

# Acid feminism: Gender, psychonautics and the politics of consciousness

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## Abstract

Psychedelic substances have undergone a transformation in the public consciousness over the last 15 years. However, the most influential first-person narratives of psychonauts and ‘scientist-shamans’ navigating the frontiers of consciousness have tended to entirely exclude women’s experiences and voices. Psychedelic feminism, has emerged to signify the role consciousness expansion and experimentation might play in rejuvenating feminism’s collective imagination, and undoing the historical silencing of women’s voices in psychedelic culture and research. Drawing on Mark Fisher’s work on acid communism, the feminist psychedelic humanities, narcofeminism and autobiographical life-writing by women on experimental psychedelic substance use, this article investigates the promise of acid feminism for the wider narcofeminist movement, and its implications for undoing some key precepts endemic in psychedelic culture and research.

## Keywords

consciousness raising, gender, LSD, narcofeminist politics, psychonauts

## Introduction

The burgeoning work of feminist scholars in the history of drugs is going some way to recover the presence of women in psychedelic history.<sup>1</sup> However, as a cohesive movement or set of shared beliefs, psychedelic feminism remains nascent. This article advocates for a specifically narcofeminist approach to understanding the relationship between psychedelic substance use and feminism with ambitions beyond the more personal projects of self-improvement, self-actualisation and repair or optimisation of individual health or creativity associated with psychedelic feminism to date. I ask how women’s experiences with psychedelic substances might avoid being constrained by the notion that a solipsistic self-improvement is the primary goal both

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within the history of feminist activism and the psychedelics research field, and why the experimental dimensions of women's psychedelic use have so frequently been ignored.

Inspired by narcofeminist activism, I see 'the creation of life, identities and a social world, where women who use drugs belong to a community of like-minded bodies' (Chang, 2020, p. 285), and specifically the expansion and raising of consciousness as potential starting points for reimagining the relationship between psychedelics and feminism. Drawing on Mark Fisher's later work on acid communism, feminist psychedelic humanities scholarship and narcofeminism, I suggest that writing and activism under the rubric of acid feminism might serve a dual function, speaking both to the wider feminist movement, including narcofeminism, but also, equally importantly, the psychedelics research field. Using women's first-person accounts of using psychedelics as illustrative, I deploy the term acid feminism throughout deliberately as a departure from psychedelic feminism. This is both a nod to Fisher's tongue-in-cheek usage of 'acid' in a reappraisal of the value of some of the political practices and ideas circulating in countercultural movements in the 1960s, and a rejection of the racialised, gendered political economy in which the quasi-medicalised state of the contemporary psychedelics field finds itself now, and which I suggest psychedelic feminism must also avoid co-opting. The article also addresses both feminist and psychedelics fields. Speaking to feminism, I begin by arguing that the consciousness-raising work of the feminist movements of the 1960s and early 1970s took clear influence from the use of psychedelics in the countercultures and that such practices might still have significant value to feminists today, and might be described as proto-narcofeminist. Despite some feminist efforts to downplay drug experiences as relevant or productive to the women's movements, I demonstrate a number of instances in which women awoke to the sometimes miserable material realities in which they lived, propelled by tripping on LSD. Advocating for the renewal of a 'politics of consciousness' within psychedelic feminism, I also suggest that feminism might engage the use of psychedelics as a form of both *self*-help and experimentation: a means, to quote Ehrenreich and English, of 'seizing the technology without the ideology' (2011, p. 156), and re-engaging narcofeminist critiques of the condemnation of feminists who reject sobriety (Chang, 2020). Speaking to the psychedelics field, I then develop an argument that acid feminism could advocate for more than simply changing representational dynamics, and might challenge some of the fundamental, universalist assumptions and precepts of the field, perhaps particularly considerations of who the figure of the psychonaut is, what experimentation means, and the far-reaching implications this has for understanding what 'the psychedelic experience' is and could be.

For the purposes of this article, I define psychedelics according to the term coined originally by Humphrey Osmond in 1957, as 'mind-manifesting' (Osmond, 1957, p. 429), with the idea that this cluster of psychoactive substances (specifically but not exclusively substances such as LSD, psilocybin [magic mushrooms], DMT and mescaline) can develop unused potentials of the human mind or produce radical changes in consciousness. This is a notoriously difficult state to describe and qualitatively differentiate with certainty from the effects of other drugs, and to do so is beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, the term 'psychedelic' is also particularly significant for narcofeminisms because of its historical problematisation: its association with 'the behavior

of deviant or revolutionary groups' (Ruck et al., 1979). Rather than disavow this association, a narcofeminist approach might prefer to disavow instead a pathological gaze that designates psychedelic use as 'deviant' in the first place, or that to be part of a revolutionary group is itself a problem to be cured. I therefore explore in depth below the specific uses of psychedelics in so-called deviant countercultural and revolutionary contexts. In addition, unlike 'hallucinogen', for instance, the term psychedelic is cross-disciplinary and has been used extensively since the 1950s in scientific, religious and recreational parlance. As Christopher Partridge has argued, 'Why not stick with the term "psychedelic"? We all know what it means!' (Partridge, 2018, p. 6).

## **Psychedelics and the political: A partial history**

One reason for revisiting the relationship between feminism and psychedelics at this historical juncture is the sheer contemporary prevalence of these substances, and their reported capacity to change the world. The resurgence of interest in psychedelic compounds as medicines or therapeutics in Western Europe and North America is frequently underpinned by a hypothesis that presumes the use of psychedelics supports, if not entirely brings about, a 'cultural plasticity' (Pace & Devenot, 2021), or a shift in one's political belief system (Gearin & Devenot, 2021; Lyons & Carhart-Harris, 2018). Rarely a week goes by without another major European or North American media publication asking rhetorical questions about the current state of play in psychedelic medicine, and its potential to change the world. Eye-catching titles are used that betray an excessive optimism for the promise of these substances: 'Can Psychedelics Save the World?' (Hoke, 2018); 'Psychedelics for Systems Change: Could Drugs Help Us Save The Planet?' (Peck, 2020); 'The World-View Changing Drugs Poised to Go Mainstream' (BBC, Prideaux, 2021). Psychedelics have even been credited for assisting with launching the global environmental movement, Extinction Rebellion. Founder Gail Bradbrook announced at the international psychedelics conference, Breaking Convention,<sup>2</sup> that:

I would support a mass civil disobedience where we take medicine [psychedelics] to tell the state that they have absolutely no right to control our consciousness and to define our spiritual practice. (Bradbrook, as cited in Wong, 2019)

Bradbrook also stated that psychedelics played a fundamental role in her personal journey towards founding the movement. Scholarship on psychedelics and its role in environmentalism has gone even further, with arguments made that 'pro-environmental behaviors' might be elicited through controlled administration of psychedelic drugs as a 'form of moral bioenhancement' (Kirkham & Letheby, 2022, p. 2).

