PSYCHONAUTICA: RHETORICAL PATTERNS WITHIN SELF-REPORTED
PSYCHEDELIC NARRATIVES

by

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ABSTRACT

JOSEPH AMEZQUITA. *Psychonautica*: Rhetorical Patterns Within Self-Reported Psychedelic Narratives. (Under the direction of DR. ERIC HOENES DEL PINAL)

An analysis was completed of the rhetorical and discursive patterns found in the narratives of altered states of consciousness on the website Erowid.org, a repository of information about psychoactive plants, chemicals, and related topics, as well as the host of an "Experience Report Vault" which collects first-person accounts of altered states of consciousness. This vault is the home of thousands of "trip reports", or narratives of individuals' experiences while using psychoactive substances. While the authors of these narratives do not belong to any one discernible religious tradition or institution, there are certain recurring patterns in how they present their shift in consciousness that are reminiscent of those described by shamans and mystics, and which suggest an emergent religion-like mythos. I argue that the individuals in this community, regardless of their cultural locations, ascribe to the *Psychonautica* discourse of an all-encompassing nature that is reflected in the presence and image that Erowid.org conveys. The results of this research suggests that there is a religious community that has coalesced around and within the Erowid Experience Vault. This community is evident in their use of Psychonautica discourse. Psychonautica discourse is composed of a variety of other discourses, but most notably in this sample group are the New Age, Counterculture, RSM and RSM Experience discourses, with Western, Eastern, Clinical, and Therapeutic discourses existing, but at much less rates. Also shown in these results, the RSM Experience discourse that appeared contained many of, if not all, the features constituting a RSM experience. Furthermore, in light of each of these points - a group existing, their

use of a multitude of discourses (in particular RSM *and* Secular discourses, and of those, New Age and Counterculture discourses), psychedelic substance use with an inclination to particular motives and outcomes, and inclinations to RSM discourse - it seems that these results suggest a positive correlation between this group and what scholars typically conceive of as a shamanic group.

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INTRODUCTION

> I was both drunk and tripping. On the one hand, the world was a woozy mess; on the other hand, I was seeing it with a razor-edge precision and in the most vibrant colors. When I closed my eyes, I saw muticolored[sic] three-dimensional triangles rotating in deep space...I didn't like DPT. The DPT realm seemed icy, annihilating. I told my friends over and over again, "This is evil. This is not to be explored. This is the wrong doorway." In retrospect, I don't think I was exploring the DPT realm on that trip. I think, instead, the DPT realm was beginning its exploration of me.
> -Daniel Pinchbeck, *Breaking Open the Head: A Psychedelic Journey into the Heart of Contemporary Shamanism*

As one may be able to tell, Daniel Pinchbeck, a prominent American author known in the psychedelic community, was experiencing something dramatic. One could further argue that he was experiencing an altered state of consciousness which was borderline religious, spiritual and/or mystical.[1] Pinchbeck refers to three-dimensional triangles rotating in deep space, alternate realms which are sentient, and *evil*. This sort of discourse[2] brings me to the central focus of my research—namely, an analysis of the rhetorical and discursive patterns found in the narratives of altered states of consciousness on the website Erowid.org. Erowid.org is a repository of information about psychoactive plants, chemicals, and related topics, as well as the host of an "Experience Report Vault" which collects first-person accounts of altered states of consciousness similar to Pinchbeck's narrative. This vault, which is only one of the many on-line archives hosted by Erowid, is the home of thousands of "trip reports", or narratives of individuals' experiences while using psychoactive substances. While the authors of these narratives do not belong to any one discernible religious tradition or institution, there are

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[1] I will be using the acronym RSM to refer to religious, spiritual, and/or mystical.
[2] Jørgensen, Marianne W., and Louise J. Phillips. *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*. (Sage, 2002); Discourse is "a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)."

certain recurring patterns in how they present their shift in consciousness that are reminiscent of those described by shamans and mystics, and which suggest an emergent religion-like mythos.

Erowid's vast repository of over 30,000 narrative reports of psychoactive drug-use[3], the sheer richness of their evocative and colorful language, and the scenes painted by that language have sparked many questions in my investigations of this "Experience Vault". When I first began to read narratives in the vault I couldn't help but notice the religious nature of the reports and the pluralism that was practiced when choosing which discourses the rhetorical items were pulled from. This led me to question if Erowid.org either explicitly or implicitly promotes any particular discourse through the media content they host. How do they construct this discourse? How is it reflected in the narratives of psychedelic experiences hosted on their web-domain? I wondered if any significant patterns existed among the narratives, and if so, which discourse predominated throughout the texts. Were the patterns dependent upon any variables? In other words, did demographics suggest a correlation with which discourse appeared more in the reports? Could such patterns suggest a coherent religious-like group emerging through Erowid's "Experience Vault" contributors? And if so, what might this say for the broader academic study of religion and religious experience?

