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Psychedelic Spirituality and Thinking in Performance

Abstract

In this article, I seek to explore resonances between psychedelic spirituality and feminist epistemologies as a starting point for bringing psychedelic studies (and more broadly, consciousness studies) into conversation with performance. In surveying the field, I will deploy the concept of a “cosmic affect,” a term I use to refer to a sense of interconnectedness with the universe, sometimes articulated as an experience of “ego-death” (dissolution of the self). I am interested in tracing the circulation of “cosmic affect” through forms of “psychedelic” aesthetic, cultural, and knowledge production. Here, I foreground a desire for the near-impossible task of articulating or translating profound, transformative, and numinous, but often ineffable and non-discursive experiences and insights into language. I explore how “psychedelic” performance texts such as Gloria Anzaldúa’s work and Diana Reed Slattery’s *Xenolinguistics: Psychedelics, Language, and the Evolution of Consciousness* approach the performance of consciousness through narrative, discourse, and writing, by foregrounding its intermedial elements, as well as the alternative and multiple ways of knowing made accessible by psychedelic experiences. My curation of the collection of sources cited in this article into a psychedelic archive traces the contours of the field of psychedelic performance studies, with a focus on spirituality, and also situates performance at the interface of spirituality and neurocognitive research.

Introduction

In this article, I seek to explore resonances between psychedelic spirituality and feminist epistemologies as a starting point for bringing psychedelic studies (and more broadly, consciousness studies) into conversation with performance. In surveying the field, I will deploy the concept of a “cosmic affect,” a term I use to refer to a sense of interconnectedness with the universe, sometimes articulated as an experience of “ego-death” (dissolution of the self) or a metaphorical plasticity of the “self” (in relationship to reality and consciousness). I am interested in tracing “cosmic affect” through various discourses and narratives that have attempted to articulate it, and in its circulation via forms of aesthetic, cultural, and knowledge production. In these discourses and narratives, I foreground a desire for the near-impossible task of articulating or translating profound, transformative, and numinous, but often ineffable and non-discursive experiences and insights into language. I will situate cosmic affect in “psychedelic” performance texts such as Diana Reed Slattery’s *Xenolinguistics: Psychedelics, Language, and the Evolution of Consciousness*, as well as Gloria Anzaldúa’s work. In doing so, I aim to bring psychedelia (as explored in the context of literature and writing) into conversation with performance. I explore how these texts approach the performance of consciousness through narrative, discourse, and writing, thereby reconceptualizing the relationship between performance and writing. I will do this by foregrounding its intermedial elements, as well as the alternative and multiple ways of knowing made accessible by psychedelic experiences. Finally, I will turn to discourses of the embodied mind to explore how performance might be situated at the interface of spirituality and neurocognitive research. My curation of the collection of sources cited in this article into a psychedelic archive traces the contours of the field of psychedelic performance studies, with a focus on spirituality.

Toward Psychedelic Performance Studies

In this article I trace the concept of “cosmic affect” through various discourses and narratives that have sought to understand its articulation through psychedelic spirituality. In the etymological definition of the term, “psychedelic” is a synthesis of the Greek *psyche* (the “mind”) and *deloun* (to “make visible, reveal”). In psychedelic perception, sensory experiences and the mind reveal aspects of each other. “Psychedelic performance” is a term I use broadly to refer to psychedelic (or “entheogenic”) dimensions of culture, but also to creative practices and technologies of self that catalyze the consciousness-expanding (or “psychonautic”) impulse. Often, such forms of performance are concerned with the nature of mind, consciousness and reality as part of their inquiry, although there are also different approaches to this, each situated in particular social, cultural, and historical contexts and traditions of thought and citational practices. “Entheogens” are psychoactive substances or plant medicines that often catalyze spiritually transformative or existentially meaningful experiences, but they are not the only way of accessing such altered or expanded states of consciousness. In approaching psychedelic performance with a queer-feminist lens, I foreground epistemic multiplicity (multiple ways of knowing) through multiple notions of reality, questions of intimacy, care, and healing, and an emphasis on embodied, lived experience that is intertwined with extraordinary and metaphysical forces in the universe. In this sense, I explore tensions and trouble binary oppositions between

“ordinary” and “nonordinary” states of consciousness, and how they interact with discursive and non-discursive, as well as universal and particular aspects of meaning-making and knowledge production.

The larger project of this article approaches altered or expanded states of consciousness as discursive sites of alterity, by reimagining what works of theory, writing, and performance might be included in a queer-feminist and trans* “psychedelic” archive, and the alternative and multiple forms of knowledge production emerging from them. How do feminist ways of thinking and knowledge about the nature of self, reality, and consciousness (as accessed through psychedelic experiences) inform each other? I aim to situate these works in relation to the psychedelic renaissance of today. How do we make sense of psychedelic experiences, which often concern issues related to the meaning of life, death, and grief. in the age of coronavirus? Although these questions are beyond the scope of this article, I am curious about delving further into them, especially with society’s increasing interest in conversations on neuroplasticity, ayahuasca tourism, microdosing, as well as the circulation of popular nonfiction books such as Michael Pollan’s *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence* (2018), which echoes the resurgence in underground psychedelic therapies and research that has been opening up possibilities for healing conditions such as end-of-life anxiety for cancer patients, PTSD, social anxiety in autistic adults, depression, and addiction.

