

Psychedelic Feminism: Intersectionally contesting white androcentrism

A critical discourse analysis of Michelle Corbin's psychedelic
feminist lecture



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Abstract

As a rediscovered interest in psychedelic research is developing, an emphasis on the practice of healing with psychedelics takes centre stage. One movement is embracing this intention of healing and simultaneously tries to shift the focus of psychedelic experiences away from the white male: psychedelic feminism. In this thesis, I intend to portray the discourse of psychedelic feminism through a critical discourse analysis of Michelle Corbin's lecture. It concerns the lecture during *The Women and Psychedelics Forum* hosted by Chacruna on November 19th, 2018 where Corbin gave a fiery lecture under the banner of 'The personal is political: The feminist possibilities of psychedelic praxis'. Her lecture is typified by a contestation of white androcentrism that is significant for the epistemology of psychedelic feminism as well. I am analyzing how Michelle Corbin is contesting this white androcentrism within the contemporary American psychedelic counterculture.

I argue that Michelle Corbin attempts to engage with an intersectional approach to white androcentrism in psychedelic discourse but fails to sufficiently take nuance and recognition of differences into account. In my opinion, the attempt at restructuring discourse from a psychedelic feminist standpoint by contesting white androcentrism is not sufficiently engaged with the racial dimension. Corbin's approach seems to partially blind her and allow her to reproduce imbalanced power dynamics, whilst homogenizing the differences among women and grouping together the experiences of women and POC. As becomes apparent from the critical discourse analysis, Corbin shows tendencies of 'victimization' framing, gender essentialism, orientalism and distancing from her privileged position as a white woman.

Introduction

It [psychedelic therapy] really does need to be a collective healing for all of us: If we're really in the midst of a psychedelic renaissance, who are we leaving behind?
 – Jae Sevelius, *Injustice, Intersectional Trauma, and Psychedelics*, 2017.

The contemporary American psychedelic¹ counterculture can be understood within the context of the 'psychedelic renaissance'. In 2017, psychiatrist, researcher and writer Ben Sessa wrote that due to a "plethora of new studies and published papers in the scientific press and the increasingly emerging presence of articles about positive psychedelic experiences appearing in the popular media, there is little doubt that we are in the midst of a Psychedelic Renaissance" (Sessa 2017). In my thesis, I am concerned with its more recent developments, hence considering a timeframe of the past twenty years. This choice is also due to several studies showing, in the past two decades, that psychedelics such as ketamine² and psilocybin³ can be beneficial in treating mental illness, including depression, obsessive-compulsive disorders, and anxiety (Sessa, 2012).

The 'renaissance' indicates a revival of psychedelic research as seen with the psychedelic counterculture in the 1950s/1960s (Fotiou 2020, 16). The latter counterculture arose as a result of social and political upheavals, such as the civil rights movement and opposition to the Vietnam War. Many of the 'hippies' who were part of the counterculture came to try psychedelic drugs in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury area. There they occasionally listened to political radicals such as Timothy Leary, who actively advocated psychedelic drug usage. He stood at the forefront of the psychedelic counterculture with fellow white, male authors Humphrey Osmond and Aldous Huxley⁴. According to Diana Negrín's article for Chacruna Institute for Psychedelic Plant Medicines, the current parallels with the 1960s are evident:

¹ "The term psychedelic – mind-manifesting – was introduced in 1957 by Humphrey Osmond, who hoped that this new label would liberate "scientific investigation from the enduring influence of the psychotomimetic (madness mimicking) paradigm, which offered limited field application and a definite pejorative bias" (Fotiou 2020, 17).

² Ketamine is a painkiller and anaesthetic used largely in veterinary surgery, but is also employed in human medicine. Ketamine can cause vivid dreams and the sensation of being removed from one's body.

³ The Aztecs ate fungi that contained the hallucinogenic ingredient psilocybin (*teonanacatl*, or "food of the gods") for medicinal, religious, and recreational purposes. Aztecs believed psilocybin allowed traditional healers to enter "the world beyond," bestowing upon them divine knowledge that could be brought back to the community (Sessa 2012, 4).

⁴ Humphry Osmond will be remembered for coining the term "psychedelic" and "turning on" famed British author Aldous Huxley, in the words of Timothy Leary. Huxley and Osmond had developed a strong friendship after Huxley approached Osmond for a desired mescaline trial in the early 1950s.

We live in a world in need of deep psychological healing and many of us live in societies and within cultures that do not offer us the answers to our crises. As women, we continue to be oppressed and desire liberation and spiritual connection; as urban citizens, we desire health and a landscape beyond asphalt. It sounds like a repeat of the 1960s and the first boom in psychedelics. Fifty years later, the existential search continues [...] The second boom is here...

– Diana Negrín, 2020.⁵

This second boom is typified by the previously mentioned resurgence of interest in psychedelic drug therapy and has supposedly not changed much in terms of white males usually representing this counterculture in America. A recent study of users of novel psychedelic substances shows that these users turn out to be more likely than average to be male, white and college-educated (Sexton et al. 2019, 1058-1067). However, it does not mean that this white androcentrism⁶ remains uncontested.

Within the context of the ‘second boom’ the concept ‘psychedelic feminism’⁷ was coined and developed as a movement by cultural activist Zoe Helene. It is critically positioned within a psychedelic domain that, according to Helene, has been historically dominated by men.⁸ I intend to critically engage with psychedelic feminist discourse concerning white androcentrism. Therefore, I am inquiring on this by asking the following research question:

How is psychedelic feminism contesting white androcentrism within the contemporary American psychedelic counterculture?