Most of the commentary on the use of psychedelics for the betterment of society is premised on their use as medicines, or on 'controlled administration' that elicits their potential to produce 'pro-sociality' and openness in those who use them (Griffiths et al., 2018, p. 50). However, use of psychedelics beyond controlled settings is also on the rise. The Global Drug Survey's 2021 results point toward a clear upswing in self-reported use of psychedelics, perhaps particularly over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. Reported use of magic mushrooms alone has doubled since 2015 from 8.1 to 16.1%

amongst survey respondents, while LSD use has increased from 8.5 to 21% (Global Drug Survey, 2021, see Winstock et al., 2021). This may in part be attributed to shifting desires for different kinds of recreational drug experiences (the use of party drugs over this period was, perhaps unsurprisingly given the lockdowns, on the wane). By some distance, though, the most common reason given in the Global Drug Survey for using the drugs was to ‘improve wellbeing’. Perhaps media headlines centring on the potentially transformative properties of psychedelics for enhancing one’s mental state, creativity or productivity are having a demonstrable impact on popular perceptions.

Despite significant optimism about the role psychedelics might play in political movements, in changing worldviews, or for the betterment of mental health, these stories often betray, at best, a disinterest in their history, and at worst, involve a project of deliberate collective forgetting. Such a project of forgetting frequently aims to absolve psychedelics of their associations with the ‘weird’ (Davis, 2019), with the spiritual, and indeed the pivotal role they played in some of the experimental political formations of the 1960s and 1970s (Roffey, forthcoming 2023). Examples might include the emergence of communal living arrangements, which challenged the nature of work women in the 1960s were considered destined for, and the inevitability of the nuclear family (Lemke-Santangelo, 2009); or the anarchist movements in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s, in which mind-altering substances were often seen as ‘chemical short-cuts’ to political insight. The magazine *Anarchy* even held an Acid Symposium at Conway Hall in London in 1971, where the primary goal was to instigate a ‘Head Liberation Movement’ (Roffey, forthcoming 2023).

The insistence that psychedelics are apolitical has had the effect of not only downplaying the indigenous roots of many knowledges and practices around psychedelics, but of merely reinforcing in the psychedelics field the ‘historically hierarchical relations of domination and subjugation across race, class, gender, and nation’ (Corbin, 2012, p. 1424). There has been little acknowledgement of the hegemony of western science over other forms of knowledge-building, and the ‘indigenous shamanisms and accompanying ontologies and epistemologies’ (Fotiou, 2020, p. 16) from which this knowledge has been appropriated. The revival of psychedelic science since the 1990s has even been said to be ‘defined by a decisive break with the vision of a counterculture’ (Langlitz, 2012). In the wake of a long chill around psychedelic research, the need to reiterate the scientific legitimacy of the methods being used to once again test their use appears to have required researchers to describe this next phase of research as ‘decidedly psychedelic *science*’ (Richert & Dyck, 2020). As Lucas Richert and Erika Dyck go on to argue, it is not that the contemporary movement in psychedelics, or what might now be termed ‘psychedelic studies’, is entirely distanced from the humanities or from an interest in the social or the political. But as debates play out between researchers about the legitimacy of their findings,<sup>3</sup> there remains a push to recast psychedelics principally as medicines or biotechnologies (e.g. Carhart-Harris et al., 2018; Sessa, 2018). The framing of their use as purely scientific gives research credibility in the public imaginary, which undoubtedly has had some role to play in the relaxation of laws around possession in some US states.

Despite this forgetting, the quasi-scientific claim that psychedelics have the power to change political views itself has its origins in the countercultural period of upheaval of the late 1960s and 1970s, in which key countercultural figure and psychedelics researcher

Timothy Leary's inducement to 'turn on and tune in' referred not simply to an introspective engagement with one's internal machinations, but an imperative to question and re-engage with political questions in a period of social flux. The practice of consciousness expansion, which appeared to inspire consciousness-raising practices so central to the women's movements, proved an effective means of 'short-circuiting the mental straight-jacket that society imposes on its members' (Lee & Shlain, 1992, p. xvi). As Debra Michals suggests, heightened consciousness could lead the LSD user to see that their 'original priorities were wrong, that the quest for the rewards of capitalism had led them astray' (Michals, 2002, p. 49).

Although there are, as per Extinction Rebellion, occasional claims about the politically transformative potential of using psychedelic compounds in a collective movement, even scholarship that champions the use of psychedelics to transform political beliefs is primarily concerned with the use of psychedelics to alter the individual, and go no further. This is less a collective project of social transformation – as the dreamers of the 1960s considered possible – and more a set of individualistic projects of self-improvement, whether that involves developing more liberal views or not. As a number of critical interventions on the political contours of the 'renaissance' have pointed out, there has been little attempt at embarking on a political or moral stewardship of psychedelics (Langlitz et al., 2021), leaving them susceptible to manipulation by right-wing interests.

