maintain wild peyote populations and prevent poaching for international trade. For this is a plant deeply ensconced with other plants in its environment, and with several indigenous and syncretic (NAC) cultures in its periphery. This volume then provides a resonant springboard for Mijarez’s request for defence.

Because they are central to the mission of the volume, I will further focus on the solutions proffered by the group of practitioners and thinkers.

Firstly, Belinda Eriacho offers a read-through tutorial in how to work respectfully with indigenous people at conferences: what special circumstances to afford, what to read-up on before (e.g. their emic rather than etic tribal name – the name they call themselves), what to ask indigenes to value them and their contributions, but also what statements and assumptions are tiresome and possibly offensive, all couched in a notion of ‘cultural humility’. This is defined as based on an ‘ongoing process of self-exploration and self-critique ... Building a relationship [without] moving your personal agenda forward.’ Eriacho advocates for the provision of actual physical spaces at conferences where the indigenous can have ‘an autonomous and internal discussion among themselves ... well in advance of the event.’ These are all timely and important recommendations during a period when ecocidal and colonizing industrial-touristic and -pharmacological actions fragment communities further – not least as many psychedelic conferences happen based on industrial and business sponsorship!

This leads us to the second practical checklist, which appears at the end of Ashley Murphy-Beiner’s description of ‘profitdelic’ conferences (pp. 101–102). She provides academics with a heuristic to assess whether conferences are backed by academic rigour and sound ethics or whether they are, at root, money-making schemes that she suggests to avoid and ideally boycott.

The third specific how-to comes from Alexander Belsner, regarding ten calls to action for an ‘LGBTQ-Affirmative Psychedelic Therapy’. This involves firstly awakening to ‘the rainbow skeleton’s in our closet’ (p. 121 + 123), i.e. the intricately tied-up history of gay-conversion therapy with psychedelic science. Psychedelics did not awaken core figures from the scientifically-recorded delusion that homosexuality is a pathology – in fact, they stimulated a continuation of the ideology that straight = the only healthy. Shockingly, heterosexualisation ‘therapy’ was promoted by several canonical thinkers in the 1960s. For example Masters and Houston’s seminal and oft-quoted *Varieties of Psychedelic Experience*, contains a chapter which refers to changes in sexual preference as ‘gains’, and Stafford and Golightly actively used LSD as a ‘shock therapy’, viewing homosexuality as a pathology based on ‘morbid dependency’ and trauma (p. 117). What is remarkable about Cavnar’s systematic historic exposé – a sad genealogy – is that among the proponents are thinkers who, in psychedelic studies, are often portrayed as ground-breaking, as socially liberal, and anti-authoritarian. Yet the DSM’s pathologization of same-sex sexual desire and transgenderism remained unquestioned by such central figures throughout the 1960s. This theme raises the issue that these molecular aides can be agents for different directions of social change, and even tools for repression.

While psychedelics have been used in the abuse of queer people, Bett Williams reminds us in the same section of the book that psychedelics themselves are queer. The irony is not lost

on her: ‘right action is not just about enforcing “diversity” in psychedelic spaces’ but about internalizing and integrating the values of the marginalized and realizing this process by giving such people actual power, real jobs, publishing contracts and financial support. These calls to action are future-orientated and concern historical education: therapist gender pairings, active and inductive (rather than trans/homophobically-motivated) research into whether sexual preference or gender change occurs, and a rejection of narrow lineages in favour of pluralism, for ‘while our past may have been homophobic and transphobic, our future need not be’ (p. 125). Such hopeful statements of realistic and tentative possibility render the book’s tone (as a whole) one from plaint to cheer.

The fourth one appears at the end of Gretel Echazü’s and Pietro Benedito’s Brazil-based study on sexual assault. Briefly: they call for (1) the production of standards on what is and is not a healing practice both pre- and post-ritual. Further (2), they recommend the creation of a headquarters for the receiving of complaints. Both of these recommendations illustrate one of the illuminating tensions held across the chapters of the book: to what extent can bureaucratized solutions be solutions, and what does enforcement of certain values look like? While some may see bureaucracy as just another tool for oppression, the spectrum of opinion is healthy and important – and all opinions agree upon the specific issues, even though from these many solutions can ensue. This is an essential discussion when it comes to demands for justice in the psychedelic space.

