

Last year in January, my boyfriend Pete and I took a trip to Mexico. After some days in Mexico City, we spontaneously decided to take a bus to Tepotzotlán, a small town about an hour away. Some years before, on our first trip together to Mexico, we had visited this town with a couple of friends, Annette and Axel. Pete had known Axel for a very long time, and he and Annette had been together for a couple of years. She had been staying in Tepotzotlán for a while as part of a writing residency called Under the Volcano, named after the Malcolm Lowry novel which was written during his stay in the region decades earlier.

That trip was magical, and we fell completely in love with this special place. So, on our return trip, we woke up in the morning, checked out of the hotel, and decided to go to the bus station. Soon we were on our way, and after an hour's ride and a melodramatic telenovela playing on the overhead screens, we arrived and set our stuff down at a little hotel in the town center.

As we set out, walking from our hotel towards the market square, I turned to Pete and exclaimed joyfully, "It's so wonderful here! The only thing missing is Axel and Annette!" We walked about a hundred meters more, and suddenly, standing right before us was Annette!

We were all completely in shock, laughing, smiling, and hugging, in utter disbelief of our luck to all be reunited here. After our excited greetings, we took a walk together down to a small grove of trees with a little bridge over a stream, and chatted about how we'd all been spending

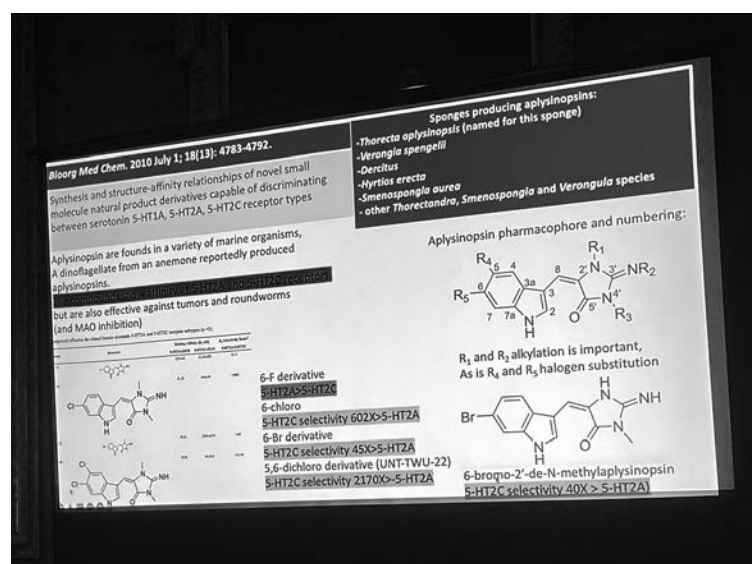
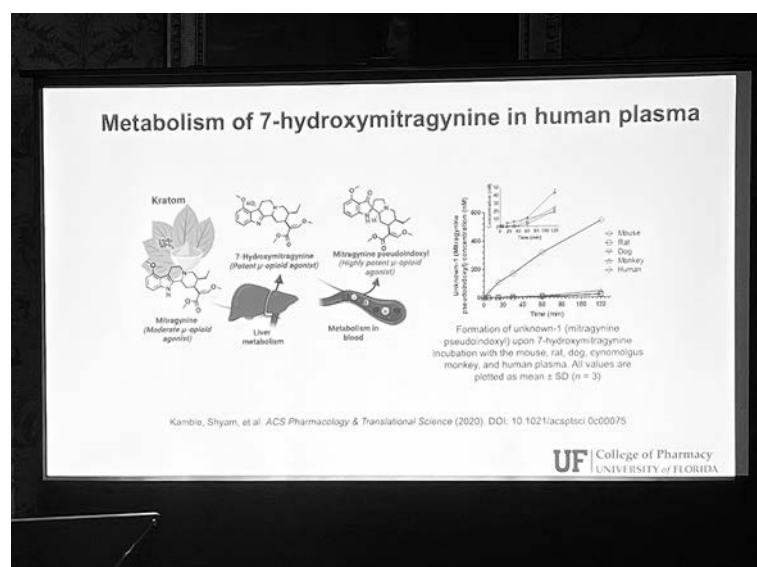
the last few years. Annette told us that she was now working in the field of psychedelic research and was organizing an interdisciplinary conference centered around this topic. I listened with rapt attention, full of curiosity about everything she was describing to us. At that time, I had just finished a long and difficult project, and was about to embark on an even bigger challenge. Taking psychedelics had been an important catalyst for changes in my life, and I had taken them every few years when I felt I was at a crossroads psychologically. Now I was at another such point. There was a certain feeling of destiny to this meeting, and I was excited to see where it might lead. We agreed to meet the next day for lunch.