The current stewardship of the 'renaissance' includes a continued failure to consider the relationship between psychedelics and gender, and in particular the ways in which the figure of the first-person author of psychedelic experience – the psychonaut – has been historically constructed as male. A single anthology of writing by women on the drug experience has been published (Palmer & Horowitz, 2000), without a specific focus on psychedelics. Where accounts of psychedelics by women do exist, they are very rarely conceptualised as psychonautic, experimental accounts, and have never been granted the significance or status that they deserve. Autobiographical texts providing women's accounts of their trips, which might have proven crucial to understanding the intersection between mid-20th century feminist thought and psychedelics, such as Constance Newland's *My Self and I* (1963), Nina Graboi's *One Foot in the Future* (1991), and even the diaries of the writer Anaïs Nin, are all sadly long out of print and not easy to find.<sup>4</sup>

Contemporary feminist psychonautic activism tends to focus on individual psychedelic journeying only. The international organisation Cosmic Sister, for instance, describe their educational advocacy projects as 'an environmental sub-genre of feminism'. The aims of their work are chiefly to encourage women to 'explore the wilderness within, where they can grow, heal and learn more deeply about themselves' and 'bring women's voices to the forefront in the field of psychedelics' (Cosmic Sister, n.d.). It is clear that there are some shared goals with narcofeminism within such organisations. However, the inward-looking, individualised lens of work in this vein – concentrated on supporting women's healing from the personal injuries of a world governed by patriarchy rather than an outward-looking manifesto geared towards changing the world around them – does not develop a clear orientation towards narcofeminism's goals of destigmatising drug use or foregrounding women's pleasure and agency. Rather, the focus is on a desire to combat a historically male-dominated culture of psychedelics communities and psychedelics

research. In another interview, Cosmic Sister cultural activist Zoe Helene has discussed her use of ceremonies to guide men towards understanding blind spots in their unconscious sexism (Francombe, 2021). This aim is laudable, especially in a wider context of growing awareness in the psychedelics community that sexual abuse, harassment and inappropriate behaviour from psychedelic healers, particularly aimed at women, is ‘ubiquitous’ (Love, 2019). However, to focus only on the role psychedelics might play in healing gendered dynamics in the psychedelics field, rather than considering what the appropriation of psychedelics – rejecting at least in part the ‘institutional knowledge’ (Hester, 2018) attached to them – might do for feminism, seems a limited approach. What seems sorely needed is an equal engagement with the structural approach of narcofeminist arguments about the relationship between gender and drugs, particularly what psychedelics might do for feminist *practices*, and how feminism might influence knowledge production about the epistemology of psychedelic subjectivities.

### Reintroducing ‘the politics of consciousness’

A crucial element of an acid feminism concerned with harnessing structural critique to drug use might be to revive the tradition of consciousness raising, as an experimental collective practice premised on consciousness expansion. The *political* possibilities of consciousness expansion have had some influence in recent left political theory, notably the work of the British theorists Mark Fisher and Jeremy Gilbert. Adjacent to Gilbert, and his notion of ‘psychedelic socialism’, Fisher imagined an ‘acid communism’ which

. . . points to something that, at one point seemed inevitable, but which now appears impossible: the convergence of class consciousness, socialist-feminist consciousness raising, and psychedelic consciousness, the fusion of new social movements with a communism project, unprecedented aestheticisation of everyday life. (Fisher, 2018, pp. 757–758)

Fisher sadly passed away before he was able to complete this work or develop it much beyond a set of provocations, but even reintroducing the idea of psychedelic consciousness as a political tool seems to have given psychedelics scholars a cue to re-explore what that might mean in practice (Devenot et al., 2021; Stamm, 2019), using ‘acid communism’ as a starting point. By all accounts, Fisher himself was mostly disinterested in psychedelics, but evidently felt they had an important representational role; that they signified ‘denaturalising . . . as a necessary precedent to emancipatory politics’ (Mitts, 2019). This ‘denaturalising’ function of psychedelics is key also to the possibilities of acid feminism. Drawing on Herbert Marcuse, the psychedelic trip involves the ‘dissolution of the ego shaped by established society . . . the revolution must at the same time be a revolution in perception . . . the kernel of truth in the psychedelic search’ (Marcuse, 1991, p. 30), which might very well involve states of intoxication that lead to greater creativity of interpretation and thought. More pressing still, though, is the idea of the unburdening of consciousness from the shackles of capitalist *sobriety*, not merely as a temporary means of escape from it, but as a reminder to thoroughly denaturalise its hold on our collective reality. However, bringing consciousness raising back to the fore of feminist organising should not be attempted uncritically, and critique has centred on two



key problems: firstly, that the fetishisation of psychedelic consciousness expansion in the 1960s actually stymied political organising; and secondly, that consciousness raising is ultimately solipsistic.

Historically, many political thinkers on the left have been at best sceptical (Frank, 1997) and at worst scathing (Heath & Potter, 2006) about the value of psychedelic culture and its promises to elicit political and social enlightenment, and evidence the eventual co-option of its rebel aesthetics into consumer capitalism. In part, the failure of the counterculture of the 1960s to elicit revolutionary change has been attributed to the nature of psychedelics themselves. It was argued that users of substances in search of ecstatic experience were, in such a heightened state, unlikely to come up with many bright ideas about what should be done about Vietnam, police violence or racial justice, for example. However, pitting psychedelic intoxication against successful political activism is hardly a new concern. In his book about the emergence of 1960s counterculture, Roszak (1969) argued that rationalist western cultures had become estranged from the non-rational aspects of our consciousness. Roszak argued that the counterculture was ultimately the result of merging New Left politics, Black Power and women's liberation movements, and the bohemian eclecticism of the commune, calling it 'the politics of consciousness'. Ultimately, however, Roszak reads the relationship between left politics and psychedelic intoxication as one of unresolvable tension. Capitalist technocracy could not be overthrown because of the fetishisation of psychedelics, and especially LSD, as the only route to enlightenment, when most of the teenagers and students who adopted bohemian lifestyles were ill-equipped to make sense of the psychedelic experience.

The reduction of the relationship between left politics and LSD in the 1960s to a question of whether its overall impact was to 'politicise' or 'depoliticise' (Lee & Shlain, 1992) not only stymied debate about how intoxication and critique might be intertwined but arguably led to the assumption that there exists a singular psychedelic subjectivity rather than a multiplicity of potential psychedelic experiences, governed as much by the mindset of the user and the social setting in which they ingested the substance (Zinberg, 1984) as by the content of the drug. To reduce the personal effects of any drug to a quality inherent to its chemical make-up has of course long been contested (Hartogsohn, 2017). The problem for contemporary thinkers interested in psychedelics' potential for collective experience is that if there is nothing about psychedelics that is unique to their make-up that stimulates collective thinking, all that may be gained from them is restricted to the personal and individual. In this sense, the most cynical readings of the capacity of substances to transform collective consciousness were correct. To imagine otherwise requires new thinking about the meaning of the collective. Gilbert (2014, p. x) has argued that to conceive of a collective now demands 'a condition of dynamic multiplicity and complex creativity', drawing on Hardt and Negri's (2004) notion of an 'infinite network of singularities', but perhaps more importantly, the reinvigoration of left politics with a spirit of *experimentation* – whether that experimentation is in new ways of arranging romantic relationships, new genders and ways of living in one's body, or experiencing altered states of consciousness with the help of substances.