My intention here is to analyze the social and discursive constructs that are of concern within the psychedelic feminist discourse. In order to unpack the research question, I am conducting a critical discourse analysis on a psychedelic feminist lecture by Michelle Corbin. As I dive into critical discourse analysis, I take Corbin’s lecture during *The Women and Psychedelics Forum* hosted by Chacruna on November 19th, 2018 as my ‘text’ (Jørgensen 2002, 67). My research question is further divided into several sub-questions:

- ❖ *How is contemporary American psychedelic counterculture defined here?*
- ❖ *How is Michelle Corbin contesting the white androcentric influence on contemporary psychedelic counterculture?*

⁵ <https://chacruna.net/colonial-shadows-in-the-psychedelic-renaissance/>

⁶ Read on page 6 of my theoretical framework.

⁷ Read on page 6-7 of my theoretical framework.

⁸ Read about Zoe Helene’s standpoint on page 7 of my theoretical framework.

❖ *To what extent is Michelle Corbin's psychedelic feminist lecture intersectional?*

Reflexivity

As a feminist, queer, Surinamese/Indian woman who has been actively engaging with psychedelics and exploring altered states of consciousness for the past four years, I have felt some sort of creeping ‘suspicion’ towards the lack of representation of women and POC within the psychedelic domain. Whereas I first happily devoured the works by Alan Watts, Allen Ginsberg, Aldous Huxley and Terence McKenna, I later on started to critically reflect upon these ‘white males’ dominating the discourse as I knew it. Initially I felt quite embarrassed about how I had been buying into this white male monopoly, but then I felt the need to scratch beneath the surface and look for the experiences that have been overshadowed and erased, whilst asking myself why this has been happening and what needs to be done.

I have put the effort into finding usable texts and sources that might have arisen from marginal voices, but this proved to be difficult within the niche domain of psychedelic feminism with such a small academic repertoire. Therefore, properly focusing on the experiences of marginalized groups will have to wait for my next thesis. Hopefully, I can conduct ethnographic research on the contemporary psychedelic counterculture in the Netherlands by then.

Growing up in the Netherlands and being academically inclined has thrown me in multiple situations where I had to ‘fight’ to prove my intellect and credibility, whereas I noticed that for my ‘white’ and especially ‘white male’ peers this seemed to be a privilege they could easily enjoy. Even within the social domain, I notice how (mostly white) friends rather believe what my white, male partner has to say. I feel how this sense of favouring is deeply embedded in their subconscious behaviour. This favouring has even shaped my own subconsciousness and deconstructing this has been a heavy and painful process. The internalized doubt, denial and devalorization of my opinions and experiences are not easy to get rid of. I have been hurt by this several times, whether by myself or others and thus can not deny that these emotions steer my approach to this subject.

Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I offer the ‘tools’ for understanding psychedelic feminism and white androcentrism before delineating my feminist approach to critically engaging with the concepts and theories that contextualize my analysis of Michelle Corbin’s lecture. These concepts and theories involve intersectionality, Orientalism and gender essentialism. I mainly want to touch upon the notion of intersectionality to provide a lens for critically examining Corbin’s attempt at an intersectional approach to psychedelic feminism.

Orientalism and White Androcentrism

There is plenty of evidence that the discourse around psychedelics has historically been overrepresented by white men. To specifically address this *white* male-centredness, I am using the term white androcentrism. The term has been employed by Mary E. Hawkesworth in *Embodied Power: Demystifying Disembodied Politics* (Hawkesworth 2016) where she typifies it as “constitutive of strategic color-blindness that assimilates marginalized people of color as putative equals to privileged whites in ways that negate the need for any measures to address or redress the inequities of the past” (Hawkesworth 2016, 46). She also states that:

Only white androcentrism erases colonial domination of indigenous peoples, chattel slavery, and centuries of disenfranchisement from official histories of the nation.

– Mary E. Hawkesworth, 2016.

One example of the white androcentric influence on the norm is how the history of the ayahuasca brew usually mentions a lineage of *white men* who discovered, reported on or studied it (Spruce 1908). This white androcentrism calls for a postcolonial perspective on Orientalism. For this, I work with the definition of Orientalism as “A Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 1978, 3). He rejects Eurocentrism from this perspective, but *also* the assumption of a free or neutral place outside of power and discourse. My aim for involving Orientalism is to uncover the (imperialist) power dynamics that are underlying the psychedelic counterculture and its universalizing claims.

Psychedelic Feminism

The problem with white androcentrism is shared with the relatively small field of psychedelic feminism, which is intimately interwoven with ecofeminism⁹. Kim Hewitt wrote an article for the *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* titled “Psychedelic Feminism: A Radical Interpretation of Psychedelic Consciousness?” (Hewitt 2019). In it, she explains that the term ‘psychedelic feminism’ was coined and developed recently by cultural activist Zoe Helene. It refers to the ways psychedelic psychospiritual practices can empower women and is, according to Helene, about women's empowerment and healing through the transformational properties of psychedelic plants (Hewitt 2019, 75). Zoe Helene, the founder of Cosmic Sister, which is an organization for psychedelic feminists, states the following:

[M]en do tend to get out there, they're more declarative, and they put themselves up as an expert and as a star. And they will stand up there no matter what they look like. They get up there, they do their thing. Whereas women, in general, will not.
– Zoe Helene, 2017.

This perception of hers underlines the way white androcentrism has been constituted within the psychedelic domain and is maintaining a vertical structure or *hierarchy*. On the other hand, Helene also talks about taking psychedelics like ayahuasca¹⁰ or mushrooms¹¹ to possibly help undo "social programming" imposed by patriarchy. In practice, Zoe Helene's two aims are thus (1) “seeking to support the voices of women in the psychedelic community, which she sees as a male-dominated arena” and (2) granting “for women to participate in reputable ayahuasca retreats with indigenous Shipibo people¹² in a specific part of the Peruvian Amazon where ayahuasca is legal” (Hewitt 2019, 77). From this, it becomes evident that Helene is mainly focused on *female* experiences.