In order to elucidate the discourse or discourses that Erowid may be promoting with their image and web presence, either explicitly portrayed or latent in manner, I will examine Erowid's hosted media content, such as their collection of visionary art,

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[3] They also include reports occasioned by non-psychoactive methods, such as yoga, meditation, breathing-techniques, etc., but my focus here will be on narratives attributed to the use of psychoactive substances.

character biographies, and an array of different types of literature. To discern common discourse which may be religiously oriented, effectively suggesting a coherent community, I will analyze self-reported narratives of altered states of consciousness occasioned by psychedelic substance-use outside of established, sanctioned religious traditions and practices, hosted by Erowid as well. I am interested in uncovering what discourses Erowid may be promoting, and mapping any patterns which may emerge across the psychedelic narratives, establishing a link between the two if it exists. I argue that the individuals in this community, regardless of their cultural locations, ascribe to the *Psychonautica* discourse of an all-encompassing nature that is reflected in the presence and image that Erowid.org conveys.

I will argue that although Erowid attempts to present itself as neutrally-oriented in regards to any discourse (religious or otherwise), their media content reflects many types of discourse. Erowid does not exactly construct its own discourse; rather, it incorporates elements from a number of different sources in a sort of bricolage that is reflected by the psychedelic narratives it hosts. I argue that this discourse, reminiscent of a New Age discourse, incorporates Eastern, Western, and indigenous traditions' religious discourses, alongside elements of clinical psychology and the drug counterculture to effectively create a new discourse which we can call *Psychonautica. Psychonaut* is a term used to describe "religious substance users and is built from the Greek roots *psycho*, meaning mind, and *naut*, meaning sailor." Andrew Monteith, a religious studies scholar specializing in American religion and the American Drug War, argues that Psychonaut refers to a religious group based on the work of Terence McKenna, an ethnobotanist and

advocate for psychedelic use.[4] It is with this particular group that I argue the

Psychonautica discourse is inclusive to both secular and religious discourse patterns.

Psychonautica discourse particularly includes New Age *and* Counterculture discourse.

I further argue that the rhetorical patterns which emerge across the narratives are

indeed religiously-oriented and can be rooted in both Western and Eastern religious

discourses, as well as a "New Age" discourse and more secular-based discourses such as

the counterculture-drug and clinical-psychology varieties. Such patterns take form as

tropes, phrases, specific words, and symbols. For example, the narratives include talk of

nirvana, reincarnation, and the presence of God and the Devil, which draw on the

language of specific religious traditions, alongside notions such as the *subconscious,*

trips, and *transformations*, which are more reminiscent of secular discourses. The

rhetorical patterns we can note seem to be influenced by demographic variables such as

the individual's *likely* socio-cultural and economic positions. Furthermore, the first-

person, autobiographical narrative genre seems to contain more rhetorical patterns of a

religious nature than other styles such as didactic narration like one would find in a

Medical Use or Preparation/Recipe report, as will be described below. Finally, I argue

that the presence of a wide-ranging religiously oriented discourse-pool within the

narratives suggests this community is engaging in religiously-oriented practices of

psychedelic substance-use that spans across Western, Eastern, and New Age traditions.

At this point, it seems logical to suggest that the group which emerges may be a

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[4] Monteith, Andrew. "'The Words of McKenna': Healing, Political Critique, and the Evolution of Psychonaut Religion Since the 1960s Counterculture." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84, no. 4 (December 2016), 1081–1109, 1082; For further discussion on Terence McKenna and the Psychonaut religion, see the Literature Review below.

manifestation of the Psychonaut religion due to the prevalence of a Psychonautica discourse composed of significant amounts of Counterculture and New Age discourse, and not either a secular or religious discourse, exclusively. Indeed, as Michel Foucault asserts, discourse divides people into objectified subjects, and establishes boundaries around what can be done or said.[5] This division-which-creates, I suggest, is seen by the division of religious experience narratives which use Psychonautica discourse and ones that don't, and subsequently the particular tropes they have to choose from and are allowed to employ in the creation of their narratives and identities; yet, given the wide array of discourse traditions present in Psychonautica discourse, this restriction is loosely acknowledged, if at all.

Moreover, the narratives produced by Erowid.org's user base share many similarities with academic descriptions of shamanism/neoshamanism,[6] warranting closer attention to these stories of altered consciousness by scholars of religion. I draw these connections between the Erowid community and shamanism with reason, and will elaborate further below; however, central to shamanism is the altered state of

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[5] Foucault, Michel, and Alan Sheridan. *The Birth of the Clinic: an Archaeology of Medical Perception.* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1973).