That day, we talked more about Annette's other occupations. It seemed that she was involved in an elite echelon of psychedelia.

And while we listened to stories and descriptions of the kinds of events she was participating in, I asked if I might be able to attend the conference she was organizing that spring. She immediately accepted, and was truly excited about the prospect of us joining her there.

Months went by and my days were filled with exhibitions and projects, but Annette and I kept in contact about the conference. She sent me the program of the weeklong event, titled ESPD55, the acronym for Ethnobotanical Search for Psychoactive Drugs. A few names were familiar to me, and Pete also did a little bit of background research and watched a few interviews with some of the speakers. By the time May came around, Pete and I were very excited to make the journey there. We took the train to London, where we would meet the other participants and catch a bus all together to the conference, which was somewhere in the British countryside.

The meeting place was an art gallery in the middle of London, and when we arrived, everyone's suitcases were in the first room, and there was a lunch spread. The first people we met were an older couple—an ethnobotany professor, Mark Merlin, and his wife who had flown in all the way from Hawaii. Their exhaustion didn't impact their friendliness though, and we soon discovered that we had studied at the same university in California, and he had even grown up in the same neighborhood where I had lived!







We also met a former student of his, Michael Coe, also living in Hawaii, who would be presenting for the first time at the conference and was very excited and nervous to share his research. He would frequently express gratitude for being there, and was generally brimming with positivity. I think we were both a bit overwhelmed by his sunny disposition; it was a bit of a shock for us, having come from Berlin.

We went outside for a while and chatted with a slightly more skeptical person, Brian Pace, whose down-to-earth attitude made us feel a little more comfortable. He introduced himself as a reporter for a journal called Psymposia, which he described as an industry watchdog. Pete and I were so naïve and new to this scene that we said we were surprised

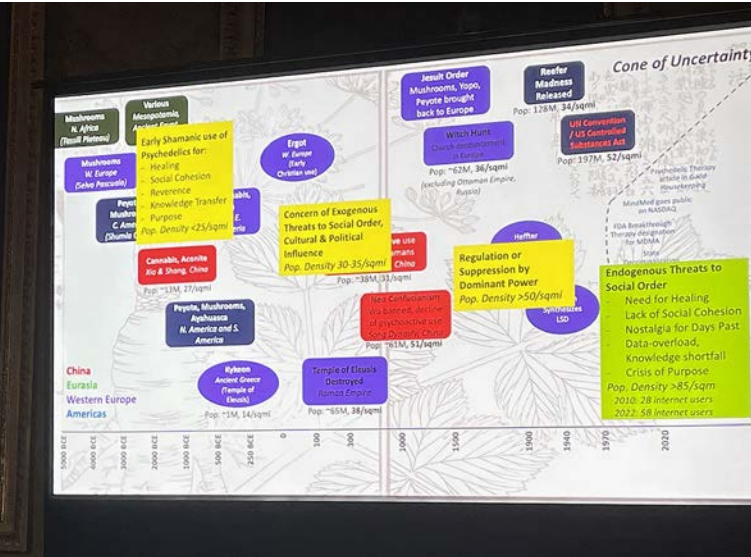
that there was already an established industry surrounding psychedelics, not just an underground market. He paraphrased some recent articles they had published about psychedelics being co-opted by the right wing in America, which seemed completely contradictory to me at that time.