Although the drugs counterculture and women's movements of the 1960s and 1970s offered alternative political paths to utopia, this does not mean the use of LSD itself was

merely ‘consciousness expansion without a politics’ (Michals, 2002, p. 50). Rather, the experience of consciousness-raising would create a ‘ripple effect’ (Michals, 2002, p. 48), allowing women to form a group consciousness and an awareness of a shared oppression that might lead to social change. Consciousness-raising, like consciousness expansion, however, has itself been subjected to a number of well-rehearsed critiques. As useful as it might be for the individual subject to see the world anew, what then? Kathie Sarachild’s (1968) original blueprint, frequently used as a starting point for consciousness-raising groups, does appear to have little interest in nudging reflection towards action:

A. Ongoing consciousness expansion

1. Personal recognition and testimony

- a. Recalling and sharing our bitter experiences
- b. Expressing our feelings about our experiences both at the time they occurred and at present
- c. Expressing our feelings about ourselves, men, and other women
- d. Evaluating our feelings

What is interesting about the blueprint that made it into vogue in women’s movements is that consciousness-raising is here named ‘consciousness expansion’; a willingness to take what constituted ‘reality’ less for granted, and to interrogate its constitution as a ‘natural’ state of affairs. Less readily admitted is that consciousness-raising perhaps works best when used in the context of subjugated groups. A common critique of the practice is that it too can become solipsistic, with a warning that engaging with social problems only ‘on one’s own terms’ (Gilbert, 2017) is always a danger. However, this does not by default relegate consciousness-raising to being an anti-feminist endeavour. As Lisa Downing has argued, ‘collective struggle and group consciousness-raising sessions were the tools designed by the group to engender the emergence of the individual’ (Downing, 2019, p. 144). If the specifically feminist practice of consciousness raising contains elements that might well be termed solipsistic, this is because its goal was to demonstrate how the social order positioned and derogated women *as a class* and therefore ‘what barriers and prejudices need to be overcome in the search for *self*’ (Downing, 2019, p. 155).

The psychedelics community appears more hesitant to engage in collective political thinking or knowledge-production. The majority of group retreats, much as they purport to foster new social bonds, are primarily focused on personal healing rather than encouraging groups to collectively ‘tune in’. My own brushes with the psychedelic community’s efforts to do consciousness-raising work specifically around sexuality have echoed this, and been the source of some frustration. I felt there was too little attempt to think through the collective, structural conditions that shape individual sexual problems, and that these conditions were ignored in favour of identifying personal causes and pathologies. In avoiding the structural, such sessions missed the opportunity to engage more in processes of collective knowledge-production (Firth & Robinson, 2016), as narcofeminist work has set out to do, and how it might enable the critiques of ‘common sense’ and received truth perhaps particularly sorely needed in our current moment. In the sections that follow, drawing on women’s first-person accounts of psychedelic experiences as



illustrative, I argue that acid feminism has crucial value both for narcofeminism and the broader psychedelics field.

## Acid feminists as narcofeminists

Crucial to making sense of the psychedelic experiences we have are the cultural narratives around psychedelics that we ingest (Davis, 2019). Some critics, writing about the 1960s, argue that the women's and feminist movements and collectives springing up and out of the counterculture had a particularly dim view of psychedelics because the narratives their proponents told about women were so unappealing. The cultural critic and journalist Ellen Willis, one of the few women who documented her brushes with the 1960s counterculture at the time, recalls going to hear Richard Alpert speak in 1964 about the LSD community, and emerged fairly unimpressed by his portrait of women and their role in the movement in an article for *US Magazine*. She writes,

He talks about how the drug dissolves people's ego hangups and helps them live cooperatively, and it's really convincing until he explains how the women at Millbrook are earth-goddesses. He doesn't say who does the community's shitwork, but I have my suspicions. (Willis, 1969/2014, p. 7)

Nonetheless, Willis later remarked, in a 1986 essay for *Village Voice* critiquing the war on drugs in Reagan's America, that her own experiences of LSD had been personally transformative. For Willis, the problem with perceptions of community from figures like Leary and Albert in the 1960s was that they fetishised the drug and 'looked to it as a solution not a pathway' equivalent to an 'addiction' (Willis, 1986/2014, p. 247). Nevertheless, she considered this a risk worth taking in the interests of 'seeing things differently' (Willis, 1986/2014, p. 247), and believed this was the 'menace' the cultural guardians who soon outlawed the possession of psychedelics were 'so determined to stamp out' (Willis, 1986/2014, p. 247). Because of the threat the combination of risk-taking and the spirit of idealism psychedelics seemed to represent to authorities, they remained for Willis:

. . . a potent emblem of freedom. Somehow they disarranged the grids I'd imposed on the world, untied the Laingian knots I'd imposed on myself. They allowed me, for the moment, to see things freshly. . . . They suggested what human beings might be if we grew up differently, if certain kinds of damage were not inflicted. (Willis, 1986/2014, pp. 246–247)

Despite the interventions of figures we might now consider proto-narcofeminists like Willis, who here undermines dominant perceptions of women who used drugs, it is notable that the most celebrated psychedelic thinkers of the 20th century were all white men. As Erik Davis has put it, 'despite the radicalism of the sixties and seventies, hippie and freak scenes often reflected well-established patriarchal and racialized codes' (2019, p. 37). There is significant evidence that women have always played central roles as leaders of psychedelic healing in indigenous communities' ritual practices (Hewitt, 2019), yet women's historical and contemporary influence over the development of psychedelic