Cosmic Affect and Language

The relationship between psychedelic experiences and language, narrative, and the discursive is complex, due to the impossible task of articulating or translating profound, and transformative but often ineffable and non-discursive experiences and insights into language. Nevertheless, psychonauts (consciousness-explorers) have attempted to contend with the linguistic dimensions of altered or expanded states of consciousness. In “The noetic connection: synaesthesia, psychedelics, and language,” Diana Slattery suggests that “Reports of psychedelic synaesthesias . . . link the states of multisensory perception to noetic experience of deep insights into the nature of reality and consciousness, and their profound intertwinement. A range of contemporary artistic practices, especially in immersive, interactive, electronic media environments seek to create, or invoke, synaesthesias” (Slattery 2005, 122). Slattery points to Walter Pahnke’s suggestion that a noetic quality, as well as synaesthesia, are two main features of the psychedelic experience. Here, Slattery cites Pahnke:

The Noetic Quality, as named by William James, is a feeling of insight or illumination that, on an intuitive, non-rational level and with a tremendous force of certainty, subjectively has the status of Ultimate Reality. This knowledge is not an increase of facts but is a gain in psychological, philosophical, or theological insight (Pahnke) (Slattery 2005, 126).

In emphasizing the participatory nature of the aforementioned synaesthetic contemporary art practices, which includes rave culture, Burning Man, and their intersections with technology and new media, Slattery suggests how psychedelic experiences can be read as social, aesthetic, and performative forms. I want to delve further into the performance context here and explore the dynamic relationship that

these forms of performance have with narrative, writing, and other discursive (critical and theoretical) practices, and the possibilities for knowledge production that may emerge from the intermediality of performance and writing.

Like the “noetic” and “intertwinglement,” cosmic affect points to a sense of interconnectedness with the universe, experiences of ineffability, and feelings of awe and wonder over the “deep insights into the nature of reality and consciousness.” While Slattery focuses on its connection to multisensory and synaesthetic perception, I want to foreground cosmic affect’s troubling of the binary opposition between “ordinary” and “nonordinary” states of consciousness. Thus, one may experience a transcendence of the self at the same time as its immanence - that is, intertwined with the concrete realities of everyday life and quotidian performance. It is important to integrate the profound insights and wisdom one might acquire (or on a larger scale, psychedelic “downloads” of information and knowledge) into everyday, lived experience, as well as to perceive the extraordinary within the ordinary. While similar insights are accessible through other spiritual practices and understandings, I am tracing the circulation of cosmic affect through psychedelic culture, performance/writing, and knowledge production. I have found queer-feminist epistemologies such as Gloria Anzaldúa’s “poet-shaman aesthetics” (as explored by AnaLouise Keating) to be useful in navigating the imaginary and intuitive realities and contexts of psychedelic experiences, as well as the intermedial, multisensory perception, and multiple ways of knowing involved.

The relationship between one’s interiority and the socio-cultural and discursive aspects of spirituality is also addressed by Donnalee Dox in *Reckoning with Spirit in the Paradigm of Performance* (2016), in which she observes a shift in how models of the mind are oriented toward spirituality and performance. Dox’s reconceptualization of the relationship between spirituality and performance situates performance at the interface of the spirituality and the materiality of culture. Dox writes, “Western modernisms’ emphasis on empirical observation shifts the kind of internal sensing associated with spirituality (feeling, intuition, insight, imagination) into aesthetics and affect” (Dox 2016, 24). Dox attempts to integrate spiritual “internal sensing” with aesthetics and affect by bringing notions of the sacred, numinous, and ineffable into conversation with performance theory, which privileges visibility, materiality, and the constructedness of meaning (influenced by social, cultural, and discursive dynamics) in its understanding of embodiment. Dox seems to be advocating for the incorporation of alternative ways of knowing and thinking into aesthetics and affect, via performance theory as well as praxis. Dox suggests that “Replacing the dualistic metaphor of a mental theatre with dynamic and interactive models of sensation, perception, and cognition invites orientations to performativity that can accommodate spirituality” (Dox 2016, 126). Elaborating further on these models of consciousness, Dox writes,

The model of the human mind as an internal theatre that represents reality has given way. Newer models broaden our understanding of how seemingly oppositional mental capacities—such as computational thinking, flights of imagination, and a sense of spirit—might share common neurological processes rather than occupy regions of the brain Mark C. Taylor advocates shifting to a ‘hierarchical yet nonlinear model of cognition that

incorporates ‘intuition, perception, consciousness, self-consciousness, and reason’ equally and without prejudice (Dox 2016, 18, quoting Taylor).

