

6 Good Mother Nature

Ayahuasca neoshamanism as cultural critique in Australia

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Introduction

This chapter investigates the practice of ayahuasca neoshamanism in Australia and the ways in which narrative accounts of ecstatic healing are inscribed with forms of “cultural critique” (Marcus & Fischer, 1986) against urbanization, materialism, environmental destruction, and consumer capitalism. The ecstatic healing practices are centered upon ritualized styles of consuming the indigenous Amazonian psychoactive beverage ayahuasca. While a variety of groups, networks, and individuals drink the beverage in Australia, this paper circumvents the Australian-based diasporas of the Brazilian ayahuasca religions (Santo Daime and União do Vegetal) and focuses on Australian-based ayahuasca neoshamanism.² By “neoshamanism,” I refer to what Atkinson (1992, p. 322) calls the “new shamanism,” which emerged in the middle classes of European, North American, and other societies among people associated with the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s.³ Neoshamanism traditionally traces its lineage to indigenous practices and cosmologies, and tends to be defined by its practitioners as a “spiritual path for personal empowerment” (Wallis, 1999, p. 42). Grounded in a Euro-American history, it involves a cosmology aligned “at once with Nature and the primordial Other, [and] in opposition to institutionalized Western religions and indeed Western political and economic order” (Atkinson, 1992, p. 322). This chapter demonstrates that, in the context of Australia, ayahuasca neoshamanism represents a novel extension and reinvention of earlier types of neoshamanism with regard to an ethos of cultural opposition.

The practice of Australian ayahuasca neoshamanism involves a critical cultural sensibility that permeates the realms of mythology and phenomenology. Practices of narrating ayahuasca trance experiences, and the trance experiences themselves, are subject to ritual codes of individualism (Gearin, 2015a) that encourage a wide variety of beliefs and perspectives to be articulated and experienced. Within this heterogeneous whole, I argue, are certain tendencies of belief that can be read as forms of cultural critique and oppositional politics. Pharmacologically enhanced conditions of the body and perception, combined with dilated emotional experience, and violent acts of purging, characterize the phenomenology of ayahuasca trance experiences (Townesley, 1993, p. 456); and these bodily acts and bodily

states (Gow, 2012), I demonstrate below, are codified by Australian drinkers with articulations that index rejections of “mainstream” society.

Ayahuasca neoshamanism gained currency at the turn of the twenty-first century, inventing and introducing Western adaptations of indigenous Amazonian shamanism. In the context of Australian ayahuasca circles, these adaptations include portraits of Amazonian shamanism that are characterized by forms of cultural idealism and forms of critical discourse mounted against social and cultural institutions of “mainstream” Australian society. The logic by which this counter-cultural perspective is authorized, as detailed below, entails certain similarities with the project of anthropology as cultural critique.

Marcus and Fischer illustrate, in their pioneering text, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (1986), ways in which ethnographic practice and knowledge can disclose and bring critical perspectives to cultural institutions that are so common they defy perception. The purpose of cultural critique, they explain, is “to generate critical questions from one society to probe the other” (1986, p. 117). Marcus and Fischer defined this “promise of anthropology,” arguing that ethnographic realities may “serve as a form of cultural critique for ourselves. In using portraits of other cultural patterns to reflect self-critically on our own ways, anthropology disrupts common sense and makes us re-examine our taken-for-granted assumptions” (Marcus & Fischer, 1986, p.1).

The importation of perspectives from one cultural sphere or context to critique another exists beyond anthropological reflections, and in diverse and radically dissimilar cultural projects and practice. In recent decades, the notion of cultural critique has been extended by anthropologists to explain realms of the political economy and devil possession in Ecuador (Crain, 1991), the history of ethnomusicology (Bohlman, 1991, p. 131), open-source software and copyright politics (Kelty, 2004), the independent film industry (Ortner, 2012), the subjectivity of postmodern anxieties (Ortner, 2005), value as a theoretical project (Otto & Willerslev, 2013), and various other fields and cultural projects.

Shamanism, spirit possession, and ecstatic trance practices may, in diverse contexts, involve forms of critical politics and subaltern resistance (Lewis, 1971). Spirit-possession cults, McIntosh argues, have long involved forms of resistance and opposition to “Western incursions, capitalism, and other oppressive forces” (2004, p. 92). This includes, for example, Barolong boo Ratshidi spirits of resistance in South Africa that protest against colonial and postcolonial forces (Comaroff, 1985); deities in Songhay possession dance styles of Niger that dramatize “horrific comedies” whereby European civilization is rejected and ancestral traditions are enacted preferentially (Stoller, 1984); and spirits of resistance that possess female factory workers in a highly capitalist context in Malaysia (Ong, 1987). In terms of the anthropological record, Boddy argues, “most would agree that possession cults are, or have become, historically sensitive modes of cultural resistance” (Boddy, 1994, p. 219). The practice of ayahuasca neoshamanism in Australia does not typically include forms of spirit possession – although, I did encounter minor cases of spirit incorporation that included glossolalia and drinkers associating embodied trance behavior to the agency of nonhuman beings. Yet,

the way in which cultural critique and oppositional politics are encoded into narrative accounts of ayahuasca trance experiences and healing in Australia indicate a level of similarity between ayahuasca neoshamanism and spirit possession, ecstatic trance cults, and other “sensitive modes of cultural resistance” (Boddy, 1994, p. 219). Ayahuasca neoshamanism draws upon portraits of Amazonian shamanism – and thus embodies similarities with other forms of cultural critique – while representing a form of spiritualized cultural resistance. In the practice of ayahuasca neoshamanism in Australia, nature, plant-spirits, and an indigenous Other represent objects by which drinkers reflexively and critically assess various aspects of everyday ethics and the broader cultural institutions of which they are constituted.