(counter)culture and knowledge-production about the psychedelic experience has been consistently downplayed and undervalued. This is also the case with the role of women in the clinical field. As Erika Dyck's work has shown, there is clear evidence that, as assistants to their researcher husbands in the mid-20th century, 'wives helped them write up their experiential reports, and often sat with other volunteers in subsequent sessions as experienced sitters or guides, even before that terminology became more commonplace' (Dyck & Chacruna Institute, 2018) but were almost never named in resulting publications. In most of the social and cultural histories of the rise of LSD use in this period, accounts of women's engagement with drugs, and critical reflection on their experiences, remain remarkably absent. Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo, one of a few authors whose work does explore this subject in the context of the 1960s and early 1970s counterculture, suggests that women's encounters with drugs were ignored by their male peers within both the counterculture and underground press, other than when women were positioned as psychedelic disciples of advocates like Timothy Leary or Ken Kesey (another key figure in the LSD counterculture), or where they served as 'cautionary tales' of LSD's potential to lead to madness should their 'delinquent' vices prevail. These latter texts

. . . show us how white-male authorities marginalized 'irrational' and 'unusual' experiences by narrowly framing them within a rational scientific worldview, granting the female drugged subjectivity voice only through the male-authenticated realist text. (Cook, 2014, p. 109)

Proto-narcofeminists of the 1960s who produced 'expert knowledge outside of privileged masculine spaces' (Campbell & Herzberg, 2017, p. 259) of psychedelics are therefore rarely granted the status of an expert. More troubling still, and echoed in the words of narcofeminists today, where women did write or talk about their drug experiences, they were often 'censored by women themselves' (Lemke-Santangelo, 2009, p. 113) in an attempt to rid the women's movements of its association with what became, as the 1970s progressed, a recognition of the patriarchal nature of the counterculture and its prophets, and the stereotypes that pervaded depictions of women drug users. In Joan Didion's notorious portrait of the Haight Ashbury district of San Francisco in 1968 (at the centre of the Californian counterculture), *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, for instance, the now familiar tropes of the negligent drug-addled mother and eventual psychiatric patient are the primary depictions of countercultural women who use drugs. As Chang has argued, a narcofeminist approach must continue to challenge such depictions, which rely upon 'tired old tropes that construct women who use drugs as victims of their drug use and its bodily effects' (Chang, 2020, p. 284). Perhaps resulting from fears that women's liberation movements would be taken less seriously were they to be closely associated with these figures, there remain very few first-person accounts by women of LSD use.

As a result, there remains no broad base of textual materials that enables us to learn more about what women within countercultural movements hoped to achieve with drug experimentation, or what they gained from their experiences. However, there is certainly evidence that women used them. Lemke-Santangelo's archival work into countercultural women, drawing on surveys, interviews and memoirs, demonstrates that the thematics

sitting across women's narratives about LSD use were often framed by a narrative of getting away from a life of domestic drudgery and a realisation that the nuclear family was no longer a social mould they had any desire to inhabit. Women's engagement with LSD was evidently primarily experienced as pleasurable, in the sense Du Rose describes: 'a sense of adventure, belonging, comfort, or the thrill of risk taking' (2017, p. 42). It sometimes took removing oneself from sobriety for such insights to take full hold. In a set of interviews Lemke-Santangelo uncovered with middle-class housewives, initial experiments with psychedelics seemed to draw their attention to a profound dissatisfaction with the constraints placed on their day-to-day domestic lives. One participant discussed the fact that, after her first experience of an acid trip, she lost interest in doing certain domestic chores ('I stopped dusting. It just didn't make any sense to spend all that time dusting all those things' [p. 117]). Other women discussed a desire, which they felt was illuminated by psychedelic experiences, to leave their husbands completely and join collectives and communes. One woman who did just this described 'a real awakening . . . that you didn't have to be in this particular rut, doing this particular thing . . . this sort of feeling coming out of the '50s that, really, life was about destroying the imagination' (p. 118). A third group of narratives Lemke-Santangelo describes were predominantly interested in the role of psychedelics for sexual self-actualisation, breaking down their sexual inhibitions and hang-ups (2009, p. 122), and understood the stigma attached to women having sex purely for pleasure for the patriarchal shaming device it was. Marsha Alexander's *Sexual Paradise of LSD* (1967), which consisted of 54 interviews – many, although the number is never specified, with women, often echoes the third set of narratives. One of the interviewees, 'a woman of 30', remarked that LSD 'helped me accept my own sexuality. Since these experiences I feel I radiate sex . . . I walk differently, talk more confidently, act more secure about my body' (Alexander, 1967, p. 175). Additionally, it also appeared to focus women's sexual attention more closely on their own pleasure. A 'girl of 19' recounted that 'you get sick of the once-over most men call love making. I used to be frustrated all the time. Now I know how to help the man help me! . . . Each act of love on and since taking LSD is more satisfying than six sessions before' (Alexander, 1967, p. 177).

Beyond these micro-accounts, even as the early women's liberation movements of the late 1960s began to publish collective anthologies of essays on patriarchy and social change, the influence consciousness expansion engendered by psychedelics had on small consciousness-raising groups for helping to loosen forms of social conditioning around gender remains implicit, but clear. What we do learn from these scattered individual accounts of countercultural women's engagements with feminism is that psychedelic use tended to put into focus insights that were perhaps already being gained from the women's movements more broadly, whether that concerned women's right to sexual pleasure, the limits of the nuclear family, or reproductive rights. Thus, despite the common contention that psychedelics proved a frivolous distraction from serious political endeavour, countercultural women's accounts of the meanings they attached to psychedelics, the pleasure they evidently took in their experimentation (Du Rose, 2017), and how it transformed their perception of the relationship between their personal lives and the social structure, seem to tell us otherwise.

In sum, despite a historical tendency to downplay the relationship between psychedelic consciousness and social change, it is clear that not only did experimenting with consciousness expansion influence feminist practices in ways we might now describe as proto-narcofeminist, but that psychedelics were for many women chemical ‘short cuts’, instrumental in leading them to action. The contemporary focus on psychedelics’ promise for self-optimisation negates both their rich history and associations with political culture, and their potential. However, I suggest in the section below that consciousness expansion as feminist practice is not limited to women shifting their worldviews, or prioritising their own embodied pleasures. A narcofeminist approach to psychedelics must also structurally shift the meanings we attach to psychedelic experience, and who the experimental subject of psychedelics is.