Soon it was time to board our bus, and after about a two or three hour drive, we arrived at a historic stately home, surrounded by vast manicured gardens. Here the bus was met by the hosts, a young couple who had inherited and restored this enormous property. We wandered the grounds a bit, looked at an ancient Lebanese cedar tree planted within a huge lush lawn, and then joined a small reception with all the participants. One of the guests had brought a special gift for the hosts: some vines from his garden of Banisteriopsis Caapi and leaves of Psychotria Viridis, the two main components of Ayahuasca. With jubilant glee, our host, Michael, and Pete and I rushed to the greenhouse to put the plants into soil. As we hurriedly worked in the vegetable greenhouse under fading light, I imagined this could be an episode of the perennial BBC classic *Gardener's World*.

The next morning the conference began with an opening speech by Dennis McKenna, whose academy was hosting the entire event. McKenna himself is an ethnobotanist, and brother of the '60s counterculture figure Terence McKenna, and was a personal friend and mentor to most of the people attending. He introduced the keynote speaker, Monica Gagliano. She described a behavioral conditioning experiment she made on pea plants. However, the results of the experiment were inconclusive, which led her to state that the plants have a deeper consciousness of their own that humans can't truly understand. Her lecture sparked a vigorous debate among the audience regarding the scientific method in general, where things got rather heated between the more spiritually-directed intellectuals and the more standard institutional specialists such as the mycologists in the room. While the hard scientists criticized her lack of verifiable results, she insisted on the importance of listening to the plants directly. Several times over the next few days, when people discussed the concept of plant teachers, or that plants were speaking to them, I understood it in a metaphorical sense, but they corrected me and others that they were speaking literally.

The next speaker, Chris McCurdy, a pharmacologist from the University of Florida, came onstage and thanked Dr. Gagliano, and said that his research was similar in some ways to hers. He continued that when he started working on *Mitragyna Speciosa*, that the plant found him. He had been studying naturally occurring analgesics with the National Institute on Drug Abuse and was first concentrating on *Salvia Divinorum* until this plant came to the forefront of his thinking. He described how it is used traditionally in southeast Asia as a tea called Kratom, and that the combination of active compounds—rather than each one in isolation—is responsible for its effectiveness as both a stimulant and painkiller. In pharmacology, the standard procedure to study any plant medicine is to isolate its alkaloids and purify them, and test which brain receptors are activated by these compounds.

Dr. McCurdy described how, one day in the shower, he realized that it made no sense to do this when the tea was a “whole symphony orchestra, so why take each instrument out?” He then described the deep research he and his team were doing together with botanists at the university, to understand the mysteries of this fascinating plant. The lecture became more and more technical, with all sorts of molecular formulas, but what stuck with me was that it is used widely



already by heroin and methamphetamine addicts to lessen their withdrawal symptoms when trying to reduce their use of those drugs, even though Kratom's mechanism of action works differently in the brain and is nowhere near as dangerous or addictive in itself. Most importantly, it does not cause respiratory depression, which is the main cause of death among opiate users. He proceeded to describe the various experiments they are doing to investigate its potential to make a medication for treating opioid use disorder. I was absolutely riveted by this talk, and the depth of Dr. McCurdy's research.

Over the next few days, many of the talks came back to ideas about fundamental methodology. Whereas modern pharmacology is premised on isolating particular molecules, specifically alkaloids, traditional medicine uses whole plants and combinations of plants to produce its effects. On the third day of the conference, Elaine Elisabetsky, an ethnopharmacologist working in Brazil, gave a presentation that addressed these issues directly. She talked about all of the pitfalls in her discipline and the difficulties of field research. All of the knowledge in ethnopharmacology or ethnobotany comes from listening to indigenous doctors, but her colleagues were not being attentive enough. They often didn't understand the relationship of trust between these village doctors and their patients, or listen to their diagnoses with enough care. She gave the example of a doctor she had interviewed in the Amazon, who described an illness caused by possession of a female water spirit, who dragged the patient down, made them toss and turn

and foam at the mouth. In the worldview of this culture, these symptoms were associations with rivers and would be embodied by a spiritual antecedent. In the western view, these would be descriptive of a grand-mal seizure, which means that the vegetal preparation used to treat this condition would be a likely treatment for epilepsy.