Nature’s medicine and the toxins of society

Ayahuasca is an agent of healing for Australian neoshamanic practitioners. Drinkers regularly refer to ayahuasca as “the medicine” or “*la medicina*,” and to each other as “medicine brothers” and “medicine sisters.” The most common live music performed in ceremonies is referred to as “medicine songs.” The array of sicknesses and maladies that drinkers attempt to cure with ayahuasca is complex, and the accounts in which sickness and well-being are articulated include themes that bring into focus various political, cultural, and philosophical dimensions of the lives of drinkers.

At the foundation of illness, maladies, and suffering, Australian ayahuasca drinkers typically explain, is a psychic and toxic separation between the individual and the natural world. For example, Fred, a regular ayahuasca drinker, explained to me that “the root cause of all sickness is simply separation from nature and the natural order . . . ayahuasca heals this separation at a very fundamental level.” Similarly, another drinker, John, explained, “The medicine connects me more deeply to myself, the planet, and the grid of life.” Daksha, Australia’s pioneering and most expensive ayahuasca ritual specialist, explained, “The main illness I’ve been working with, specifically, is the split in the Western psyche, the individual, between themselves and nature” (Daksha, personal communication, March, 2012). Central to the cosmology of ayahuasca neoshamanism is the reification and personification of nature in the form of a Mother Nature goddess. Drinkers have creatively reinvented or summoned the Ancient Greek goddess Gaia in ways that relate to popular depictions of Mother Nature and to various New Age formulations (see Hanegraaff, 1997, p. 156).

There is typically a strong rejection of artificial or “nonnatural” things for Australian ayahuasca drinkers. Nonorganic foods, water treated with chlorine and fluoride, synthetic pharmaceutical drugs, synthetic psychedelic drugs, Wi-Fi technologies, artificial light, urban cityscapes, and other artifacts may be associated with illness, disease, toxicity, and spiritual malaise. In contrast, organic foods, natural environments, and plant-spirits are associated with well-being and spiritual fulfillment. Ayahuasca ceremonies are held almost exclusively outside cities and in nature or “the bush,” and drinkers warn of the dangerous “energies” that

may enter a ceremony conducted in city or urban settings. For example, Nick, a regular ayahuasca drinker, explained to me:

All of the functions of society take me away from having a profound experience; so, being out in wilderness gives you a natural environment from which to have a natural experience. Things don't get in the way, they kind of work with your experience.

Drinkers tend to explain that ayahuasca ceremonies conducted in urban settings – that may include sounds of cars, sirens, and people walking through streets – are limiting, dangerous, and will distract participants from types of deep healing that may occur in ceremonies located in natural surroundings and a sensorium of nature. Ayahuasca healing is described in terms of a psychic connection with nature that becomes more available in geographies that are devoid of cities, urban landscapes, and human settlement.

Ayahuasca typically induces dramatic and grueling bodily processes and states of purging (that may include afflictive experiences such as vomiting, profuse sweating, extreme yawning, glossolalia, and haunting visual imagery and sensory experiences), and drinkers codify these processes and states in terms of notions of healing. Concomitantly, drinkers explain that extreme purging may be the result of incorrect practice. Forms of incorrect practice may include drinking ayahuasca in city or urban settings, drinking with malevolent or naïve shamans or “charlatan” “cowboy shamans,” and not following strict dietary and behavioral regimes in the period before drinking ayahuasca. Participants warn that incorrect practice may block or hinder the type of deep communing with nature that ayahuasca occasions and, in these instances, the purging and radical bodily process of ayahuasca trance experiences may represent processes of “unblocking” and preparing the drinker for a deeper and more authentic spiritual union with “energies” of the natural world. The practice is ultimately a work of self-cultivation. As Nick explains:

Working with aya requires a real desire to make change in your life. It isn't easy. You have to work at it, work with it, be willing to purge, to get messy, to get down on your knees in the dirt and let it all out, to be humble or humbled, and to re-join the world as part of nature instead of a dominator and consumer of nature.

Nick explains that “all the functions of society” prohibit him “from having a profound experience” of healing and rejoining “the world as part of nature.” In the practice of ayahuasca neoshamanism, the famous Cartesian and modern dichotomy of nature-society is not overcome, but inverted and radicalized by locating transcendent value in nature, not society. Society and the *rational mind* are instrumentalized by the “intelligent” and uncontrollable purgative powers of the sacred plant-spirit ayahuasca. By sharply inverting modern axiologies, the neoshamanic ayahuasca cosmology is grounded in a Euro-American cultural genealogy, while at the same time producing a form of resistance or alternate

modernity that challenges an emphasis on humanity and human artifice with perceptions and radical practices of nature made sacred. The personification of nature, as a total being, in the form of Gaia and Mother Nature is premised upon a modern dichotomy that involves what appears to be a Rousseauian-style valuation in which nature is placed in opposition to society.