### **Gendering the psychonaut: Feminist psychedelic imaginaries**

If the starting point for a psychedelic feminism is a set of practices by which ‘women consume psychedelic substances to create and empower themselves’ (Hewitt, 2019, p. 77), is such a goal sufficient to transform the gendered politics of the psychedelics field? And how can a feminist project that starts with the ‘creation’ of self distinguish itself from the self-help and wellness industries that have now largely appropriated psychedelics? The narcofeminist movement is clear that, while they advocate for a ‘world where women who use psychoactive substances allow themselves to be themselves and are given the opportunity to develop and fulfil their potential’ (Eurasian Harm Reduction Association, 2019), there are also clear *external prerequisites* for being able to do so, specifically drug policy that no longer demonises substances and people who use drugs particularly women. Similarly, personal liberation of consciousness, as discussed above, was in the 1960s feminist movements seen as the starting point for women’s liberation, but changing the external conditions around them was, of course, ultimately the goal. Despite the dearth of accounts of psychedelic use from within the women’s movements, this is not to say that such accounts by women do not exist, only that there is sadly a continued lack of interest in them. Even contemporary accounts of the relation between a utopian politics and psychedelics use in the countercultures of the 1960s still pay scant attention to women’s contributions to psychedelic thought (Jay, 2019).

Beyond problems of representational politics in the psychedelics field, there is a particular deficit in women’s accounts of their *experimental use* of psychedelics. This deficit has profound consequences for the discursive, universalist meanings attached to ‘the psychedelic experience’ itself, and I suggest that only when their narratives are given more space and attention will a narcofeminism engaged with psychedelics emerge that does more than simply change the representational politics of the field and offer discourses of self-improvement. An acid feminism might therefore need to revisit the epistemological foundations of our conception of the psychonaut, and from there, the extent to which knowledge production about the subjective experience of the psychedelic trip has historically been, and remains shaped by, gender. This is not to suggest that women’s experiences of psychedelics are by any means uniform or consistent, but neither is it of

no consequence at all that cultural representations of psychedelic experiences are so thoroughly shaped by those experienced by men. As Campbell and Herzberg have put it, critical drug studies must avoid both the problem of simply dividing bodies into 'simple demographic units' and the 'ubiquity of gender binaries' (2017, p. 253). Nevertheless, as they go on to argue, gender orders have a significant role to play in the characterisation of particular forms of drug use, and it would be difficult to argue otherwise in the case of psychedelics. The language of experimentation that surrounds them seems rarely to factor in any actors other than men, often in positions of considerable power. Similarly, drugs also play important roles in processes of identity production. Thus, in the context of 'the psychedelic experience', beyond the problem of locating the hidden history of women's participation in psychonautic voyages, the language of psychonautic exploration and experimentation *itself* seems implicitly to exclude the possible experiences of white women and non-white people.

The term psychonaut translates roughly from the Greek, meaning 'mind-sailor'. Such a translation is apt, drawing as the psychonaut does so frequently on the colonialist and masculinist language of the 'frontier', the 'pioneer', 'the explorer' and so on, venturing bravely where no woman seemingly dares. It is notable that even where women's accounts of experimentation and exploration of psychedelics are considered in the literature, such as Anaïs Nin's or Jane Dunlap's or Mabel Lohan's, the term 'psychonaut' is rarely if ever attached to them. In Nin's case (as with Dunlap's), this is perhaps in part because their experiences of psychedelics took place in the context of therapeutic research settings, always with a male guide, who was invariably a psychiatrist. Indeed, granted a thin veil of scientific validity, this is probably why their accounts have had more longevity and influence than the purely recreational and non-clinical experiences Lemke-Santangelo captures in her book. As Anaïs Nin put it, discussing Timothy Leary, it was crucial that he was 'a cool, scientific intellectual . . . describ[ing] a drug which gave dreams, fantasies, hallucinations' (Nin, 1963/1976, p. 331) rather than an artist or writer. For Jeffery (2013, p. 157), discourses of the 'scientist-shaman' or psychedelic explorer present in the work of the likes of Leary and McKenna<sup>5</sup> cast psychedelics as 'evolutionary tools, or chemical technologies', rearticulating the 'ever-present relationship between technology and masculinity' (Masters, 2010, p. 6). In this equation, human flourishing is recast as a kind of striving for evolutionary perfectionism, in which the effects of psychedelics are satisfactorily predictable and measurable enough that they have an evidenced utility that might be used to promote the psychedelic experience to others.

The earlier construction of the psychonaut as a daring, heroic explorer looking to 'master' oneself via the psychedelic experience bears a striking resemblance to the language often deployed now by psychedelics start-ups (despite their disavowal of the counterculture), in which the aim is less repair of the body but rather further mastery of its capabilities, pushed to their absolute capacity. In this vein, the language deployed to promote psychedelics reframes them as human enhancement drugs, where the aim is to be 'better than well and . . . surpass one's natural potential' (McVeigh et al., 2012). If, in the early 21st century, self-medication using human enhancement drugs concerned with cognitive abilities (such as Ritalin, Modafinil, and so on) was high on the agenda of many drug scholars, so the use of psychedelics should be in the present. This narrative of masculinised, instrumental self-improvement is particularly prevalent in the

presentation and promotion of microdosing, and this is echoed in the literature in which the motivations of users are explored. Webb et al. (2019), for instance, document participants' perception of microdosing as part of a broader project of 'living smart'. Unfortunately, there has been little attention paid to questions of gender in the burgeoning research on psychedelics when used as human enhancement drugs, although in the studies that do exist it is notable that participants who identified as men always outnumbered those who identified as women, sometimes overwhelmingly so (e.g. Anderson et al., 2019; Webb et al., 2019).