[6] DuBois, Thomas A. "Trends in Contemporary Research on Shamanism." *Numen* 58, no. 1 (2011): 100-128, 114; Von Stuckrad, K. "Reenchanting Nature: Modern Western Shamanism and Nineteenth-Century Thought." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 70, no. 4 (2002): 771–800; Von Stuckrad, Kocku. *Schamanismus und Esoterik: kultur-und wissenschaftsgeschichtliche Betrachtungen.* (Peeters, 2003); Znamenski, Andrei A. *The Beauty of the Primitive: Shamanism and the Western Imagination.* (OUP USA, 2007); Neoshamanism describes "various attempts to revive or recreate shamanic traditions in the lives of contemporary Westerners." DuBois proposes that "the line between 'traditional shamanism' and 'neoshamanism' is not always clear, either in the experience of neoshamanist practitioners or in the analysis of observers." Von Stuckrad and Znamenski further suggest that both shamanism and neoshamanism can be seen as direct outgrowths of Western scholarly conceptions of primitive religion, nature, and spirituality.

consciousness which provides sociobiological advantages such as integrating human consciousness and increased "socioemotional and self-functions of the paleomammalian brain."[7] Moreover, Arthur Saniotis and Maciej Henneberg posit that the goal of shamanic psychoactive substance use is the attainment of altered states of consciousness as a part of their religious-based experiences.[8] These two points of shamanism provide my initial link between shamanism and the Erowid Experience Vault community. While psychonauts are decidedly not shamans in a traditional sense of being religious specialists within an established indigenous tradition, their narratives nonetheless may provide insight into the experiential dimensions of altered states of consciousness in religious experience.

The unique phenomena of religiously-oriented discourse which is used to create the virtual-space for Erowid's community to discuss and share their psychedelic substance use consists of three aspects which have relationships with one another: religious/spiritual/mystical experiences[9] linked to altered states of consciousness; shamanism and its relation to religion and RSM experiences; psychedelic substances as they relate to RSM experiences and shamanism. The literature review will aim to culminate into the interplay between these three phenomena. Additionally, I will briefly address the historical setting and context of psychedelic use in the US/global North, the

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[7] Winkelman, Michael. "Shamanism as Neurotheology and Evolutionary Psychology." *American Behavioral Scientist* 45, no. 12 (2002): 1875-1887.

[8] Saniotis, Arthur, and Maciej Henneberg. "Craving for Drugs is a Consequence of Evolution." *Anthropos H*. 2 (2012): 571-578.

[9] Arguably, some experiences that we could deem religious would not qualify here. While I could attempt to enumerate the many types and varieties which would not be covered in this research, I feel it would be best to simply say, the experiences covered here are of a dramatic, intense, and potentially life-altering nature. They include interactions with entities and beings, visitations to alternate realities and worlds, and an often unmistakable feeling which the experiencer categorizes as religious/spiritual/mystical.

history of drug narratives, and last, Terence McKenna and the inception of the Psychonaut religion.

Following the literature review and approaches, I will examine Erowid.org and its hosted media. However, Erowid's web-domain contains a vast amount of items, and as such, I will focus my analysis on the content which is overtly religious or spiritual in nature. After completing the examination of Erowid's discourse, I will turn my attention to the narratives and establish the methods of my analysis, including how the narratives were chosen, what variables will be used to develop categories of analysis, and how the rhetoric will be examined. Afterwards, I will present excerpts of select reports, as well as the results of the rhetorical analysis and begin to discuss the implications of their results. I will conclude with a discussion of how the narratives' rhetoric and Erowid's discourse are related, and the implications that may be suggested; in particular, the coherence of a community that is engaging in religious or religious-like activities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars have debated how to conceptualize religious experience since at least the late 18th and early 19th centuries with the most notable scholar to do so being Friedrich Schleiermacher, who is often referred to as the father of modern theology.[10] In his work *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers,* Schleiermacher attempts to turn away from the "progressive" view of Enlightenment thinking, and equates religion with *feeling*, "It is to have life and to know life in immediate feeling, only as such an existence in the Infinite and Eternal...true religion is sense and taste for the Infinite."[11] This *feeling* is essential to the development of academic thinking about religious experience. *Feeling* is at the heart of the narrative approach to the study of religious experience, since the experiencer is recording their subjective *feelings* of the experience as a crucial component of the other imaginable aspects of those events. The inner subjective feeling of the experience is also up for debate as to whether actual "having-experienced" such a feeling is required to theorize, or even comment upon it. In other words, in order to understand religious experience, regardless of its origin, must we "go native" and have a religious experience to further the discussion? Scholars following Schleiermacher, such as William James and Rudolf Otto, held the position that one must have their own religious experience to truly know what it is, because to do otherwise is to rely on language which

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[10] Schmidt, Leigh Eric. "The Making of Modern 'Mysticism.'" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 2 (June 2003): 273-302, 275.