Ayahuasca drinkers explain that ayahuasca offers an indispensable intervention into psychic crises and the “roots” of global political and ecological problems. The notion of a rupture between the drinker and nature – a kind of fall from Eden – is central to conceptions of this cultural crisis, and the healing that ayahuasca provides involves the production of tropes and themes whereby environmentalist ethics are raised to mythological postulates. The Australian ritual specialist, Daksha, echoed this affinity between ayahuasca healing and environmentalist ethics to me in a conversation in the hills of subtropical Australia:

The medicine, coming from the very jungles that we are decimating at such a rapid rate is a panacea for that very sickness that can do that, that can cause so much destruction to the mother, the planet. From the very place of what is being destroyed comes the plant which can heal that, and as a kid I always remember whenever I was near stinging nettles and got stung, just nearby there was a plant that had a milky thistle to stop the pain. So there is always an antidote near the problem. Ayahuasca has come out of the jungle into the Western psyche to invite the Western psyche back into the garden. Come back into Gaia, back into Eden, back into oneness, back into connectivity and symbiosis and synergy with the plants, with Mother Earth. So that’s what I feel she’s coming to the West to do.

(Daksha, personal communication, March, 2012)

Similarly, Matthew, a regular ayahuasca drinker, explained to me:

Aya is a sacred plant, which means it is a gift from a higher consciousness to aid humanity in our quest to awaken into the truth of what we are doing as a species, what we are doing to each other and to the planet. There is an urgency to this awakening due to our moral responsibility to future generations to not make sick and lifeless the planet they inherit.

The idea that ayahuasca can contribute substantially to the survival and evolution of the human species is a relatively general claim shared by Australian ayahuasca drinkers; these expectations are also shared by certain scientists of ayahuasca (McKenna, 2005; Grob, 2013). Furthermore, psychedelic advocates in Western societies may be associated with instilling an environmentalist consciousness in users (Brown, 2009).

The discourse that drinking ayahuasca is healing the human species and our devastating impacts on nature or the anthropocene appears to stem from, or be related to, the reproduction of certain forms of the phenomenology of ayahuasca trance experiences. A dominant theme of narrative accounts of ayahuasca trance in

Australia includes descriptions of sensory and existential merging with all of nature and the cosmos. For example, Kate, an Australian ayahuasca drinker, explained, “After purging I felt completely connected to all nature, every breath, movement, small or large felt like my own or like the ‘I’ did not exist anymore . . . I was feeling everything all at once in a soft, gently and perfect way.” There appears to be an affinity between ayahuasca trance experiences of “becoming everything” and the politics of “all nature,” “all life,” and “species healing” that drinkers articulate. Furthermore, the challenges that drinkers mount against anthropogenic assaults on the environment – which stem from conceptions of people embodying a psychic disconnection from nature – and the challenges of undergoing the grueling act of ayahuasca purging, involve perceptions of imbalance in nature and the body.

Drinkers integrate a sacred environmentalist ethos of ayahuasca healing into a complex array of descriptions of personal healing. Practices of drinking ayahuasca represent a key means of explaining and healing various forms of everyday and chronic illness, disease, and malaise for Australian ayahuasca drinkers. For example, Peter, a regular drinker, refers to ayahuasca as a healing modality that can unite humanity with nature and sustainable living practices, and that can heal a myriad of everyday illnesses. Concepts of global proportion – including fears of human “species extinction” – are described alongside descriptions of personal healing. I asked Peter, “Has ayahuasca healed anything for you, personally?” He responded as follows:

Depression; a non-functioning sense of smell; acute back pain; emotional trauma that has caused long-term negative effects on my interpersonal relationships; umm, general lethargy and a lack of ability to focus and achieve goals; heavy metal detoxification; digestive system imbalance; anal polyps. Ultimately, I feel the root cause of all sickness is simply separation from nature and the natural order. My feeling is that ayahuasca heals this perception of separation at a very fundamental level, and as a result has the ability to heal all of the expressions of this underlying sickness . . . As our species awakens from what Einstein referred to as the delusion of separateness, we increase our likelihood of averting human extinction and finding a way to live sustainably as a species on our only home. I’m not aware of any other healing modality [than ayahuasca] capable of addressing issues as important as us averting our own self-caused extinction.

Ayahuasca trance “journeys” through the realms of Gaia and Mother Nature represent a certain kind of flight from conditions of ecological sickness and spiritual poverty that drinkers associate with modern civilizations. They also provide, drinkers explain, the means of curing a myriad of biological illnesses and diseases. Through pervasive explanations, such as “all sickness is simply separation from nature,” an environmentalist ethics and a critique of urbanized socialization imbue the framework of an etiological system in which politics and everyday sickness are bound together.