The fifth is the ‘Ayahuasca Community guide for the Awareness of Sexual Abuse’, guidelines generated collaboratively covering a spectrum of possible abuse including those which are only abuse in these contexts – that is, verbal persuasion and ostensibly ‘consensual’ sex between healer and participant. They are informed by agreed-upon taboos in the indigenous space (for example, the ubiquitous *dietas* on sexual activity in-and-around the time of the ceremony) as well as by an understanding of the complexity of cross-cultural mistranslations which occur when boundaries are (close to) being crossed. The standard promoted in this guide includes prescriptions and advice such as: underwear off is unacceptable; shamans are not saints and idealization on the basis of supposed ceremonial office is as naïve as it is objectifying; personal space is important and listen to yourself and whether you are comfortable; speak up if you see anything unethical happening.

The sixth how-to guide by Anya Ermakova and Martin Terry regards the aforementioned factors involved in sustaining psychedelic plants. Using a plant as complex as Peyote requires taking into account ecological and cultural symbioses and variables.

The final practical advice section considers how licensed practitioners – i.e. those working in psychedelic clinics – can join the ‘harm reduction’ movement, a movement hitherto innovated more by recreational drug culture. This section appears to be the only reference made to autochthonously Western drug culture outside the clinic.

Yet, autochthonously Western culture (including, for example, the development of chemicals such as LSD and MDMA and spaces such as Psytrance and Techno dance floors) have more to offer than just psychotherapy. There are only three essays in section three, entitled ‘Psychedelics and Western Culture’, and they are concerned almost exclusively with psychotherapy and capitalism. Bill Brennan laments that psychotherapy is the ‘natural home for psychedelics’ because of its ‘bias towards individual solutions in lieu of collective ones’. While psychologization can occlude systemic change, the essay ignores autochthonous ways in which groups of humans in the West have come together to be in relationship with one another through the use of psychedelics. The limited representation of rave and festival cultures, in their own right, represents one of few limitations in the book’s remit. More woe to the West if all we offered were clinical psychotherapy and capitalism – though the mutual feedback these two entail, through the privatization of stress, the artificial scarcities

and demands of the pharmacy industry, etc. do testify to the greater point being made. Metropolitan Westerners have developed cultural synergies (electronic dance music, trip reporting) beyond the pharmacologically-backed clinic or the parroting of indigenous peoples.

In Erik Davis' words, we cannot risk 'simply feeding into the self-improvement logic that increasingly underscores capitalist subjectivity, and that has already shown a remarkable capacity to absorb, defang, and redirect ... transformative practices' (p. 93). The book as a whole is a reminder that a myopic focus on chemicals and biological mechanisms denies at least four-fifths of the 'preparation, dosage, set, setting, and integration' paradigm.

Perhaps the most interesting constructive dissonance in the book is the role of bureaucracy and regulation. Some advocate some kind of libertarian self-policing, whereas others suggest more authoritarian strategies of certification and centralized complaint bodies. This offers the reader a chance to breathe through variation. It reflects the breadth of answers available to agreed-upon problems. Charlotte Walsh argues most explicitly in favour of decriminalization instead of legalization, replete with careful legal technicalities: in this she offers an intricate definition of 'cognitive liberty' which is also a central tenant of the rave movement.

Rave ethnographies are an intricate intellectual ecosystem involving ethnography, musicology, and political critique. A book about psychedelic justice may have benefitted from these perspectives. The implication by omission is that that cultures like UK Rave, resource-based economic experiments like Rainbow Gathering, Borderlands, and Burning Man are not worth mentioning because they somehow embarrass serious discussion. But these cultures offer strong localist critiques of hegemonic global structures as well. Erik Davis' essay thus comes as refreshing when he speaks about the 'optics' being 'restricted to the performance of licensed rationality' thus ignoring the 'writers, healers, freaks and wizards who made up the underground ... centrally concerned with the values' (p. 91).