This “nonlinear model of cognition” seems to include the modes of perceiving, thinking, intuiting, imagining, and re-visioning that Anzaldúa deploys in her practices of reading and writing/performance, which I will discuss below. I will also situate psychedelic performance at the intersection of science and spirituality, by exploring neurocognitive research that has attempted to make sense of spirituality in the brain, including theories of the embodied mind paradigm. Here, performance (especially in conversation with queer-feminist epistemologies) is a useful lens for approaching psychedelic experiences in order to explore how they are embodied, and how such notions of embodiment are intertwined with mind and spirit. I approach this intersection as a productive site of tension from which emerges discursive possibilities for reconceptualizing and reimagining the self in relationship to reality, perception, consciousness, and multiple ways of knowing and thinking.

Psychedelics and Spirituality

In *Darwin’s Pharmacy: Sex, Plants, and the Evolution of the Noosphere* (2011), Richard Doyle refers to the sense of ineffability in consciousness-expanding experiences as the “ecodelic” insight: “the sudden and absolute conviction that the psychonaut is involved in a densely interconnected ecosystem for which contemporary tactics of human identity are insufficient” (Doyle 2011, 20). Concerned with the “swarm of ontological, epistemological, and ethical questions provoked by psychedelic experience in the context of the global ecological crisis,” especially as explored by Terrence McKenna, Doyle raises a series of questions about the following:

What are these compounds and how do they reliably produce experiences of interconnection? What do the states that they induce suggest about the nature of human minds? How should we respond to the claims of psychonauts that these materials give them nothing less than an encounter with alternate and perhaps divine realities? Do we have a robust notion of how to live in a reality that has itself become plural in the context of an ecosystem increasingly saturated with information amidst dwindling biodiversity? What can contemporary science and technology learn from psychedelics? Can psychedelics help cultivate a new and paradoxical outburst of interconnected and hence transhuman agency on Earth, one that embraces and even enhances ecological imbrication? (Doyle 2011, 13).

Doyle seems to be suggesting a reconceptualization of our relationship to nonhuman entities, perhaps troubling the binary opposition between human and nonhuman in the first place as we move toward an interconnected ecosystem.

In this text, Doyle approaches psychedelic (or “ecodelic”) experiences through a rhetorical lens. Positing a symbiotic relationship between rhetoric and reality, Doyle foregrounds the role of language and discourse in framing one’s experience of consciousness and reality, and also in manifesting particular psychedelic experiences. However, this role of language and discourse is perpetually in tension with the ineffability of such experiences. Doyle seems to be suggesting that “ecodelic” insight offers access to rhetorical possibilities and tools that the ego does not usually have access to. Doyle describes it as “a sudden apprehension of immanence, a connectivity

that exceeds the rhetorical capacities of an ego and simultaneously summons transpersonal characters who, at the very least, function as rhetorical tactics for managing the strangeness of ecodelic experience” (Doyle 2011, 20). In other words, language is part of the “set” (mindset) and “setting” (environment/cultural milieu) that influences the content and tone of psychedelic experiences. Later in this article, I will explore how concepts of the embodied mind are connected to “set” and “setting.”

Describing psilocybin (the compound in hallucinogenic or “magic” mushrooms) as a “rhetorical adjunct,” Doyle delves into several rhetorical tropes - tripping, evolution, synecdoche, technoscience, consciousness, and holograms (also, the peacock and cosmic ink blot) to explore narratives and discourses surrounding “altered” (or expanded) states of consciousness. Doyle is concerned with the “linguistic management of psychedelic states. This management extends to the use of trip reports themselves to orient the psychedelic experience, to act as the recursive ‘set and setting’ of psychonautic practice” (Doyle 2011, 37). Again, language plays a direct role in psychedelic experiences in addition to offering frameworks of knowledge for making sense of these experiences. Expanding upon this, I want to foreground the tropes of performance, writing, and altered or expanded states of consciousness in psychedelic narratives and knowledge production. Thus, I situate my project in proximity to Doyle’s in its foregrounding of the discursive; however, I also expand on its scope to include performance, and also to approach it through a queer-feminist lens. Tropes of performance, writing, and altered or expanded states of consciousness are present in Gloria Anzaldúa’s work, as well as in texts such as Timothy Leary, Ralph Metzner and Richard Alpert’s *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (2017)) and Diana Reed Slattery’s *Xenolinguistics* (2015). These tropes are also intertwined with technology and media, as evident in Slattery’s work as well as in Timothy Leary’s *Experiential Typewriter*, a “tele-thought communication system” or device that allows for a short-hand mode of documenting the vast amount of information that emerges during a consciousness-expanding experience. This vast “download” of information (to use Slattery’s term) seems to have some similarities to dream compression, in that it involves a dense amount of experiential data. Thus, psychedelics catalyze a rethinking of frameworks and paradigms of knowledge, as well as our ways of thinking and processing information, by allowing intuition and imagination to work alongside more logical forms of thinking. This has implications not only for knowledge production, but also for neurodiversity and cognitive liberty. This informs (and is also informed by) the ways we reconceptualize and reimagine our sense of self in relationship to reality and consciousness.