⁹ Ecofeminism famously claims that androcentrism is the true cause of degradation of nature and thus of women (d'Eaubonne 1974).

¹⁰ Ayahuasca is a psychoactive brew made using the leaves of the Psychotria Viridis plant and the stalks of the Banisteriopsis Caapi vine.

¹¹ See footnote no. 3.

¹² Ayahuasca and medicinal plants are important parts in Shipibo-Konibo culture, informing much of their creative and ritual behavior.

However, through analyzing the lecture of Michelle Corbin, I intend to broaden the focus from the experience of just women to women *and* POC. As said by Fotiou in the *Journal of Psychedelic Studies*, “The stories we tell are important. The stories about psychedelic science have been dominated by medicalization, stereotypes, and the heroization of the White men who “discovered” psychedelic plant medicines risking the erasure of the people who initially used these substances” (Fotiou 2020, 20). The people who used these substances have widely varied over time and different cultures.¹³ Not only does this statement by Fotiou back up my stance regarding white androcentrism within psychedelic discourse, but it also *explicitly* brings in the racial dimension by addressing whiteness.

Intersectionality

In this thesis, I am concerned with two axes of identity and their intersection, namely the axis of gender and of race. I attempt to understand how the intersection of these two is constructed in the psychedelic feminist discourse as presented by Corbin. I am therefore applying Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory on intersectionality. According to Crenshaw, intersectionality is a way of thinking within gender studies where gender, race/ethnicity, class and sexuality and other axes of identity co-construct each other and are active at the same time (Wekker 2015, 101-102). The ultimate goal of intersectionality research is to investigate “the relationships between sociocultural categories and identities” (Knudsen, 2006, 61). This definition of intersectionality and its goal is important in order to analyze Michelle Corbin’s attempted intersectional approach and question her position as a white woman. According to Crenshaw, anti-racism and anti-sexism are often focused on the dominant groups within these movements, namely black men in the former or white women in the latter (Wekker 2015, 102). It becomes evident from this that the position of women of color – and thus the *double* oppression – is becoming invisible to us due to what Crenshaw calls ‘single-axis frameworks’. Any specific form of oppression or discrimination based on multiple categories is thus unseen because we lack the frames to recognize these categories and how they influence each other. This shortcoming gave rise to critiques by black feminist researchers, among whom Patricia Hill Collins. According to Collins and Crenshaw, grouping all women together set up further oppression of black women because it overlooked race as an identity category (Hesse-Biber 2014, 112).

¹³ Although cave art from the paleolithic era shows an even earlier beginning of psychedelic use, archeologists have discovered fossil evidence of psychedelic rites reaching back 10,000 years (Merlin 2003). <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/psychedelic-renaissance-historical-progression-canadas-desiree-smith/>

Intersectionality research, which seeks not to privilege one axis of difference over another, rather recognizes that different identities that one individual may have are likely to overlap and intersect dynamically. The intersectionality approach locates the source of power at a crossroads where the axes overlap and intertwine, allowing the axes' relationships to be examined. Using this approach, researchers like Collins were able to highlight the multiple identities and discriminations faced by women of color (Hesse-Biber 2014, 116).

Homogenizing 'Women'

To enter Mohanty's critique, I want to establish Judith Butler's standpoint regarding gender essentialism first. In *Gender Trouble* (1990) Butler contests the use of 'woman' as a sign due to it erasing the extreme heterogeneity and conflicts of interest within the category. She argues that gender is constructed through performativity, rather than being an essential given (Butler 1990). In this same text she questions who counts as 'women' and what the category 'women' assumes and excludes. According to her, white, imperialist, middle class, ageist, heterosexist, cisgender, feminist politics are posed as *universal* women's struggles. Mohanty seems to pick up this discussion and focuses on the experience of 'Third world' women.

Mohanty notices in *Under Western Eyes* (1988) that the lives and experiences of all women in the 'Third world' are generalized:

What is problematic, then, about this kind of use of 'women' as a group, as a stable category of analysis, is that it assumes an ahistorical, universal unity among women based on a generalized notion of their subordination. Instead of analytically demonstrating the production of women as socio-economic-political groups within particular local contexts, this analytical move – and the presuppositions it is based on – limits the definition of the female subject to gender identity, [...]
 – Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 1988.

She argues that women become objects of analysis and do not act themselves, which leads to a lack of agency. Their oppression is systematized in the discursive practice of questioning 'how women are affected by...' which points towards methodological universalism. What happens is that the third-world women change into passive victims. This methodological universalism becomes apparent from treating these women as mere objects of the analysis as *affected by* something and not *dealing with* it themselves. It does not happen with western women since they make themselves the active 'subject' whereas the non-western women function as the passive 'object'. This is where I recognize a dichotomy of framing the experiences of women in the sense of either passivity and victimization or activity and agency. What I take away from *Under Western Eyes* is that we cannot generalize specific findings or phenomena without considering the context. In my case that would be the context of framing non-western (or non-white) women as passive victims and the underlying power dynamics of this phenomenon.

Methodology

Situating the Object of Analysis

Chacruna Institute of Psychedelic Plant Medicines is an organization founded by Brazilian anthropologist Dr. Bia Labate. Chacruna's goal is to "educate the public and create cultural understanding and legitimacy regarding these substances so that they may cease to be stigmatized and outlawed" and promote "a bridge between the world of plant medicines and the emergent field of psychedelic science, between "traditional ceremonial use" and clinical and therapeutic settings, bringing the knowledge and perspectives of the social sciences to health care professionals and practitioners of psychedelic-assisted therapy" (Chacruna 2020).