While there is a burgeoning literature on the relation between neoliberal cultures of self-help and 'wellness' industries and the psychedelic industrial complex, the conclusions of this work do not go much further than arguing for better therapeutic training protocols and more reliable research that will help users engage in more 'responsible use' (Plesa & Petranker, 2022). Plesa and Petranker's call for decriminalisation – sadly not a priority for all psychedelics researchers – is certainly welcome, but their analysis perhaps misses the value of experimental use that does not come with a clear object of enhancement. The experimental dimensions of psychedelics use by men for the purposes of productivity and creativity are often easily contrasted with the promotion of the drugs to women, where the focus is far more frequently on therapy and repair. For instance, the psychedelic start up, Mind Cure, has launched a psychedelic therapy project that aims to 'help women overcome lack of desire' (Mind Cure Health, 2021). Rather than touting the ability of these substances to 'optimise' human creativity and productivity, the mode of address to women – even within psychedelic feminist literature – is often premised on recovery rather than optimisation or expansion of consciousness. Two accounts of LSD therapy, *Exploring Inner Space* and *My Self and I* published respectively under the names Jane Dunlap and Constance Newland, were each framed in the introductory forewords (both by male psychologists) by the idea that their resulting 'trip reports' were guided by their male clinicians' interpretations of their experience. This gave the books an epistemological credibility (Campbell, 2000) that, as narcofeminist activists have documented, drug-using women are often considered to lack. The starting point for both books was the presumption that each woman suffered from inadequacies in need of remedy, and therefore a therapeutic imperative underscores their accounts of psychedelic experience.

For Hewitt (2019), however, who develops the term 'psychedelic feminism' in an article of the same title, the connections to nature inherent to psychedelics require a necessary engagement with the feminine. Drawing on the tradition of *écriture féminine* in France in the second half of the 20th century, she argues that psychedelic consciousness is 'quintessentially feminine, where "feminine" is a concept rather than a sexed or gendered characteristic' (2019, p. 84), given that it requires the subject to disavow the phallogocentric discourse associated with the Enlightenment, in which logic, rationality, empiricism, individualism and goal-orientated processes of efficiency are reified. The 'psychedelic experience', as it has been historically formulated, has little to say to any of those values, other than to confound them, and even to go as far as questioning their value. As Davis (2012) puts it, despite the attempts to rationalise and measure the effects of psychedelics,

. . . reductionist researchers of powerful psychedelic effects must still squirm before God – or at least before the experiential states that recall the ecstatic reports of traditional religious



mystics, or of shamans making pacts with non-human entities, or of meditators seeing into the knitted web of self and world.

Viewed in this frame, attempts to contain the value of psychedelics to the rhetoric of measurable scientific effects are also an attempt to eradicate aspects of the psychedelic experience that might otherwise be too readily associated with the feminine. In the accounts of LSD therapy by Dunlap and Newland, this becomes all too clear. As Lana Cook has argued, despite the context on which their trip reports were based, Dunlap and Newland

. . . use their narratives to work through their anxieties about love, sex, and motherhood; their angst about the institutions of marriage and religion. . . . These narratives yield radical perspectives on the immanent and interconnected nature of reality that challenge American myths of domesticity, scientific progress, and human independence. (Cook, 2014, p. 82)

This is not to suggest a veneration via psychedelics of archetypal traits too often attributed to women: their supposed intuitiveness, connection to feeling and ability to 'let go of' their egos to be subsumed in the collective. Rather, it is to demonstrate the inevitable historical gendering of the psychedelic field: a gendering that will not simply be undone by changing its representational politics. Acid feminism might also see women's use of psychedelics as having an embodied as well as discursive potential to unmoor the historically masculinist trappings of the psychedelic imaginary. To follow Cosmic Sister, if psychedelics are used to empower, this might be through their reconstitution as a means of self-help that is consciously divorced from the ideological context and masculinist framing in which they have historically been contained. Quite apposite to the psychedelic industrial complex selling the science of psychedelics to make claims about the measurable effects of these substances on enhancing human capability, a psychedelic self-help movement within feminism might be an opportunity to 'seize the technology without buying the ideology' (Ehrenreich & English, 2011, p. 156): in other words, creating a feminist psychedelic imaginary that is at least in part disentangled from psychedelic substances' historical embeddedness within institutional knowledges guided by science.

In producing a feminist psychedelic imaginary, autobiographical accounts by women are vital to deconstructing the evidently masculinist knowledges that have framed western canons of thought about psychedelics, and might go some way to elucidating further the 'often-inexpressible fullness' (Dubus & Leger, 2021) of a psychedelic experience that is missed in the rationalist language of scientists and researchers. It is important to state, at this point, that first-person narratives of the role psychedelics play in engendering personal healing from the injuries inflicted by patriarchy also remain imperative. Constance Newland's work, discussed earlier, is an apt example of this. Visiting a psychoanalyst in New York in the late 1950s, who agreed to administer her LSD to help with her 'frigidity', her musings at the conclusion of her treatment reveal a transformation in her perception of her personal relationship with men:

Before therapy I was always grasping . . . for the man who would fill the void within me. This was the pivotal point around which my life revolved. . . . Instead I feel capable of coping with my problems, in my own way. I do not mean, of course, that I no longer want the companionship and love of a man. I do, very much. But I no longer want a man to protect and punish me. . . . This change of focus has wrought a transformation in the way I live my life. (Newland, 1963, pp. 253–254)

Such personal ‘workings through’ are also important to acid feminism. As discussed earlier, both Dunlap and Newland sought out these therapeutic experiences primarily in search of psychic adventure and experimentation rather than because they truly believed they were unwell. Dunlap’s narrative makes this more explicit still. Her perspective on subjectivity and reality seemed irreversibly altered:

Under LSD I was repeatedly all humanity, experiencing its hungers, yearnings, hatreds, terrors, and illnesses, its love, appreciation, reverence, tranquillity, and ecstasy. As a result I have a wonderful, crazy feeling, admittedly without basis in reality, that I have been in every person’s shoes. (Dunlap, 1961, p. 203)

She went on to state that she believed all persons who desired to take LSD should do so approximately twice a year.

This spirit of experimentation in mid-20th century women’s writing on the psychedelic experience appears now too often eclipsed by an impetus to prove that where women do use psychedelics, it is for productive purposes, with a clear objective of self-improvement. A recent study of online trip reports on the experience vault Erowid, by Hase et al. (2022), confirms once again the dominance of male voices in the more experimental psychedelic space. A mere 21.2% of trip report authors identified themselves as women, while 72.6% were men. This deficit in contemporary women’s accounts, even in the safety of the anonymous online forum, surely has serious implications for our understanding of the ‘psychedelic experience’ itself in the present.