On Cultivating Psychedelic Perception

I want to suggest that psychedelic performance involves the “cultivation of perception,” a concept that Jay Johnston deploys in *Angels of Desire: Esoteric Bodies, Aesthetics, and Ethics* (2008) to explore spiritually transformative aesthetic practices. Johnston suggests that “[t]hese practices—which include various meditation and ritual activities—are undertaken to enable the apprehension of realities that are understood to exist in immanent and transcendent relation to this everyday, phenomenal world. Such activities are employed specifically to enact a change in cognitive ability which in turn are understood to enact a change in subjectivity” (Johnston 2008, 89). In

“Psychedelic Perception in Queer-Feminist Reading and Writing (as Performance),” I explore how Anzaldúa cultivates psychedelic perception through imagination, and takes the form of reading and writing (as well as art), which Anzaldúa connects to dream work and shamanic journeying (Li forthcoming). I read these practices as forms of performance, due to the ways they engage both mind and body in the “re-visioning” of reality (or multiple realities). In *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* (2015), Anzaldúa delves into the nature of reality, and its relationship to perception, experience/life, and language/ideology. Psychedelic perception delves into the hidden or invisible aspects of reality, thereby questioning our assumptions about the nature of reality, consciousness, and perception itself. From psychedelic perception emerges alternative forms of knowledge production. By “consciousness” I am referring to a synthesis of mind, body, and spirit in the experience of reality (or multiple realities), as well as the processes of perception, cognition, and affect involved in the production of knowledge.

I also want to suggest that these performance practices of “cultivating perception” have a dynamic relationship with writing, due to its potential to enact change in the mind, body, and material reality itself. In “Speculative Realism, Visionary Pragmatism, and Poet-Shamanic Aesthetics in Gloria Anzaldúa—and Beyond,” AnaLouise Keating explains,

In poet-shaman aesthetics, language can initiate physiological, material change. In a way, writing functions as a kind of magical technology. This deeply embodied transformation directly links shamanism’s shape-shifting power and Indigenous theories of participatory speech acts with poetry’s intimate relationship with language. In poet-shaman aesthetics, images—whether visual, imaginal, and/or painted by words—are interrelated to intuitive-emotional knowledge and conscious awareness (Keating 2012, 53).

Here, spirituality is intertwined with processes of imagination, intuition, and acts of re-visioning reality through both visual images and language. Additionally, spirituality is situated at the interface of speech and writing through poetry, which also informs a “magical” epistemological orientation. For Anzaldúa, these processes of alternative knowledge production and reception are connected to identity formation (or re-construction). Anzaldúa suggests, “Identity formation (which involves ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ oneself and the world) is an alchemical process that synthesizes the dualities, contradictions, and perspectives from these different selves and worlds” (Anzaldúa 2015, 3). This reconciliation and synthesis of ambivalences and paradoxes between different selves and worlds is reflected in her earlier work, which articulates her concept of “mestiza consciousness,” which embraces the hybridity of identities as well as their tensions and complexities. Anzaldúa writes, “By focusing on Chicana/mestiza (mexicana tejana) experience and identity in several axes—writer/artist, intellectual, scholar, teacher, woman, Chicana, feminist, lesbian, working class—I attempt to analyze, describe, and re—create these identity shifts” (Anzaldúa 2015, 3). Keating’s emphasis on Anzaldúa’s later work, which marks a shift from her focus on “mestiza consciousness” to a “shamanic” sensibility, foregrounds the dimension of spiritual activism that is present in multiple threads of Anzaldúa’s thought but underexplored by scholars of her work. By approaching Anzaldúa’s work through the politics of spirit, Keating moves beyond the identity-based issues that are often the emphasis of readings of Anzaldúa’s work, while continuing to address issues of oppression, power,

and knowledge. Describing spiritual activism as “spirituality for social change” in “Shifting Perspectives: Spiritual Activism, Social Transformation, and the Politics of Spirit,” Keating suggests that it is “a visionary, experientially-based epistemology and ethics, a way of life and a call to action. At the epistemological level, spiritual activism posits a metaphysics of interconnectedness and employs relational modes of thinking” (Keating 2005, 242). Through Anzaldúa’s “poet-shamanic aesthetics,” Keating explores the intersection of spiritual activism with language, poetry, and writing (Keating 2012). Anzaldúa articulates a “shamanic” sensibility through her navigation of multiple worlds, which I read as an articulation of multiple ways of knowing, as well as cognitive multiplicity.