This institute ties in with the focus on the *contemporary American* psychedelic counterculture. Firstly, Chacruna Institute is geographically located in San Francisco, California and mainly operates in terms of organising events within the American borders. Secondly, although nowhere on the website the year of the foundation is stated, the institute still reflects the dimension of the contemporaneity of the American psychedelic counterculture through its situation within the recently developed internet culture. Therefore, I decided to use a discourse that emerged from this institute to exemplify psychedelic feminism's contestation of white androcentrism. The sample of data that I use has been collected from my transcripts of a publicly published lecture given by Michelle Corbin on November 19, 2018.

Approaching the Object of Analysis

I aim to look into the power dynamics that are at play within the psychedelic feminist discourse and express criticism from my feminist position. What I mainly focus on during my analysis of the discourse is a critique of 'objective' and seemingly universalizing language. This is identified as what Donna Haraway described in "Situated Knowledges" as employing the "god trick", which is about enacting "a conquering gaze from nowhere" (Haraway 1988, 581). This gaze is taking the observer out of the 'visible' by making itself unseen, "to represent while escaping representation" themselves (Haraway 1988, 581). I embrace Haraway's argument for politics and epistemologies of positioning, by arguing for nuance instead of universality as the condition of making rational knowledge claims. I intend to unmask the purveyed universality and work with feminist objectivity, which quite simply means situated knowledges.

I am shaping my critical discourse analysis by drawing from Jørgensen's *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (Jørgensen 2002). Additionally, my approach to the psychedelic discourse is coloured by the idea that it is gendered and racialized due to the white androcentric influence. Therefore, I am working with the theory and praxis from the book *Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis: Gender, Power and Ideology in Discourse* (Lazar 2008) as well. This feminist CDA is “concerned with demystifying the interrelationships of gender, power and ideology in discourse, [which] is equally applicable to the study of texts as well as talk, which offers a corrective to approaches that primarily favour one linguistic mode over another (Lazar 2008, 5). A central concern for feminist critical discourse analysts is with “*critiquing* discourses which sustain a patriarchal social order: that is, relations of power that systematically privilege men as a social group and disadvantage, exclude and disempower women as a social group” (Lazar 2008, 5). This systematic – extended to *white* – male privilege resulting in exclusion and disempowerment of not only women, but POC as well, is what becomes evident to me from the psychedelic feminist discourse.

Fairclough's Three-dimensional Model

Now for a brief description of my strategy: I am analysing the power dynamics that are at play within psychedelic feminist discourse according to Fairclough's three-dimensional model as illustrated in the figure below. The focus during my critical discourse analysis is on “(1) the linguistic features of the text (text), (2) processes relating to the production and consumption of the text (discursive practice); and (3) the wider social practice to which the communicative event belongs (social practice)” (Jørgensen 2002, 68). I intend to collapse the first and second steps together so I can directly analyze the text with its discursive practice because I feel like merely analyzing the linguistic features in isolation grants me no valuable insight into the implications of power.

For the ‘text’ I look into Michelle Corbin's lecture during *The Women and Psychedelics Forum* hosted by Chacruna on November 19th, 2018. It is the only psychedelic feminist lecture that explicitly brings together the concern that is also underlying my research question, namely that the psychedelic domain has been dominated by white males and women and POC have been feeling the repercussions. My reason for choosing this ‘text’ is due to her intersecting position within psychedelics *and* feminism¹⁴, the facilitation of this low-brow lecture by Chacruna Institute (tailored to women and POC) and the explicit engagement with the influence of white androcentrism on the psychedelic realm.

¹⁴ “I have been at the intersection of psychedelics and feminism since graduate school” (Corbin 2018)

From there on, I am analysing which existing discourses give rise to Corbin’s lecture and what processes of production and consumption it is embedded in. According to Jørgensen, the “discursive practices – through which texts are produced (created) and consumed (received and interpreted) – are viewed as an important form of social practice which contributes to the constitution of the social world including social identities and social relations” (Jørgensen 2002, 61). The analysis of discursive practice focuses on the author drawing on already existing discourses and genres to create a text, and on receivers also applying available discourses and genres in the consumption and interpretation of the texts.

Once I have arrived at the dimension of social practice, I am considering what the effect of Michelle Corbin’s lecture is on the established order of the psychedelic discourse. I am also discussing whether the discursive practice reproduces or resists any approaches and ideas.

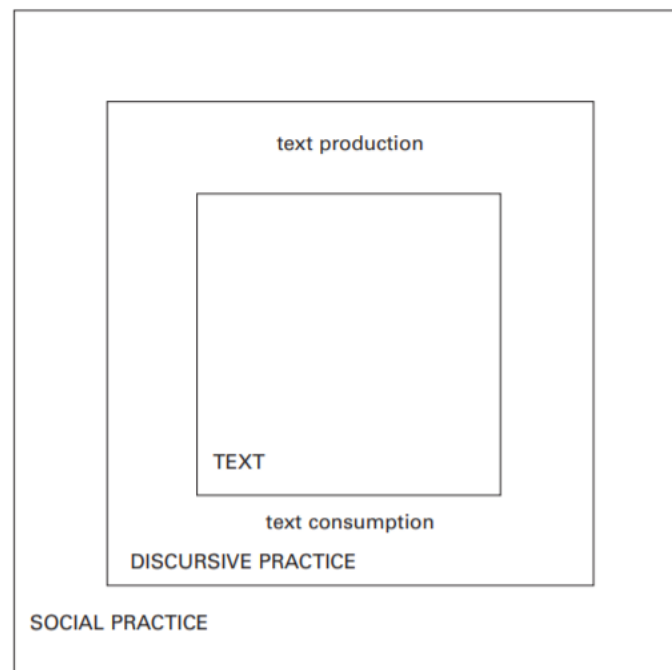


Figure 1. *Fairclough’s three-dimensional model for critical discourse analysis: an analytical framework for empirical research on communication and society (Fairclough 1992, 73)*

Analysis: The Text & Discursive Practice

Engaging with Psychedelic Feminist 'Text'

During *The Women and Psychedelics Forum* hosted by Chacruna on November 19th, 2018 Corbin gave an excellent and fiery lecture under the banner of 'The personal is political: The feminist possibilities of psychedelic praxis'. Corbin identifies as a feminist sociologist, coming from a Women's Studies standpoint, who wrote about the politics of the experiences of psychedelic drugs and ended up discovering particular pathways that she found liberating.