As we have seen, examples of attempts to demonstrate the promise of intersecting countercultural and feminist tactics for ‘unravelling repressive forms of social conditioning’ (Satchell-Baeza, 2021, p. 85) do exist. Jane Arden’s explicitly feminist countercultural film, *The Other Side of Underneath* (1973), appears a rare example of a creative attempt to draw simultaneously on the anti-psychiatry of R. D. Laing, psychedelic advocacy and the feminist practice of consciousness-raising. The film remains almost legendary in its reputation, especially for the use of LSD on set during the section of the film depicting a group therapy session. To film this scene, performers were urged to go ‘deeper’ into their unconscious to enact more authentic performances and incite ‘moments of intense psychological revelation and collective catharsis’ (Satchell-Baeza, 2021, p. 86), with many of its critics commenting on what was presumed to be the exploitation of the performers while under the influence. The presumption that performers must have been exploited on the basis that they were filmed using LSD demonstrates once again the importance of narcofeminist perspectives. As discussed above, it is the oppressions of capitalist sobriety from which consciousness-raising practices attempt to allow the subject some escape. The use of LSD appears in the film

not exploitative but permissive, allowing women to experiment with the edges of their consciousness, and finding as a consequence ways to creatively express collective rage, ecstasy and vulnerability.

Arden's scale of creative and political ambition designates her as a proponent of a proto-acid feminism, who understood keenly that the wider transformation of society had to begin with a politics of consciousness, and specifically, the expansion of consciousness. *The Other Side of Underneath* is a rare example of a project that invited women to use LSD experimentally to explore psychedelic subjectivities. As I have demonstrated in this section, the experimental use of psychedelics has historically typically been narrated by men, which Arden was clearly keen to undo. This has had the effect of creating a universalist 'psychonautic' subjectivity that often draws heavily on the rationalist language of science. Autobiographical accounts by women of their experiences of tripping are crucial to acid feminism, not simply to change the representational politics of the field, but to 'cause some trouble' (Ettorre, 2015); to untether the very conception of the psychedelic trip from the psychedelic industrial complex, and demonstrate the ways in which psychedelics' effects are often far from knowable, measurable and predictable.

## Conclusion

As I have argued in this piece, a feminist 'politics of consciousness' has significant lessons for contemporary feminism, in particular underlining the importance of reconnecting what Lisa Downing terms 'self-fulness' and collective cause. Consciousness-raising practices have perhaps unfairly received a bad rap as nothing but solipsistic ways of reducing the political to the personal. But as testimonies from countercultural women, feminists and more recent reappraisals of consciousness-raising illustrate, such a picture is reductive. Consciousness-raising was, and can be, a 'mode of knowledge-production that aimed to provide an alternative to masculinist theories' and a means to achieve 'grass roots knowledge production' (Firth & Robinson, 2016, p. 355). Similarly, the suggestion that LSD had no role to play as a political tool, and that it certainly had no place in feminism, seems reductive. It is clear that feminist consciousness-raising practices took inspiration from the focus on consciousness expansion in the counterculture. If 'acid' does have a place in contemporary feminism, it is to reiterate the malleability of our collective gendered reality, and to demonstrate that it is only one possible reality of many. Consciousness expansion clearly does have a role to play in denaturalising our present political order, and the assumption that the conscious self is a sober self.

In attempting to offer some possible priorities for a feminism engaged with psychedelics I hope that the provocations I make here, in advocating for an acid feminism interested in psychedelics as experimental, *political* tools as well as technologies for personal development and transcendence, also go some way to opening up conversations about the role of feminism in the psychedelic community and field. Beyond merely extending the volume of women working in and speaking to the field, important work is already underway to revise the history of psychedelic research and put women's 'hidden'

contributions to the front and centre of the field (Dubus, 2020; Dyck & Chacruna Institute, 2018; Kline, 2020), in addition. Further than this, however, more could be done to highlight women's first-person accounts of using psychedelics experimentally, not least by revising the typical canon of literature associated with the figure of the psychonaut to include texts by women, such as the diaries of Anaïs Nin, below. This has implications not simply for the representational politics of the field, but the colonialist, masculinist framing and discursive meanings we have historically attached to the psychedelic experience itself. Narcofeminist activists and feminist drug scholars (Campbell, 2000; Chang, 2020; Du Rose, 2017; Ettore, 2015) have demonstrated the necessity of gendered analysis for reimagining psychedelic subjectivities. Occasional disruptions to the primarily white male canon often offer important challenges to the now-dominant language of scientific rationale that has come to dominate the field, and subjugate both indigenous knowledges and any historical association between psychedelics and the counterculture. This repression of imagination risks severely limiting the potential of psychedelics. As Anaïs Nin wrote in 1963,

No one had taught them [Western scientifically minded experimenters] to dream, to transcend outer events and read their meaning. They had been deprived of all such spiritual disciplines. It was a scientific culture, a technological culture. It was logical that they would believe in drugs, drugs of all kinds: curative, tranquilizing, stimulating and (logically) dream-inducing drugs . . . they were going in their own scientific way into their other reality. (Nin, 1963/1976, p. 332)

Such disruptions to what is fast becoming a newly scientised canon of work on psychedelics are sorely needed in the here and now. As private companies sell the benefits of psychedelics for profit, it is vital that these substances do not merely become instruments of the wellness industry, and that those of us interested in countering this co-option demonstrate that their meanings are not fixed. Psychedelics can still be endlessly reappropriated and repurposed. Acid feminism may offer a stark reminder to the field that the psychedelic experience cannot be patented.

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## Notes

1. See for instance Erika Dyck's Women's Wednesday series for the Chacruna Chronicles: <https://chacruna.net/chronicles/#WOMEN>
2. Breaking Convention is a 'biennial multidisciplinary conference on psychedelic consciousness, featuring more than 200 presenters from around the world'.
3. Perhaps the starkest recent example of this is a debate over an article published in *Nature Medicine* (2022) by Daws et al., in which the validity of their methodologies and findings were the subject of serious public contestation. See Love (2022).
4. To access Jane Dunlap's *Exploring Outer Space* or Constance Newland's *My Self and I* at all might well involve a visit to an archive.
5. An ethnobiologist and psychedelics advocate and enthusiast.

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