In “Facing Our Dragons: Spiritual Activism, Psychedelic Mysticism and the Pursuit of Opposition” (2006), Michelle Corbin mentions Gloria Anzaldúa’s experiments with sensory deprivation and practice of *conocimiento*. *Conocimiento* is a seven-stage process of self-transformation involving the “seven chakras of the energetic, dream body, spirit body (counterpart of the physical body),” as well as the “seven planes of reality” (Anzaldúa 2015, 123). It also involves a “nonbinary, connectionist mode of thinking” (Anzaldúa 2015, 243). The process of *conocimiento* ends in spiritual activism, which involves the deployment of spirituality in a social change context. Arguing that Gloria Anzaldúa’s work is “mystical, not just contemplative or spiritual,” Corbin observes how Anzaldúa intentionally allows mystical practice, via experiences of hallucination and visions, including psychedelic experiences, to inform her intellectual work. Corbin approaches Anzaldúa’s “work around transforming consciousness through mystical practice as a form of feminist praxis” (Corbin 2006, 245). While Corbin does not explicitly define what “mysticism” is, as distinct from spirituality, the term seems to refer to a kind of epistemological orientation, or way of knowing. This epistemological approach to mysticism is reflected in Corbin’s problematizing of the theme of dualism often found in psychedelic mysticism. Corbin writes, “Psychedelic mysticism often relies on unexamined dualist tropes in their own analyses. On the one hand, psychedelic mysticism has been deeply heretical to Western knowledge. It interrogates the supposed separation of subject and object. It reminds intellectuals that rationality is only one way of knowing the world and a limited way at that. Psychedelic mysticism seeks toward oppositional consciousness” (Corbin 2006, 246). This troubling of binary oppositions in knowledge and positing of multiple ways of knowing resonates with feminist epistemologies, which is reflected also in Corbin’s reading of Anzaldúa’s mystical practices and spiritual activism as feminist praxis. As Corbin suggests, “Anzaldúa pursues her intellectual writing, her activism and her spiritual and cultural disciplines as one practice. This she argues, is what it means to do knowledge differently and to do knowledge so that it returns to a source that leads to ‘conocimiento’, or consciousness, or deep awareness” (Corbin 2006, 241). Here, Corbin foregrounds the multiple but also integrated forms of knowledge production that is part of this feminist praxis and epistemological orientation.

Corbin seems to be advocating for a rethinking of psychedelic mysticism in a way that embraces ambivalences and paradoxes, as in Anzaldúa’s work, as well as multiple ways of knowing, as in the foregrounding of epistemic multiplicity in queer-feminist thinking. For Gloria Anzaldúa, epistemic multiplicity is also articulated through multiple realities. Expanding upon this, I would be curious to explore how psychedelic spirituality and mysticism engages with *cognitive* multiplicity (multiple ways of

“thinking”) as well. Here, I also draw upon Neşe Devenot’s notion of “queering” consciousness in “A Declaration of Psychedelic Studies” (2013). In this text, Devenot locates psychedelic studies in proximity to queer theory. Drawing upon David Halperin’s notion of queer as “whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (1997), Devenot argues that psychedelia is queer. As Devenot suggests, “as a multiplicity of social groups, interests, and worldviews, psychedelia is a ‘queer’ deviation from dominant cultural norms” (Devenot 2013, 188). Furthermore, Devenot approaches psychedelia as a “queering of consciousness,” in that it troubles normative states of consciousness.

Consciousness and Language

Foregrounding brain plasticity in the co-evolution (in biological and social contexts) of language and consciousness in *Xenolinguistics*, Slattery uses the term “intertwined” to articulate the sense of interconnectedness between consciousness, language, perception, and reality. As she writes,

This deeply intertwined relationship between language and consciousness became experientially real when I used psychedelics to explore the connections. Psychedelic states of consciousness produce novel forms of language in some psychonauts, especially visual languages, and novel ideas about language. This book is also about an outrageous twelve-year adventure in which I looked behind the veil of natural language and discovered new species of language, as well as a different set of questions to guide my process into a deeper mystery about the workings of language. Additionally, a profound personal healing unfolded in the process of taking sizable risks. They are the same story. The Glide language, whose download launched the voyage of exploration, accomplished its mission: the healing of the heart, and the transformation of consciousness to new ways of experiencing self and world through new language (Slattery 2015, xxix-xxx).

The term “intertwined” was initially coined by computer visionary Ted Nelson, as part of the insights he had about hypertext in the early 70’s, prior to the emergence of the World Wide Web (Slattery 2015, xl). Slattery suggests, “As in the case of consciousness and language, perception and reality are deeply, deeply, *deeply* intertwined” (Slattery 2015, 141). What Slattery means here is that perception and reality dynamically inform each other, and are in a perpetual mode of engagement. Slattery compares the relationship between perception and reality to a “dynamic cognitive system,” much like cyberneticist Heinz von Foerster’s notion that the sensorium and motorium are closely intertwined (Slattery 2015, 141).