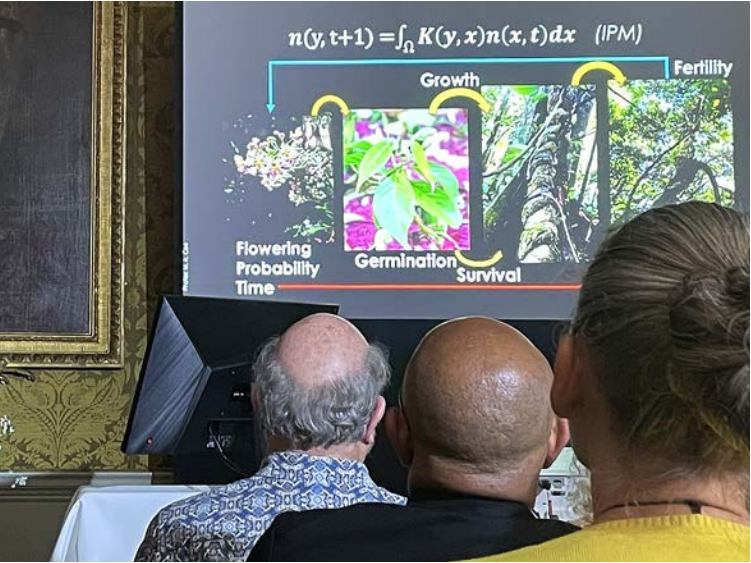
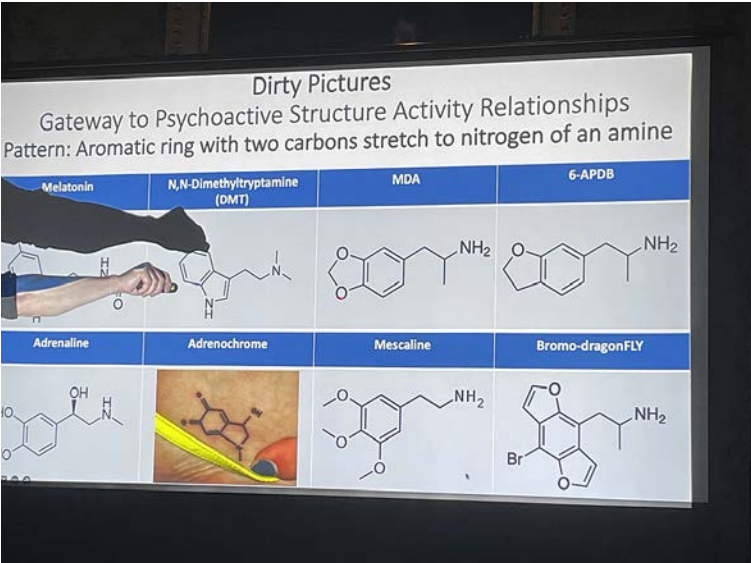
Elisabetsky described how most medicine is developed “bench to bed,” meaning that only after extensive testing would it be administered to a patient. Traditional medicine goes “bed to bench”—its efficacy is already known, and it's analyzed in the laboratory to unpack its mysteries. And many of these medicinal plants abound in mysteries.

After Dr. McCurdy, Michael Coe was the next speaker, and he gave a presentation of his field survey of *Banisteriopsis Caapi*

within a few sites in the Amazon rainforest. The locations of these plants are carefully guarded, because the plant is in danger of extinction due to overharvesting. The worldwide popularity of Ayahuasca has significantly diminished the varieties of these plants in the wild. And while strains of these plants may look identical to a western scientist, to indigenous people they are considered as completely different varieties, each with their own properties known from experience.