In this part of the critical discourse analysis, I mainly answer my subquestion of *how American psychedelic counterculture is defined here* from a psychedelic feminist perspective, namely through notions of white androcentrism and the portrayed experiences of women and POC. Therefore, my second subquestion – *How is Michelle Corbin contesting the white androcentric influence on contemporary psychedelic counterculture?* – is also addressed through analyzing Corbin's approach.

As Michelle Corbin, and I, speak of 'white' 'males', my two main focuses are thus on the gendered and racialized dimension of the psychedelic counterculture. The topics that are addressed by Corbin and further analyzed from my feminist standpoint are: white supremacy; toxic masculinity; trauma and PTSD among women and POC; "an ongoing epidemic of sexual violence"; liberating women and people of color from all manner of oppressions and enabling them, by focusing on helping and offering them a platform for their voices to be heard. However, I firstly want to portray how white androcentrism in the psychedelic counterculture is embedded in Orientalism.

Orientalist Behaviour

Orientalist concepts play a significant role in the psychedelic experience. The experience is characterized as authentic and universal because of its alleged ability to transcend gender, race, class, and so on. It is because of such a belief in spiritual transcendence, communal harmony, and personal emancipation impacting 'man at the very centre of his nature' (Leary 1999) that psychedelic drug advocates assimilate it. This is where I detect the employment of the 'god trick', the universalized, objective knowledge claims as contested by Donna Haraway. Such sweeping claims to universality have masked the countercultural discourse on psychedelics' distinctly white, male, middle-class bias, while concealing how specific power relations and forms of difference shaped it (Shortall, 201).

An example of power relations being obscured by universality is seen within stigmatization. White people within the psychedelic community are not stigmatized in the same way as POC. Looking at the “White hippie narrative”, for example, shows psychedelic drug use for recreation, self-exploration, and transcendental experiential purposes (Davis & Munoz, 1968; McClure, 1992; Saldanha, 2007); in contrast with the cultural reputation and false stereotype of criminal people believed to sell and abuse drugs imposed on African Americans (Williams, Gooden, & Davis, 2012). Corbin needs to communicate an awareness of her position as a white woman who does not experience the same oppressive social forces as people of color. It is not the same because the historical record not only *protects*, but *encourages* White Americans in their use of drugs for self-exploration (Davis & Munoz, 1968; McClure, 1992), whilst not protecting and even imprisoning African Americans for attempting similar self-exploration (Beckett, Nyrop, & Pflingst, 2006).

Another example of power relations embedded in Orientalist behaviour is made visible from the psychedelic counterculture’s appropriation of non-white cultural markers. The largely white demographic tended to associate the drugs with non-white cultures to trumpet the authenticity of the psychedelic experience, over and against the artificiality of western norms. Here, I recognize the orientalist notion of ‘exoticizing’ non-western culture. The Westerner colonizes and appropriates the cultural heritage in order to present themselves as an heir to age-old Indigenous traditions. Most psychedelic drugs aside from LSD were imported from an indigenous cultural setting. This is an example of white androcentrism erasing the colonial domination of Indigenous peoples (Hawkesworth 2016, 46). As I show, not once in her lecture does Corbin acknowledge the differences in power dynamics mentioned above.

Tackling White Androcentrism

Michelle Corbin advocates for work that has to be done to tackle toxic masculinity¹⁵ and white supremacy¹⁶ within the psychedelic realm. This strikes me as a very loaded statement to make since it implies that the psychedelic realm is *for a fact* negatively impacted by toxic masculinity and white supremacy. Here, these two notions are defining for Corbin what the problem is within the contemporary American psychedelic counterculture. Corbin’s reason for pointing towards toxic masculinity and white supremacy as the problem seems to stem from a witnessed predominance of PTSD and trauma among women and POC within the psychedelic realm.

¹⁵ Toxic masculinity is a set of socially regressive (masculine) characteristics that promote dominance, devaluation of women, homophobia, and indiscriminate violence.

¹⁶ White supremacy refers to beliefs and viewpoints that say "white" human races have a natural superiority over other racial groups. White supremacy, sexism, ableism, and cis/heteronormativity are all examples of systematic unfairness in our culture. Psychedelic cultures, unfortunately, are not immune to these power imbalances.

Corbin addresses the necessity of tackling toxic masculinity and white supremacy by “inviting us to look at the position of women in psychedelics.” Within this realm, she notices “a predominance of PTSD and trauma, since the focus of women using these psychedelic substances has become to address trauma” (Corbin 2018). What I find interesting, however, is her deliberate choice of looking at the position of women in psychedelics as being subjected to PTSD and trauma. According to her, the predominance of it is no coincidence and makes it even more apparent that trauma is a gendered and political issue. To me, the way she speaks of trauma and PTSD frames women as passive ‘victims’, similar to what is seen in ‘dominance feminism’ or ‘victim feminism’¹⁷. Her decision to focus on victimization is possibly problematic due to disregarding the complexity of the power vs. victim dichotomy¹⁸ and the misery that this victim status brings upon them. Corbin continues to state:

Trauma is more than often the result of sexual and gendered violence, which caused feminist responses such as consciousness-raising and movement building to rise up collectively.