Thus, Slattery’s research also reflects a journey and narrative of psycho-spiritual healing. Like Anzaldúa’s work, an intermedial form of performance and writing functions as a catalyst for both self-transformation and knowledge production. Slattery asks, “Communicating the unspeakable is the mission impossible of every psychonaut, ancient or modern. Can the visionary bacon be brought back home to consensus reality in a form that can be understood and put into use by the tribe?” (Slattery 2015: xxxi). In this text, Slattery presents a history of psychonautic (consciousness-expanding) practices in both scientific and artistic contexts, such as Terrence

McKenna's experiments with psilocybin and Allyson Grey's "Secret Writing", as well as an overview of key issues and concepts involved in psychonautics, especially in the context of language. Topics explored include a neurophenomenological approach to language, various discourses of consciousness, and the "downloading" of psychedelic knowledge. Slattery then describes her own intermedial psychonautic practice, which has textual (and literary), as well as technological/new media and performance elements. Over the course of several years, Slattery documents her experiences with various entheogens, which becomes part of an interdisciplinary and multimedia engagement with consciousness, that also reflects a journey of psycho-spiritual healing. During this journey, Slattery discovers Glide, a dynamic and responsive visual-gestural language Slattery first encounters (or in her terms, "downloaded") in a chemically-induced "altered" (or expanded) state of consciousness, followed by the development of Glide Oracle, an iOS app,¹ and LiveGlide, the app's 3D iteration used as part of live video performance in a dome environment. Consisting of 729 hexagrams, Glide is also situated in its own culture, forms of knowledge, and narratives, which are a part of the world that Slattery describes in her science fiction novel, *The Maze Game* (2003). In *Xenolinguistics*, Slattery writes about the autobiographical and theoretical dimensions of her interactions with Glide, thereby troubling distinctions between fiction and reality. Slattery communicates the "ineffable" through collaborative "authorship" with this interdimensional entity through language ("xenolinguistics") that enacts a sense of what Slattery calls "high strangeness." (From Slattery's description, Glide could be seen as extraterrestrial, but exists in "inner" space rather than "outer" space.) As both visual and gestural, Glide encompasses multiple mediums and genres, as reflected in the intermedial and hybrid forms of text/performance that articulate the narratives and discourses surrounding the language. As a visual and gestural language made up of signs and glyphs, Glide merges visual/digital art with performance, and also functions as a form of "embodied" writing. Slattery calls writing into question on multiple levels - through interaction with the intermedial elements of Glide, and its existence in multiple dimensions, mediums, and genres. In engaging with Glide, Slattery also enters an intersubjective space, in which processes of reading and writing are performed simultaneously (or synchronously). Slattery grounds psychedelic experiences of "ego-death" (dissolution of the self) in the concept of plasticity. Here, Slattery is referring both to plasticity in the neurobiological sense — that is, the brain's capacity to change, such as through creating new neural pathways and connections, as well as a metaphorical notion of plasticity via self-transformation or personal change. Slattery suggests that changes in perception and self-consciousness in this context are always in relation to language, which opens up epistemological possibilities.

Thus, Glide (in collaboration with Slattery) performs epistemic multiplicity through its plasticity of reality and perception - its ability to move between various dimensions of reality (or multiple realities) as well as aesthetic mediums and genres of writing. The collaborative authorship between Slattery and Glide can also be read as an intersubjective performance (between human and nonhuman forms of consciousness). Slattery describes the emergence of these novel symbols and forms of cognition in terms of the "perturbation" of perception, which changes one's sense of self and opens up multiple (or alternative) forms of knowledge. Visual perception and language also perform synergistically in Doyle's analysis of psychedelics as a

“rhetorical adjunct.” Doyle observes that “[Stanley] Krippner notes that the LSD functioned here as a perceptual adjunct, somehow tuning the visual perception toward increased semantic and hence rhetorical efficacy” (Doyle 2011, 113). Doyle goes on to suggest that “Rather than a cognitive modulation, then, psychedelics in Krippner’s analysis seem to affect language function through an intensification of sensory attention on and through language, ‘a complete joy’” (Doyle 2011, 113). For the various works of psychedelic performance and writing mentioned in this article, one might suggest that a reconciliation of the paradox between the discursive and non-discursive dimensions of psychedelic and spiritual experiences occurs through the intermediality of performance and writing. Additionally, for Anzaldúa and Slattery, changes in cognitive ability, and subsequently, in subjectivity, are enacted through language and writing that functions as performance.