The act of drinking ayahuasca and purging to “rejoin” nature may involve articulations that include critiques of social institutions and general cultural practices. The process of healing invisible levels of the psyche that inform a (dis)connection between the individual and nature may also be accompanied by critiques of institutions and cultural conditions that, drinkers explain, harm this connection and nature proper. For example, in the following transcript, Nick, an Australian nurse, critiques biomedicine and “Western society” in ways that pivot upon the healing powers of ayahuasca:

I find the problems in the medical system to be a reflection of the flaws in our Western society. A world of distractions, materialism, self-interest and ego indulgence does not make for healthy living or healthy systems. I believe it increases illness and mental health issues . . . the average person is so far removed from any element of living that could be described as normal or natural that most people do actually suffer from some form of mental disease, but that is the new normal, without actually knowing what freedom is, without actually having any interaction with nature, without ever experiencing a period of time away from unnatural light, without eating food that is not processed, without being away from electrical grids and flooded EMF and many other strange things we now take as normal.

I asked, “How does ayahuasca compare?” and Nick responded:

It feels like when I partake of aya in a ceremonial way, I am allowing a plant consciousness access to my physical and spiritual being. It feels ancient and wise, seems to have a feminine spirit, it has always acted kindly and patiently with me . . . It feels like the experience has been customized just for me by someone or something that has an intimate knowledge of who I am and what I need . . . Aya is the spirit of the earth in plant form, Mother Nature taking a form that can actively communicate and participate with humanity. Our individual and collective pain and confusion is personally felt by that spirit and is holding the whole planet back from the next step, from something amazing I am unable to even imagine yet.

(2012)

Critiques of urbanization, consumerism, biomedicine, and materialism may be read in the practice of ayahuasca healing and “rejoining nature” in the neoshamanic milieu, and these critical perspectives may also include demonization and pathologizations of capitalism. Paul, a regular Australian ayahuasca drinker, described that he once worked as an information technology consultant for a multinational mining company but, through drinking ayahuasca, he decided to change his occupation to hosting spiritual retreats. During a discussion we had about ayahuasca healing, Paul critiqued “corporations,” “governments,” and “schooling,” stating that they create and maintain a sick world in which people are asleep and

are mindless robots. In contrast to this “sick world,” he affirms types of sensory ayahuasca healing and an “awakened” sociality shared among ayahuasca drinkers. Paul explained to me:

Paul: We are all connected to the Earth. We are children of the planet. And, as you know, these are all part of a dangerous worldview that must be kept from the mainstream by keeping sacred shamanic medicines illegal. How else will we work like robots and keep a sick system that doesn’t serve the people running?

Alex: Why would the sick system want to conceal ayahuasca? What does ayahuasca do to this sickness?

Paul: The system doesn’t serve the interests of the people. It serves corporate interests. It has brainwashed us to believe that we need whatever the corporations market to us. The governments have become agents for the corporations and not the people; they’ve sold us out. They are like shepherds that have let the wolves into the lamb pen. They have molded us through a sub-standard education system to be obedient and to accept whatever irrational policies they impose . . . the current system works as long as people remain dull, complacent, and asleep to their true identity. Awakened people are the opposite of the mindless consumers that the corporations wish us to be.

Alex: Suffering with our hearts disconnected from our minds?

Paul: And journey-work [drinking ayahuasca] involves putting down the ego and accessing spirit through the feeling body. All our senses become enhanced. Smelling, taste, touch, etc. are much more awake when the ego is disabled. This is not hallucinogenic. It’s heightened perception of reality.

The deeply embodied and sensory experiences of ayahuasca trance provide Australian drinkers with a space wherein types of cultural critique – that include environmental and social ethics – are radically experienced. It is from these experiences that the particular critiques and ethics are articulated or reconstituted. While the ecstatic trance wisdom may differ from person to person, the *way of knowing* is consistent and is shown to encode forms of cultural critique in which urbanization, materialism, and consumer capitalism may be actively evaluated, purged, healed, and replaced with visions of an interconnected, sustainable, and sacred world associated with nature, Gaia, and ayahuasca plant-spirits.

By momentarily stepping outside society, the everyday, and regular consciousness, the everyday is thrown into view, reconstituted, and rearticulated. The liminal space of ayahuasca ceremonies is geographically oppositional to urban life and culturally oppositional to social and industrial factors that drinkers understand to be harming people and the natural world. The oppositional and critical stance of ayahuasca neoshamanism is valorized by utopic visions and trance experiences in which the entities Mother Nature and plant-spirits play central roles; these entities, drinkers explain, is the natural territory of Amazonian shamanism.

Ayahuasca neoshamanism and Amazonian shamanism

In February of 2012, I attended a series of ayahuasca ceremonies near a small town outside of Melbourne with 67 other people. Most of the participants were “experienced journeyers” and had been drinking ayahuasca for several years or more, yet there was an unusual level of anticipation among participants in the period shortly before the ceremony. People travelled across the continent and from as far as New Zealand to attend the event. Australia’s most esteemed and expensive ayahuasca ritual specialist – who spearheaded and cultivated ayahuasca circles across Australia during the turn of the millennia – organized to bring, for the first time, his teacher, the shaman Don Julio from the Peruvian Amazon, to conduct a series of ayahuasca ceremonies. It was a significant moment in the history of ayahuasca in Australia, and the retreats sold out during the first few days of being privately advertised. Australian ayahuasca drinkers tend to invest Amazonian ritual specialists with a degree of skill, authenticity, and spiritual power that typically eludes Australians.