The collection of essays tackles the medical and retreat models (as well as Chacruna's established focus, that is, ceremonial models) and if there be later editions, more of the rich history and traditions developing in the fields of dance music and festival newtopia would add another perspective, providing fertile cross-pollination.

The take-home for me has been that from the physical appropriation (poaching) to the ideological appropriation (epistemicide and tokenism), it is the cultivation and maintenance of horizontal rather than vertical relationships which can help to mitigate and solve these issues – as López, Flores and Alcántara remind us so powerfully. On the level of discourse this means that 'exchanges should move beyond the folkloristic attitude towards the ritual ... intimately related with ways of being and sensing the world. Finally, these approaches should not focus on only a few specialists in the region ... [because] *sacred legacy is, above all, a collective heritage*' (my emphasis, p. 80). As anyone who has related to plant medicines knows, we did not invent the language we speak, the sacred music we sing, the tunes we offer to the spirits. It is only when one has reached a level of mutual relationality and experience that receptivity to the spirits reaches the level which can embody and embolden new music in the world. Academics may systematise well and badly, but the holy continuation is wholly together – inside and outside the theory, inside the self – beside the other.

Haraway advocates *Staying with the Trouble* 'not as a vanishing pivot between awful or Edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures' but instead 'promiscuously plucking out the fibres in clotted and dense events and practices' with a view to 'the thing that is not oneself but with which one must go on' (2016, 1 + 3) – and, indeed, without which one cannot go on! Almost as a case in point, the focus of *Psychedelic Justice* on real past and present situations, on, in Haraway's memorable words, 'mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times matters, meanings' (ibid.) in the psychedelic-society axis opens a door to critical thinking about the future. *Psychedelic Justice* does this

by introducing a deficit in the critical literature and describing the symptoms, causes of, and solutions to important injustices. I hope that the book continues to be read in the coming decades as a reminder of how we can keep co-inventing the future. May readers of this book feel inspired to co-develop the kind of world it is worth coming-down into, the kind of cosmos in which we want to live, where all plants, animals, humans, genders, sexualities, grammars, lives, deaths and minerals can help mother earth wave her shapes through the co-operative symbiosis that has brought us into being.

Notes on contributor


Mark Juhan Schunemann has been studying the sacramental drug-culture relationship for seven years, having presented his research in Tallinn, Harvard, Breaking Convention and Prague. His interests span natural and revealed theology, philosophy, critical theory, medical anthropology and literature and he looks at the relationship between measurable exteriorities, immeasurable interiorities, ritual and value generation, and comparativism. He is especially interested in the ways in which ritual, rave, and medical cultures potentiate the psychedelic state, and in the philosophy of cognitive liberty. Having studied at Oxford (BA First Class Theology and Religion) and Durham (MA Religion and Society), Mark is also a published poet and is pursuing a PhD at Exeter University, in comparative drug culture and philosophy with Prof Christine Hauskeller and Dr Luis Eduardo Luna.

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Coming down from the American trip

Review of 'American Trip. Set, Setting, and the Psychedelic Experience in the Twentieth Century', by Hartogsohn, Ido, Cambridge, MA, USA: The MIT Press, 2020, 432 pages, Price \$35.00, ISBN:9780262539142, <https://mitpress.mit.edu/9780262539142/american-trip/>

Everyone took advantage of his [their] power and yelled at his [their] underlings. But once you became used to that, it sounded no different than the regular ticking of a clock. But what did startle him [them] as he [they] pushed his [their] cart along the corridor was the dirt lying everywhere, though he [they] had admittedly expected something of the sort. He [they] liked to think about the improvements that could be made and how pleasant it would be to get started right away, however endless the work required.