– Michelle Corbin, 2018.

¹⁷ In the sex wars of the 1980s there was an anti-pornography movement on one hand. This is known as 'dominance feminism,' in which women are predominantly seen as *victims* of gender oppression (Schneider, 1993). On the other hand, pro-sex feminists such as Naomi Wolf criticize "dominance feminism" and refer to it as "victim feminism" (1993). In contrast to victim feminism, they advocate for "power feminism," which emphasizes women's agency.

¹⁸ Schneider states that “Portrayal of women as solely victims or agents is neither accurate nor adequate to explain the complex realities of women’s lives” (Schneider 2000, 289). She argues that victimization and agency are not opposites of each other, but rather “interrelated dimensions of women’s experience” (Schneider 2000, 395).

Here, the passive ‘victims’ of trauma seem to be brought in contrast with feminists with agency who respond with consciousness-raising and movement building. One example given by Corbin is the way awareness is being brought to murdered and missing indigenous women by a mass movement in the US and Canada which is recognized under the abbreviation MMIW / MMIWG.¹⁹ She also offhandedly mentions the movement under the hashtag #SayHerName.²⁰ Whereas Corbin was first focusing on the position of *women* in psychedelics, she now explicitly tries to intersect with the racial dimension by giving examples on WOC. She states that from these examples “it becomes evident that those who are in need to heal traumas are women and people of color, but are psychedelic substances the right way to go?” (Corbin 2018) The way she groups ‘women and people of color’ together here is causing friction in my opinion, since their experiences are wholly different and she offers no clear insight into who is *actually* referred to here. This grouping together of ‘women and people of color’ comes forward again in the chapter titled ‘A White Woman’s Position’ along with the issue of not sufficiently addressing POC in her lecture, despite her partial focus on tackling white supremacy.

I was just looking at examples of the ways that feminist communities and psychedelic communities are taking up these questions of trauma largely driven through our clinical work.

– Michelle Corbin, 2018.

Corbin has thus seen psychedelic communities engaging with the trauma discourse through clinical work. Unfortunately, and what she does not address, there has been a lack and erasure of serious trialling on women and POC, with the horrifying exceptions of using POC from prison²¹ as guinea pigs – reinforcing trauma once again... Such historical events, along with other overshadowed psychedelic experiences that *do not* belong to white men, deserve more exposure in my opinion. Aside from focusing on history, there should be more regard for the prevailing white androcentrism in the contemporary American psychedelic counterculture and how to challenge this. Research scientist Katherine MacLean shared the following in a discussion titled *Male Supremacy and the Psychedelic Patriarchy*:

¹⁹ A parallel mass movement is underway in the United States and Canada to raise awareness to missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG).

²⁰ #SayHerName is a social movement in the United States that aims to raise awareness about black female victims of police brutality and anti-black violence.

²¹ “The Addiction Research Center (ARC) in Lexington KY, run by Dr. Harris Isbell, shared the campus with the Federal Bureau of Prisons. The research subjects were inmates; one-third White, a third “Negro,” and a third “Mexican.” Many have heard of the “Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis,” but few know about the facility dubbed the “Narco Farm.”” (Chacrana 2020)

[N]early all of the world's psychedelic research groups and funding organizations are led by cis white men, even though women and people of color make up more than half of the clinicians, research staff, volunteers, and visionaries fuelling and guiding these institutions.

– MacLean, 2018.

It is erasing the contribution of women and POC. I personally believe that without any diversification of experiences from different positions, the experience of the white male would probably remain a normalized standard within the contemporary American psychedelic counterculture.

Another way Corbin sees trauma being reinforced in the psychedelic community is within the realm of ayahuasca use. In the setting of a ritual, the power relations are unfair because of the elevated and romanticized status of the facilitator or shaman.²² Articles such as “sexual seduction in ayahuasca shaman and participants interactions”²³ and “I was sexually abused by a shaman at an ayahuasca retreat”²⁴ open our eyes to the deeply upsetting reality of how women and people of color are suffering by the hand of (white)²⁵ males, even within the psychedelic domain. It exposes the severe need for safe spaces for everyone. Corbin detects an “ongoing epidemic of sexual violence across our communities”. According to her, a response to this would be the *Ayahuasca Manifesto: Healing Toxic Masculinity and Getting Woke*, but unfortunately, ayahuasca is not some magical potion that could cure the toxicity that is possibly already bound to arise from the males in question (Corbin 2018). More so, it would seem necessary for them to at least experience the psychedelics whilst acknowledging the “rage, the misogyny and the entitlement that is driving epidemics of violence” (Corbin 2018) in order to even make a change within. If anything, however, the substance is so potent that it could only damage a toxic person even more instead of digging out the rotten ego.²⁶ And then again, according to Corbin, it should not be *our burden to bear* to heal toxic masculinity. She states that women and people of color should *not* be responsible for ensuring an antidote against this toxicity *and* that it is necessary for the men to “get woke” by themselves (Corbin 2018).

²²According to the Chacruna Institute's Ayahuasca Community Guidelines for Sexual Abuse Awareness, "shamans' are often glorified in the Western mind." Some South American and Western males have figured out how to profit off glorified images of healers.

²³ <https://chacruna.net/sexual-seduction-ayahuasca-shaman-participants-interactions/>

²⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-51053580>

²⁵ Regarding the case of female shaman Maestro Olivia Arevalo Lomas being murdered by a white male patient: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/23/canadian-lynched-in-peru-after-being-accused-of-killing-shaman>

²⁶Dethroning the ego first necessitates being conscious of this psychedelic ego. Second, psychedelic experiences must be viewed in the context of true self-development with the goal of becoming more compassionate and connected, rather than more separate and arrogant.