Mind and Embodiment in Performance/Writing

Corbin’s intersectional approach toward knowledge production resonates with Victoria Pitts-Taylor’s queer-feminist critique of neuroscience in *The Brain’s Body: Neuroscience and Corporeal Politics* (2016), in which she explores the embodied mind paradigm, or “diverse family of theories that describe cognition as variously embodied, enactive, embedded, and extended, as well as emotional or affective” (Pitts-Taylor 2016, 46). Although Pitts-Taylor does not address spirituality in this analysis, I want to suggest this as a further pathway of inquiry, especially if feminist epistemologies (such as Anzaldúa’s, as well as other ways of thinking that draw upon mystical, spiritual, and intuitive practices and paradigms of knowledge) are to be brought into conversation with consciousness (and more specifically, psychedelic) studies. Emphasizing the relationship between the mind and lived experience, as well as epistemic multiplicity (multiple ways of knowing), Pitts-Taylor suggest how the four dimensions of the embodied mind resonates with feminist epistemologies: “A mind that is embodied, potentially, can mean it is immanent (tied to the capacities and worlds in which it is enacted); relational (affected by its position to and interaction with other minds, bodies, and objects); affective (shaped by feeling and emotion); and situated (tied to specific places, needs, and circumstances)” (Pitts-Taylor 2016, 44). I want to suggest that these four dimensions of the embodied mind can be useful lenses in understanding the “set” (mindset) and “setting” (environment/cultural milieu) of psychedelic experiences, as well as the practices of language, and writing, and performance they are intertwined with.

Slattery’s intermedial engagement with language through performance and writing considers how psychedelic cognitive processes work in tandem with “set” and “setting.” For Slattery, the possibilities for collaborative authorship through *LiveGlide* can be contextualized as a “structural coupling between two or more autonomous systems,” which can be read as an intersubjective performance between human and nonhuman consciousness. Slattery describes the emergence of these novel symbols and forms of cognition in terms of the “perturbation” of perception, which changes one’s sense of self and opens up multiple (or alternative) forms of knowledge. Additionally, Slattery describes how *LiveGlide* interacts with the physical space and environment as well as her altered state of consciousness. Slattery writes, “In my own practice of performing with *LiveGlide*, the projection of the moving, transforming symbols onto a dome in an altered state of consciousness drives the altered state of consciousness. This

projection, on the physical dome, and reflected in the dome of consciousness in turn, directs the writing and simultaneous reading in a feedback loop, amplifying the intensity, resonating within the integrated inner/outer space of inscription” (Slattery 198). This “feedback loop” between Slattery and Glide appears to be multidirectional, in the sense of functioning as both processes of reading and writing. Slattery writes:

Judging from the novel experiences of the mind when the brain undergoes psychedelic perturbations in its neurotransmitter systems, we could say that the brain/mind system is highly structurally plastic The mind, apparently, is so plastic that its primary structures, such as the sense of self or self-identity, can disappear or dissolve and pull themselves back together Henceforth, the ego contains the knowledge of its own porosity, and the possibility of its very personal dissolution and subsequent rebirth. When the individual’s cognitive domain expands to the degree that occurs under psychoactive stimulation, and can be integrated upon return to baseline, the fact of plasticity allows changes to occur in the baseline structures of consciousness . . . The positive changes that a profound psychedelic excursion, in a supportive setting, can bring have been well documented in the clinical research of Charles Grob, Roland Griffiths, and others in their research on the use of psilocybin and LSD to ameliorate end-of-life anxiety in terminally ill patients. The attitudes and emotions of the baseline self can be shifted in a positive direction (Slattery 2015, 206-7).

Here, cosmic affect is located in a brain/mind system (which, in Pitts-Taylor’s view is embodied) that is structurally plastic, which informs a plasticity of self-consciousness and reality. Once again, cosmic affect articulates a tension between discursive and non-discursive experiences of altered or expanded states of consciousness, from which alternative forms of knowledge production (often of a spiritual or mystical nature) can emerge. One might point out that “baseline” reality is already plastic to a degree. I want to suggest that there are multiple baseline states (due to neurodiversity, cultural relativism, as well as other reasons), and also that these baseline states are perpetually shifting, from day-to-day and between different contexts.

Additionally, Slattery’s work points to a psychedelic meme: the concept of the “linguistic structure of reality.” Slattery turns to Harry Hunt’s distinction between “presentational” states of consciousness and “representational” that characterizes the dominant view in cognitive science. Slattery writes, “By relating “symbolic cognition” to ‘presentational states’ (ASC [Altered States of Consciousness]), Hunt constructs a framework for understanding hallucination (extended perceptions) and mystical vision as linguistic, communicative, something that can be read, a text.” (Slattery 2015, 199). For Hunt, “symbolic cognition” which refers to the “human, self-referential form of consciousness” and includes both the “presentational” and “representational,” is “cross-modal and synaesthetically based” (Slattery 2015, 150). Slattery expands on Hunt’s view of synaesthetic consciousness to include nonhuman subjects (Hunt 1995). Returning to this psychedelic meme of the linguistic structure of reality, Slattery goes on to approach the linguistic and phenomenological aspects of psychedelic states of consciousness (and more broadly, the linguistic structure of life/reality) on a systemic level by engaging with Varela’s notions of autopoiesis and “structural couplings” (the latter of which symbols are a part) (Maturana and Varela 1980), as well as other

concepts related to his concepts of embodied cognition (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1996) and neurophenomenology (Varela 1996).