Ayahuasca ceremonies in Australia are conducted throughout the night, culminating in a morning “sharing-round” ritual where participants publically articulate and narrate aspects of their personal trance experiences. Given the special occasion of having Don Julio conducting the ceremony, the sharing-round ritual was reconfigured into a question-and-answer time directed toward the Amazonian shaman. The questions posed through a translator to Don Julio in the sharing-round ritual near Melbourne, described here, represent a certain kind of distillation of forms of ayahuasca neoshamanism as cultural critique. A participant opened the discussion by asking the shaman, “Should we work with or oppose the current political and mainstream culture?” It was followed shortly after by another similar question, “Do you see corruption and toxicity finishing on earth?” The Peruvian shaman answered, “No, no, but this is why we are doing this work with ayahuasca, to heal these problems.” By conceptualizing an affinity between practices of ayahuasca healing and political and cultural issues, the shaman helped to authorize a relationship between the radical somatic acts of ayahuasca trance experiences and the forms of cultural critique expressed by the ayahuasca drinkers.

Conceptions of indigenous Amazonian shamanism that Australian ayahuasca drinkers articulate appear to follow in the lineage of a historical relationship between colonizer and colonized, the Old World and the New World, and the West and the East that extends back to at least the late eighteenth century, with the emergence of the “shaman” character in European theatre (Stuckrad, 2012). Stories and accounts of “shamans” first began to trickle into European intellectual and aristocratic circles during the early eighteenth century through Dutch and Russian colonial missionary accounts of the Siberian Tungas *saman* (Flaherty, 1992; Stuckrad, 2012). Historian of religion Kocku von Stuckrad (2012) analyzed depictions of “shamans” in the works of late eighteenth-century European Enlightenment rationalists, romanticists, poets, and playwrights. The author exposes an ambivalence in influential eighteenth-century attitudes toward shamanism that, he argues, reveals an “intrinsic tension of the European project of modernity” and the

dramas and contentions of rationalists and religionists (Stuckrad, 2012, p. 103). The Siberian shamans were understood in terms of notions linked more to European politics and history than to Tungas cultural life. Stuckrad (2012, p. 102), quoting Kohl (1981), explains how “What European observers ‘perceived in the foreign civilization was essentially determined by the limited horizon of experience of their own civilization.’” Interpreting late eighteenth-century European attitudes toward and constructions of shamanism, Stuckrad concludes that, in this context:

The shaman is a projection screen for European fantasies, fears, and desires. Lovers and haters of the irrational could fill in the details, whether these details were concerned with a re-invention of pre-Christian Greek philosophy – with Orpheus as a key figure – or with fantasies about the East.

(Stuckrad, 2012, p. 118)

Seemingly following a related historical lineage, particular fantasies about indigenous Amazonian shamanism have become important factors in the reinvention of ayahuasca shamanism in the recent emergence of ayahuasca tourism lodges in Amazonia (Labate & Cavnar, 2014), and in the practice of ayahuasca in Australia and other places outside Amazonia.

There are various structures of cosmology and cultural ideology among Amazonian peoples that contrast dramatically with the cultural backgrounds of Australian and Euro-American ayahuasca drinkers. The shapeshifting and predator-and-prey cosmologies of indigenous Amazonia (Riviere, 1994; Viveiros de Castro, 1998; Praet, 2009) – in which animals and natural beings may constitute “moral failings” in human sociality (London Sulkin, 2005, p. 13) and general political ambivalence (Fausto, 2004, p. 171), and that are couched in the broader “moral ambiguity” that characterizes the practice of healing/sorcery in Amazonian shamanism (Whitehead & Wright, 2004) – are no doubt difficult for Western ayahuasca drinkers to swallow. The emphasis on an Edenic cosmos, populated by the benevolent, holistic, and healing figures Gaia, Mother Nature, and Madre Ayahuasca, finds itself a cosmos apart from the notions of assault sorcery and moral ambiguity typical of Amazonian shamanism. Furthermore, as described by Labate (2014), aspects of the neoshamanic projections of indigenous Amazonian shamans have resulted in certain forms of confusion and dissonance in situations where ayahuasca “tourists” have observed indigenous ayahuasca shamans throwing trash into the forest and rivers, or buying expensive Western clothing or video games.

The anthropology of sorcery and dark shamanism in Amazonia (Whitehead & Wright, 2004) – in which practices of spiritual attack by malevolent shamans or nature spirits are described as “imperative for the decentering of power” (Peluso, 2009, p. 199) and for maintaining social harmony – contrasts dramatically with the etiological system of ayahuasca neoshamanism in Australia. Sorcery as a concept or practice is virtually nonexistent in Australian ayahuasca neoshamanism and tends not to hold political or social currency in the lives of drinkers. I became aware of only two accounts of sorcery accusations during fieldwork.