Focusing on Corbin's engagement with trauma among women and POC in this chapter, I have addressed that the psychedelic realm is negatively impacted by toxic masculinity and white supremacy. These two notions are used by Corbin to define what the problem is within the contemporary American psychedelic counterculture. I mainly focused on a critique of Corbin's 'victimization' framing, but now it is time to look at how the notion of gender essentialism comes forward in the lecture.

Gender Essentialism

Departing from Judith Butler's argument for gender being constructed through performance²⁷, as opposed to being essentialized, I am now looking at what problems become apparent as I analyze Corbin's lecture from this perspective. What I am focusing on here is the way Corbin talks about gender and focuses on women in specific.

And so if we look in the history of the feminist response to sexual violence, what we see is the politics of care right from the beginning. Women reaching out to each other – the politics of care – as we see in psychedelic communities, but it was also an effort at institution building and collective care. Again as it's been mentioned: these collectivities, this horizontalism, this mycelium, that has often been the experiences of women.

– Michelle Corbin, 2018.

First of all, it is interesting how she remains very vague about 'the experiences of women', which points towards a homogenizing portrayal of women²⁸ in my opinion. This argument is in line with what Judith Butler said in *Gender Trouble* about the use of 'woman' as a sign erasing the extreme heterogeneity and conflicts of interest within the category (Butler 1990). Corbin seems to have no regard for how much nuance there still is within 'the experiences of women', which virtually essentializes the idea of gender. This notion of gender essentialism is addressed by feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz in *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (1955):

²⁷ Read about this on page 9 of my theoretical framework.

²⁸ Read about this on page 9 of my theoretical framework.

[essentialism] entails the belief that those characteristics defined as women's essence are shared in common by all women at all times [...] Her essence underlies all the apparent variations differentiating women from each other. Essentialism thus refers to the existence of fixed characteristics, given attributes, and ahistorical functions that limit the possibilities of change and thus of social reorganization.

– Elizabeth Grosz, 1955.

This is primarily backed up by feminists who argue that feminist theory is capitalizing on the idea of gender essentialism by using the category of gender to appeal to "women's experience" as a whole (DiQuinzio 1999). An argument presented by Patrice DiQuinzio states that the universalizing and normalizing claims for *and* about women made in feminist theory are only true of white, Western, heterosexual, cisgender, middle- or upper-class women. In my eyes, Corbin is reproducing this same problem through her lecture.

Corbin's failure of adopting an intersectional approach seems to resonate with the entire set-up of *The Women and Psychedelics Forum* organized by Chacruna Institute for Psychedelic Plant Medicines. The event was held at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco on the 19th of November in 2018. During this event of over approximately three hours, the executive director of the Chacruna Institute – Bia Labate – offers a space for lectures and interactive Q&A's. However, of the fifteen women who get to speak, there are *only two* identified as non-white. Both of them appear among the five panellists during the Q&A session. What is interesting concerning Corbin and the event's unsuccessful attempt at intersectionality is the following statement from Chacruna, which calls for taking up an intersectional perspective:

...we also recognize that, for the field to reach its true liberatory potential and move away from the heavy dominance by straight able-bodied cis White men, we must take up an intersectional perspective, considering issues of accessibility for all minority identities and levels of class privilege.²⁹

The engagement with, what Corbin refers to as, 'the experiences of women and POC' from a sufficiently intersectional position is still lacking. What I detect here is a reflection of Michelle Corbin's privileged position as a white woman, which is further analyzed in the following chapter. This is done to see whether Michelle Corbin's attempt at psychedelic feminist discourse reproduces, restructures or resists existing approaches and ideas. In the following chapter, I am formulating an answer to my final question: *To what extent is Michelle Corbin's psychedelic feminist lecture intersectional?*

²⁹ <https://chacruna.net/blinded-by-the-white-addressing-power-and-privilege-in-psychedelic-medicine/>

Analysis: The Social Practice

Now that I have arrived at the social practice, I am concerned with whether Michelle Corbin's example of psychedelic feminist discourse reproduces or restructures approaches and ideas or if there is any form of resistance. I am focusing on the extent to which Corbin's lecture is intersectional.

A White Woman's Position: Erasing Difference and Situated Knowledges

As I have argued in the previous chapter, Michelle Corbin's privileged position as a white woman becomes evident from the way she speaks of 'the experiences of women and POC'. She tends to erase differences and homogenize the experience of 'women', without critically considering that it can not be grouped together. I recognize this in her following statement as well:

Let's look briefly at (this) history because sexual violence has been at the root of women's struggles with power [...] whether black women under slavery or white women for birth control or women having to bear too many children in poverty or being sexually assaulted by their bosses because they occupy low positions of power.
– Michelle Corbin, 2018.

Speaking of 'women's struggles with power' *only* to follow that up with 'black women under slavery' and 'white women for birth control' displays a dismissive attitude towards the different implications of power for 'black women' compared to 'white women'. For example, 'Black women', as well as other WOC, have been experiencing acts of violence via medical sterilization abuse from the 1960s and 1970s on to *this day* (George, Michaels, Sevelius and Williams 2020, 8). White women have the *privilege* of not experiencing this violence, so putting the struggles of 'black women' and 'white women' side-to-side is an act of ignorance in my opinion. Just as Corbin grouped 'women and people of color' together in the chapter titled 'Tackling white male dominance', this indicates erasure of difference.