So many of the lectures were fundamentally about this exact dilemma—trying to bridge different orders of experience to understand the changes in perception these plants are able to bring about. In all likelihood, Pete and I were the only people in the room who hadn't actually drank Ayahuasca before. And to everyone else, they were trying to describe, in the frameworks and language from their various disciplines, the ineffable and the sublime. Some gave deeply personal accounts of their experiences taking psychedelics, of cleaving their ego away from their perception of the world, and how this came to aid all their other life pursuits. One self-described “visionary scientist,” Bruce Damer, gave an account of how a lifetime of psychic journeying had culminated in his development of an astrobiological theory of how life had developed from cellular fragments in the warm and murky fluids of the young Earth.

That same day, Paul Stamets, the famous old-head mycologist in the room, had given a passionate lecture about his lifetime of research on psilocybin. He concluded his talk with an emotional plea—that he believes psilocybin makes nicer and better people. This came after he showed sociological studies proving that psychedelic users had decreased violent behavior and that hallucinogens were effective in treating opioid use disorder, which he tearfully said had caused a crisis in his own family. These studies were elaborated on by Michelle St. Pierre, a PhD student in sociology writing her dissertation on psychedelic use





among prisoners, and David Nutt, an esteemed psychologist working on clinical trials with entheogens and psychedelics for alcohol and drug use disorders.

In general, everyone speaking at the conference held these substances in the highest respect and felt they had tremendous healing potential. Rather than being an agent of escapism, they allowed people to confront and work through their problems. What concerned most people was the legislation of these substances, or the co-opting of them by the wrong actors, that would corrupt their power. But it's already too late, and many of the speakers talked about the destruction of the rainforest, overharvesting of traditional medicinal plants, and the loss of indigenous ways of knowledge, as well as the use of psychoactive plants in societally harmful ways. Some worried about the pitfalls of legalization, or medicalization, and one speaker made an elaborate chart of a sort of idealized psychedelic landscape, the best and worst outcomes that could happen from the course things are taking now.

The most interesting moments of the conference happened when there were unplanned correspondences between various lectures. On the first day, Jonathan Lu gave a talk speculating about the use of psychoactive plants and fungi in China. He gave a sweeping cultural history of the country, laden with grand theories about cultural psychology, not just in China but also in comparison to simultaneous movements around the world. He also introduced some historical figures important to traditional Chinese medicine. Finally, he gave an account of some mystery boletes which are frequently consumed in Sichuan province in the form of a soup.

The next evening, Colin Domnauer and Bryn Dentinger, two mycologists from the University of Utah, reported on these very same mystery boletes. They followed up on reports from China of poisonings from psychoactive mushrooms, where the patients had reported seeing many *tiny people*. This elicited many jokes from the audience, but nonetheless as the lecture continued it was clear that Jonathan Lu and the mycologists needed to compare notes. During the question and answer section, the famed mycologist Giuliana Furci, who had traveled to the conference with her colleague Merlin Sheldrake, pressed the scientists onstage, and gradually introduced a new conundrum about the taxonomy of fungi in general. Because, while other types of organisms evolve over generations, or vertically within a *family tree*, fungi are so difficult to classify because these changes can occur horizontally in a taxonomic chart—meaning, within the very same generation. Therefore, classifying fungi becomes an elusive exercise, when one single organism can change species within its own lifetime.

This problem of classification in some ways overtook the whole conference, and was the same thing that made it generative. With so many experts from different fields all looking centrally at one topic, that topic invariably changed itself, as well as changing the perceptions of all of the participants (hopefully for a long time). For me, being engaged in these conversations felt adjacent to a kind of high—thoughts of limitless potentiality, of being transported to vastly different places and states of mind, all of these things happened to me during those few days.

It would be nice to imagine that people could also evolve into different species within one lifetime, and that this conference would bring about deeper changes in consciousness in everyone there. At the same time, people's egos were still very much present and directing their behavior, no matter how much they had tried to kill those egos with Ayahuasca. I'm still left with many questions, doubts, and skepticism, as much as I do believe that these substances can help lead to many personal insights. So, even though I haven't actually become a *psychonaut* since then, it was wonderful to bask in their glow and have a contact high for those few days.