These were confidentially made by ritual specialists and were associated with rival ritual specialists. Resonating with Dobkin de Rios' (2008, p. 12) study of ayahuasca neoshamanism in Peru, in Australian ayahuasca practice "the etiology of psychological disorders and stress are clearly anchored within the individual's self (although influenced by his milieu), [and] not attributed to the evil-willing on the part of one's enemies or rivals." In contrast to Australian ayahuasca ritual specialists that hone abilities of "holding space" for drinkers to personally purge maladies and gain insights from personal visions, Amazonian Shipibo ayahuasca healers, as described by Brabec de Mori, are structurally both healers and sorcerers "because healing consists of neutralizing an enemy's action on the patient, and overthrowing this enemy by striking him with his own weapon" (2014, p. 218). The absence of sorcery in Australian ayahuasca practice reflects the characteristics of the Western self as bounded, autonomous, and responsible (Gearin, 2015b). Ayahuasca circles in Australia, I suggest, would struggle to gain popularity if they included dimensions of assault sorcery and predator/prey ideologies in the practice of drinking ayahuasca.

The practice of sorcery in Amazonia has come up against resistance by the global market of ayahuasca tourism in Peru, Ecuador, and elsewhere, revealing a cultural intersection characterized by contradictions. There is an inverted political dynamic that has been noted in the juxtaposition of Western ayahuasca tourists with indigenous Amazonian shamans. On the one hand, indigenous ayahuasca shamans have evaluated competencies of each other based upon the degree to which they are culturally and geographically proximal to urban or modern settings (Gow, 1994; Brabec de Mori, 2014; Shepard, 2014). On the other hand, Western "ayahuasca tourists" have tended to value ayahuasca shamans to the degree to which they are outside jungle cities, such as Iquitos and Pucallpa, and in remote parts of the jungle or nature (Saéz, 2014, p. xxi). When I told people in Australia that I was studying the use of ayahuasca in Australia, frequently they asked, "When are you planning on visiting the real thing in Amazonia?" Yet, the "real thing," Brabec de Mori (2014) explains, is typically not attractive to ayahuasca tourists, given the ideologies of sorcery that underlie conceptions of illness and healing in indigenous Amazonia.

Echoing the "mark of obsession" logic that Stuckrad illustrates in eighteenth-century European Enlightenment projections of Siberian shamans, Carlos Fausto (2004, p. 172) comments on Euro-American neoshamanic ayahuasca use and the absence of sorcery, moral ambiguities, and predator/prey ideologies in conceptions of well-being and social life. He writes, in parallel, "neoshamanism subjects others' thoughts to Western thinking and moral standards" (2004, p. 172). Western ayahuasca drinkers may expect indigenous Amazonian ayahuasca ritual specialists to be able to intervene upon or cure toxicities associated with the city, urbanization, and consumer capitalism, and these expectations involve the production of cultural difference in which, as Cesarino states, "indigenous shamanism becomes a metaphor for our [Western] dilemmas . . . rather than being understood according to that which is original and specific to itself" (Labate, 2013, p. 7). In the reimagining of ayahuasca use in neoshamanic milieus, indigenous ayahuasca

shamanism – perhaps the most remote geographical and cultural dimension of the Western imagination – has become a space for “orphaned citizens of transcendence” (Saéz, 2014, p. xxv) to rearticulate or reconstitute aspects of Western cultural ideology.

By crudely comparing the etiological and healing systems of ayahuasca neoshamanism with forms of Amazonian shamanism, the extent to which ayahuasca neoshamanism is characterized by forms of cultural critique and ideological liminality becomes apparent. Analyzing the absence of sorcery in Australian ayahuasca practice reveals an etiological system in which moral failings, sickness, malaise, and bad fortune are not associated with psychic attacks from sorcerers, animal spirits, neighbors, or kin – a hallmark of indigenous Amazonian shamanism (Whitehead & Wright, 2004) – but with an alienation from nature, with urbanization, materialism, consumer capitalism, and other cultural entities that become sites of critique. In the context of ayahuasca neoshamanism in Australia, plant-spirits and indigenous ayahuasca shamans are associated with nature, polarized in a way, in which broad aspects of society and culture become open to critique. When the Peruvian shaman Don Julio visited Australia, he reaffirmed perceptions of being connected to nature by telling a story to everyone about his history of training and initiation with indigenous shamans “deep, deep, deep in the jungle.” The apparent depth of relationship with nature is met by neoshamanic ayahuasca drinkers with a corresponding depth of expectation of abilities to heal and critique society.

The cultural dissonance, interaction, and reinvention emerging between the use of ayahuasca by Westerners and indigenous Amazonians is a burgeoning topic for anthropologists (Dobkin de Rios, 2008; Brabec de Mori, 2014; Labate & MacRae, 2010; Labate, 2014; Losonczy & Cappo, 2014). Anthropologists have studied the intersections between indigenous Amazonians and Westerners in the rubber-tapping industries (Taussig, 1987; Chaumeil, 1992; Gow, 1994), and in the nascent ayahuasca tourism lodges (Fotiou, 2014; Freedman, 2014; Peluso, 2014). Overshadowing research into these cultural intersections of hybridity, invention, and imagining appears to be subtle criticism of nonindigenous ayahuasca being inauthentic. For example, there is a telling comparison in the fact that anthropologists are quick to accuse New Age ayahuasca neoshamanism of being guilty of including romantic, exotic, and false perceptions of indigenous Amazonian shamanism; yet, in contexts where indigenous Amazonians have absorbed, for example, modern artifacts as spirits of psychic healing and sorcery, anthropologists do not account for this with charges that indigenous peoples are romanticizing or exoticizing “modern” societies. The indigenous practices of contacting the spirits of radios, syringes, sunglasses, and outboard motors during ayahuasca trance experiences, and for the purposes of healing, sorcery, and various forms of divination, have been described by anthropologists as forms of absorption whereby novel *things* are incorporated into pre-existing epistemologies or techniques of knowing (Chaumeil, 1992; Townsley, 1993). Anthropologists, I argue, have overlooked the ways in which the absorption, reimagining, and appropriation of indigenous ayahuasca practices by Western neoshamanic practitioners has resulted in

novel epistemological formulations that bring into focus different social and cultural realities of the everyday plight of Western ayahuasca drinkers.