Psychedelic Spirituality and the Self

In *The Awakened Ones: Phenomenology of Visionary Experience* (2012), Gananath Obeyesekere draws a distinction between the “I” of the “discursively reasoning and active consciousness” and an alternative mode of the thinking self, “It-thinking,” which is inspired by the Nietzschean notion of the “It” (Obeyesekere 2012, 35-36). Obeyesekere traces “I” thinking to the Cartesian “I think, I am.” While “I-thinking” is considered to be active, “It-thinking” is characterized by a “passive” form of cognition. Obeyesekere suggests:

One in full meditation, conscious discursive intellection or I-thinking or the will switches itself off as the meditator enters into states of trance or *jhana* (*dhyāna*). It is then that knowledge appears before the Buddha, giving him the capacity for ‘divine vision.’ Not only can he see the coming into being and disappearance of people and worlds but also ‘thought comes’ to him during the third watch of the night. While ordinary cognition and I-thinking makes sense in everyday life, not so in the meditative context, which is designed to explode the idea of a self as an enduring entity. (Obeyesekere 2012, 36)

Such visions can also include forms of memory that are not accessible to rational cognition (Obeyesekere 2012, 37). Obeyesekere troubles the notion that cerebral activity is suspended during these states, thereby troubling the binary opposition between the active rational discursive “I-thinking” and suspension of cerebral activity during trance states. Although Obeyesekere does not use these terms, Obeyesekere seems to be referring to a kind of intuition or receptivity, or perhaps even extra-sensory perception.

Eugene d’Aquili and Andrew Newberg have articulated the sense of interconnectedness with the universe via their model of the Aesthetic-Religious Continuum in “The Neuropsychology of Aesthetic, Spiritual, and Mystical States” (2000). They suggest that all spiritual and mystical states (“at least those that have a powerful affective component”) are located along this continuum. They suggest, “This upper end of the Aesthetic-Religious Continuum more or less begins with experiences of religious awe, such as the sort of states that occur in some individuals when confronted with the beauty and majesty of nature. With this lower-level mystical experience of religious awe we should probably include various numinous experiences, such as mandala dreams” (D’Aquili and Newberg 2000, 45). D’Aquili and Newberg also describe a certain “progressive incorporation of the sense of the observing self” in spiritual-mystical experiences. What does “incorporation” mean, and how does it work? What notions of self might one have (and how does this self observe) during ineffable or non-discursive experiences? If this self is in a state of interconnectedness with the universe, who is observing that self? Who is it then who experiences the dissolution of the self in moments of interconnectedness with the universe, and narrates it as such? Who does this story of the ineffable, non-discursive, and numinous belong to? Who gets to say, I am now without ego? What happens to this “observing self” when

returning to “ordinary” or “baseline” reality and the process of integration that follows. What motivates this self to return to “baseline” reality?

Conclusion

Clare Hemmings rewrites feminist historiography through narratology, by considering alternative ways of approaching the construction of narrative and knowledge production (discourse). In *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (2011), Hemmings seeks to “uncover the political grammar through which we come to believe in narratives of progress, loss, and return” by analyzing citation tactics and textual affect in feminist stories we tell, and the intellectual genealogies they entail (Hemmings 2011, 17). As an alternative, Hemmings considers “how we might tell stories differently rather than telling different stories,” by engaging with diverse intellectual genealogies and citational praxes (Hemmings 2011, 16). Although Hemmings’ project is focused on feminist historiography, I want to suggest that we can apply this way of thinking to narratives about personal “development” and healing, stories about journeying/tripping, and discourses of “alterity” (as well as “interconnectedness”) in “altered” or expanded states of consciousness. Stories that we tell about what consciousness or reality is, how it works, or the self in relationship to it, and the sorts of knowledge this produces. In other words, we can turn this alternative feminist epistemological lens onto stories about the self (ego-dissolution or loosening of the self). One approach to “telling stories differently” in this context is by engaging with psychedelic spirituality in performance, and the multiple ways of knowing, thinking, and reimagining the reality with which it resonates.

Notes

1. The app can be downloaded at <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/glide-oracle-for-iphone/id969753623>

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About the Author

Deni (Denise) Li is a writer, performance-maker, and PhD student in Drama at the University of California, Irvine. They received their MFA in Writing from the California Institute of the Arts. They are interested in approaching altered or expanded states of consciousness as discursive sites of alterity and alternative forms of knowledge production, by situating performance at the intersection of psychedelic (and more broadly, consciousness) studies, and queer-feminist and trans* epistemologies. These areas of inquiry include psychedelic culture (as quotidian performance), intersections between psychedelia and technology/digital media, as well as performance art and writing that involves practices of cultivating perception and intuition, re-visioning reality, and psycho-spiritual healing, that might be included in a queer-feminist and trans* “psychedelic” archive.