Corbin does not seem to reflect upon her own positionality, which I find detrimental for her engagement with situated knowledge. Situated knowledges supposedly demand a practice of *positioning* and is about carefully attending to power relations at play in the processes of knowledge production (Haraway 1988, 587), which Corbin fails to do. Another quote that clearly displays her biased use of language is:

You want to talk about people who are bullied? Let's talk about people of color and women! *We ain't out there shooting everybody so let's make sure we don't re-psychologize male violence as we ask this question of: will it (ayahuasca) be a cure for white supremacy and toxic masculinity?*

– Michelle Corbin, 2018.

I am perplexed by her use of 'we' *immediately* after grouping together 'people of color and women' again, as if their struggles or the experienced 'bullying' actually align.

This abovementioned 'bullying' is embedded in racist power dynamics since, for example, the police in most places in the United States are more likely to pull over African Americans than Whites (Alexander, 2010) and African Americans and Hispanics – more than any other group – are more likely the targets of searches, arrests, and experiences of force used against them (Tonry & Melewski, 2008). So as Corbin does not acknowledge these imbalanced power relations, it shows her privilege of not having to *live* that truth, of not having to experience that struggle (George, Michaels, Sevelius and Williams 2020, 8). A way in which Corbin seems to erase difference is through her use of 'horizontalism', which strikes me as a naive idea of a structure *without* the power dynamics that would elevate one's status above the other. This is similar to the assumption of a free or neutral place outside of power and discourse that Edward Said rejected.³⁰ Corbin is seemingly reproducing Orientalist notions of universalizing experiences in my opinion.

³⁰ Read about this on page 6 of my theoretical framework.

Conclusion

Having looked into how Michelle Corbin's lecture relates to the greater discourse of psychedelic feminism, I detect an obvious strive for an engagement with intersectionality. Whereas Corbin pays adequate attention to the gendered dimension, I argue, however, that the way the white androcentric influence is contested here does not offer a critical engagement with the racial dimension. Corbin's approach seems to partially blind her and allows her to reproduce imbalanced power dynamics.

How is psychedelic feminism contesting white androcentrism within the contemporary American psychedelic counterculture?

Psychedelic feminist discourse as communicated by Michelle Corbin is defining the contemporary American psychedelic counterculture in terms of white androcentric influence. She mainly does so by addressing white supremacy, toxic masculinity and focusing on the trauma experienced by women and POC within a framework of the victim vs. agency dichotomy.

Corbin attempts to contest the white androcentric influence by encouraging to tackle white supremacy and toxic masculinity. She emphasizes that the predominance of trauma among women and POC is a gendered and politicized issue in the contemporary psychedelic counterculture. To contest white androcentrism, she calls for a dismissal of carrying the burden to heal white males and states that they "need to get woke themselves".

The way she is contesting white androcentrism is implicated in a naive emphasis on solidarity among women *and* POC. She homogenizes the differences among women and groups together their experiences. Corbin thus seems to have no regard for how much nuance there still is within these experiences. As became apparent from the critical discourse analysis, Corbin shows some problematic tendencies in terms of 'victimization' framing, gender essentialism, orientalism and distancing from her privileged position as a white woman.

By bringing in arguments that were left out by Corbin, I gave more attention to the racialized dimension of the psychedelic counterculture. I attempted to adopt a more intersectional approach than Michelle Corbin did. At the same time, I was critical of Corbin's positionality and her (lack of) engagement with power relations that are at play. I have argued for nuance instead of universality for the sake of situated knowledges and partially unmasked the embedded power relations at play. In my opinion, Corbin's lecture mainly requires more nuance and recognition of differences within. She is currently engaging stronger with the axis of gender within psychedelic feminist discourse, seemingly privileging it over the axis of race. Her approach to intersecting identities, such as WOC, is still either focused on the dimension of gender *or* (but to a lesser extent) the dimension of race.

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PLAGIARISM RULES AWARENESS STATEMENT

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Scientific integrity is the foundation of academic life. Utrecht University considers any form of scientific deception to be an extremely serious infraction. Utrecht University therefore expects every student to be aware of, and to abide by, the norms and values regarding scientific integrity.

The most important forms of deception that affect this integrity are fraud and plagiarism. Plagiarism is the copying of another person's work without proper acknowledgement, and it is a form of fraud. The following is a detailed explanation of what is considered to be fraud and plagiarism, with a few concrete examples. Please note that this is not a comprehensive list!

If fraud or plagiarism is detected, the study programme's Examination Committee may decide to impose sanctions. The most serious sanction that the committee can impose is to submit a request to the Executive Board of the University to expel the student from the study programme.

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Plagiarism is the copying of another person's documents, ideas or lines of thought and presenting it as one's own work. You must always accurately indicate from whom you obtained ideas and insights, and you must constantly be aware of the difference between citing, paraphrasing and plagiarising. Students and staff must be very careful in citing sources; this concerns not only printed sources, but also information obtained from the Internet.

The following issues will always be considered to be plagiarism:

- cutting and pasting text from digital sources, such as an encyclopaedia or digital periodicals, without quotation marks and footnotes;
- cutting and pasting text from the Internet without quotation marks and footnotes;
- copying printed materials, such as books, magazines or encyclopaedias, without quotation marks or footnotes;
- including a translation of one of the sources named above without quotation marks or footnotes;
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- copying sound, video or test materials from others without references, and presenting it as one's own work;
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The rules for plagiarism also apply to rough drafts of papers or (parts of) theses sent to a lecturer for feedback, to the extent that submitting rough drafts for feedback is mentioned in the course handbook or the thesis regulations.

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Ignorance of these rules is not an excuse. Each individual is responsible for their own behaviour. Utrecht University assumes that each student or staff member knows what fraud and plagiarism



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I hereby declare that I have read and understood the above.

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Student number: 6088031

Date and signature: 30/06/2021

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