What I would like to highlight is that the promise of an archaic, natural wisdom of Gaia that Western ayahuasca drinkers often mistakenly associate with indigenous Amazonian life includes forms of individual personal healing and cultural critique that foreground *real* issues that constitute the lives of the drinkers.⁴ Australian ayahuasca trance accounts are arguably best understood not as a depository of a static system of (“false”) knowledge, but as representing a practice whereby *techniques of knowing* – that draw upon portraits of indigenous Amazonian shamanism – are put to work on realities that constitute the everyday ethical and cultural contexts of Australian drinkers. The “Other,” however falsely portrayed, is absorbed in ways that create space or “hold space” (to use the language of neoshamanic ayahuasca ritual practice) for personal and cultural issues to be healed, known, reevaluated, and reconstituted.

Moral and healing pedagogies of Gaia and trance experiences

As noted, the phenomenology of ayahuasca trance experiences may include grueling emotional, sensorial, and cognitive challenges, and vomiting, dilated fears, extreme sweating, visions of haunting imagery, and other afflictive experiences. It may also include blissful, pleasurable, and lucid experiences, and visions of beautiful, graceful, and benevolent spirits. The famous psychedelic dictum “To fall in hell or sore angelic, just take a pinch of psychedelic,” penned by psychiatrist Humphrey Osmond, crudely encapsulates the sublime spectrum of the phenomenology of ayahuasca trance experiences.

In Australia, ayahuasca trance experiences are shaped by mythological narratives of Gaia and Mother Nature that index forms of cultural critique. There is a moral and affective pedagogy in mythological characterizations of Gaia that appears to subtly teach drinkers ways of approaching the phenomenology of drinking ayahuasca. A central piece of advice that Australian ayahuasca ritual specialists give drinkers is, when confronted with distressful, difficult, and challenging ayahuasca visions, to “just let go” and “surrender,” because “resistance is persistence,” and fear tends to only “feed” the afflictive spirits in visions. “Letting go” may bring “ego death,” or the annihilation of the self, which is described as an important process of healing, gaining self-wisdom, and undergoing positive personal transformation.

The process of personal transformation is why people are undergoing the challenging psychic gymnastics of ayahuasca trance. It is “the work,” drinkers explain, and the work may take the form of an embodied allegory of cultural imagining whereby mythological descriptions of evolutionary ecological and political crises mirror descriptions of the psychic personal crisis that the individual may undergo during an ayahuasca trance experience. The ritual specialist Daksha explained to ayahuasca author and advocate Rak Razam the history of Mother Nature:

It’s not just you and I going through transformation. It’s the earth, Gaia, who is going through an amazing rebirth. It’s as big as puberty . . . the planet has

grown up to a certain point and then, you know what it was like when you go through puberty and you get pimples and boobs and you rebel against authority and all kinds of emotional stuff happens. Well you look at the planet, it's in an emotional cloud, you know, Muslims against the Jews, fucking Christians against whomever they're against and political factions and all this emotional weather going on around the planet. You look at the volcanoes going off, they are like the pimples of Gaia and it's all got to be expressed. It's all got to come out. But when you're in the middle of it, like puberty, it's pretty intense; you don't know what's going. Gaia, the planet, we are going through a transition that is as big as puberty. It's one big global initiation. Fear of being annihilated is an essential part of aboriginal initiations. And this is what's happening on the planet. This is a good thing. The feeling of possible annihilation is what is needed for transformation.

(Razam, 2009)

Mythological descriptions of Gaia are emergent in different forms in the visions that drinkers articulate and share with each other. Daksha's characterization above appears to represent a form of neoshamanic *media* in which psychic crises of the earth, nature, and global politics are transmitted not only into the drinkers' imagination, but also potentially into their ayahuasca visions. There is an affective pedagogy in the neoshamanic mythologies of a sentient earth undergoing ecological and political crises, being "annihilated" during a process of "planetary puberty" and discharging through volcanoes, that tacitly teach drinkers to "let go," purge, discharge, and allow themselves to undergo various forms of catharsis from which "personal transformation" can occur. The predicament of Gaia doubles as a map for "navigating" the ayahuasca trance-realms. A global political and ecological crisis is described in ways that covertly inform drinkers how they *should* approach their ayahuasca trance experience and healing practice.

The encounter with near-annihilation, or seemingly actual annihilation, during ayahuasca trance experiences is naturally followed by a reflective period in which the forces opposing annihilation or death are in the foreground. These are typically described as feelings of communion and connection with nature, the self, and significant others. An intersection or affinity between processes of the mythologies of Gaia, the phenomenology of the trance experiences, and notions of interpersonal healing and communion is enshrined into bodily processes and bodily states. The topic of "interpersonal healing" is too large and will have to wait for another publication. But, if we incorporate the theoretical consequences of it, aspects of the social, the political, the body, and the natural global environment may be characterized by drinkers in terms of darkness, toxicity, and imbalance that the medicine ayahuasca intervenes upon. The complex dimensions of ayahuasca healing that explicitly involve immediate social relations are mediated by the same bodily processes and states that drinkers describe as healing the most chronic issue of all: the individual's separation from nature.

Final thoughts

In the context of ayahuasca neoshamanism in Australia, the occasioning of radically augmented and ecstatic sensory perceptions, along with vomiting, sweating, and purging, mark the potent moments in which Gaia and ayahuasca plant-spirits enter the sensorium with more force and character than usual, or with more *presence* than in ordinary consciousness. These are also the moments that may heal distress related to interpersonal and social life, and that inform types of cultural critique related to urbanization, materialism, consumer capitalism, and environmental destruction, alongside cultural ideals of a sustainable, sacred, and healthy planet and human species. Bruno Latour notes that neopagan constructions of Gaia and Mother Nature have been criticized for being nostalgic, romantic, and a reinvention of an exotic “cult” that never existed (2013). Ayahuasca neoshamanism is undoubtedly vulnerable to similar criticisms, and these, I argue, risk deflating and silencing the social and cultural issues that appear to underpin the motivations of people in Australia and other Western societies who seek healing and wisdom from ayahuasca. Idealized conceptions of Amazonian shamanism couple with conceptions of nature as interconnected, archaic, and transcendent, and provide the visions by which neoshamanic drinkers rearticulate and reconstitute critical perspectives of modern life. With and through portraits of Amazonian shamanism and portraits of a sentient natural world, Australian ayahuasca drinkers “reflect self-critically on [their] own ways” and “disrupt common sense . . . taken-for-granted assumptions” (Marcus & Fischer, 1986, p. 1) related to global politics, various cultural institutions, and industrial and individual practices of environmental destruction.

The radical differences between anthropological portraits of “traditional” Amazonian shamanism and ayahuasca neoshamanic portraits of Amazonian shamanism present important evidence for the extent to which Amazonian ayahuasca shamans are radically reinventing themselves in the tourism circuit of Amazonia and in Australia, Europe, North America, and elsewhere. New forms of cultural difference are being produced in the “culturally, socially, and economically interconnected and interdependent spaces” (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992, p. 14) that constitute the tourist circuits of ayahuasca use in Amazonia and the neoshamanic circuits around the globe. These new forms of difference – which include conceptions of indigenous Amazonians being connected or conflated with nature, Gaia, and “intelligent,” “healing” powers of Mother Nature – represent important grounds by which Western ayahuasca drinkers articulate critiques of global and local cultural milieus. Furthermore, the new forms of difference situate the practice in a larger and older lineage of neoshamanism properly linked to Western social groups in the 1960s (Atkinson, 1992, p. 322).

Australian ayahuasca drinkers are immersed in everyday Australian cultural and political life and may be found working in schools, restaurants, universities, gyms, hotels, tattoo parlors, or any other area and sector of society. The emergence of political and cultural critiques in ayahuasca neoshamanic trance accounts does not fit typical everyday processes of cultural and political practice in Australian society,

and thus the question is raised of whether ayahuasca neoshamanism represents a vacuous simulacrum of politics and not a pragmatic form of political action. However, by reducing neoshamanic ayahuasca drinking to dominant institutions and norms of Australian society, ayahuasca neoshamanism is reduced to terms, rules, and practices that fail to properly accommodate the reasons for why people in Australia drink ayahuasca. The problems that ayahuasca drinkers in Australia are seeking healing and solace from are problems that drinkers characterize as being beyond the capacity of “mainstream” social and cultural institutions to deal with or heal. Thus, ayahuasca neoshamanism represents a “radical political imaginary” (Hage, 2012) and a radical cultural imaginary that appears in the cracks of modernity with particular prescriptions of well-being that link to forms of neoshamanic idealism. The practice and visions of ayahuasca neoshamanism involve forms of empowerment and well-being that drinkers seek to receive not from regular channels of Australian society, nor from society at all, but from nature as a sacred ally.

Notes

- 1 PhD in anthropology from the University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia. Email: akgearin@gmail.com
- 2 I undertook fieldwork during 2011–2014 across eastern Australia. Fieldwork included attending 30 ayahuasca ceremonies and other gatherings, interviewing, and generally exploring Australian ayahuasca “loose-knit communities of vision seekers” (Tramacchi, 2009, p. 7). Australian ayahuasca practice closely resembles and is connected with global currents of ayahuasca neoshamanism. Given the illegality of ayahuasca use in Australia, informants’ names have been converted to pseudonyms.
- 3 The social and cultural upheavals of the counterculture included ideological oppositions to core Western values of “progress, materialism, and rationality” (Znamenski, 2007, p. x) and a fascination with spiritualities linked to pre-Christian traditions, the occult, Eastern religions, shamanism, and various other denominations of the sacred (Alexander, 2003, p. 206).
- 4 There is also a small number of Australian ayahuasca facilitators and drinkers who specifically distance themselves from indigenous Amazonian practices and perceive them as primitive, backward, and unevolved.

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