[11] Schleiermacher, Friedrich Daniel Ernst, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*. Translation from the 3rd German edition of 1824 by John Oman (1958). (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994.)

can only go so far towards helping us understand religious experiences.[12] Nonetheless, this remains a problem for scholarly studies aiming to produce understandings of religious experience from a more objective perspective.

With this research I have chosen to approach religion and religious experience both rhetorically and social scientifically. Indeed, it seems to me that the best method to elucidate the information these experiences hold for us in the academic study of religion is to focus on the personal narratives of the experiencer. Of course, this sort of approach is not revolutionary, since as early as 1902 William James in his signature work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* advocated for the personal and subjective over the impersonal and objective of a strict scientific approach.[13] In response to the surge of scientific reasoning via the establishment of psychology, James considers that the more an experience is abstracted from its narration, the more fragmented or decomposed it becomes - "authentic religious experience and naturalistic explanations of religion were[are] not incompatible."[14] More recently Anne Taves and David Yamane have also stressed the importance of the narrative when considering religious experience. Taves believes that narratives give us access to the "experience-in-practice" of an individual or community and not simply what doctrine says people should be doing.[15] Yamane argues that we cannot study "experiencing" as such, and that we can only study linguistic representations of these events. He also says that phenomenological descriptions are of

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[12] Schmidt, Leigh Eric. "The Making of Modern 'Mysticism,'" 275.
[13] James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. (Auckland: The Floating Press, 1902)*,* 170.
[14] Taves, Ann, and Taves, Ann. *Fits, Trances, & Visions : Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James*. (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1999), 348, 360.
[15] *Ibid.*, 360.

little use for academics and lead to no real new insights due to their attention to *meaning*.[16] Instead, narratives are a key source to uncovering how experiencers make these events meaningful through the discourse they use to convey them. Yamane and Polzer suggest that patterns may emerge within the discourses of narrative that implicate the occurrence of a religious experience.[17] They call this model the "cultural-linguistic view," and conceptualize religion along the lines of Clifford Geertz's definition of religion, in which religion provides a system of symbols which act as models of and models for transcendent realities which in turn facilitate religious experiences.[18] In other words, the traditions that the experiencers live in provide the symbols which not only shape the contents of the experience and therefore the discourse used to communicate the event, but also serve as expressive tools which help occasion a religious experience as opposed to simply a dramatic, non-religious experience.

Following the work of these scholars, my research takes a middle approach so that the individual's own words of their unique subjective experience are being used as raw data to describe the patterns of meaning that emerge. By favoring the personal and subjective over the impersonal and objective of scientific data, such as biological phenomenon, I aim to understand how Erowid's users find meaning in altered states of consciousness. These narrative reports are then being interpreted not only social scientifically using statistical data of Erowid's demographics, but also rhetorically; their

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[16] Yamane, David. "Narrative and Religious Experience." *Sociology of Religion* 61, no. 2 (July 1, 2000): 171-189, 173.
[17] Yamane, David, Polzer, Megan, and Yamane, David. "Ways of Seeing Ecstasy in Modern Society: Experiential-Expressive and Cultural-Linguistic Views." *Sociology of Religion* 55, no. 1 (April 1, 1994): 1-25, 15.
[18] *Ibid.,* 9.

"experience-in-practice" is being translated using statistical information based upon rhetorical items of their "cultural-linguistic view".

Benjamin Feinberg, in his ethnographic work with the Mazatec people of Oaxaca, Mexico, famous for their *curanderos*, or shamans, proposes a pictorial view of how metaculture is made.[19] By discussing metacultural discourses we can begin to envision culture, with religion and religious experience being constituents of this *culture*, as a "process of managing the interconnections among differently construed groups, or metaculture."[20] These groups of metacultural discourses are co-creators of their own and one another's identities along complex border spaces where identity expression is not uniform. In Feinberg's study of the Mazatecs, a distinct group, are the outsiders, and with my research Erowid and the narrative authors are each considered distinct groups.[21] This *pictorial view* of Feinberg's can be used to push the need for personal narratives, as it essentially conceptualizes metaculture and identities as being created and negotiated at the boundaries of communities, as opposed to a central core that is inherent within, such as is found in a typical linear style of viewing culture.[22] The linear way of conceptualizing culture and history, according to Feinberg and Volosinov, is the most familiar way of representing the world. Within the linear view power relations are obscured through the imposition of hard borders, as well as naturalized in those relations via a use of culture, i.e. "markers of poverty can be read as tradition, exploitation as an

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[19] Feinberg, Benjamin, and Feinberg, Benjamin. *The Devil's Book of Culture: History, Mushrooms, and Caves in Southern Mexico.* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 16.
[20] *Ibid.,* 11.
[21] *Ibid.,* 16.
[22] *Ibid.,* 18.

immutable way of life handed down from our ancestors", etc.[23] The linear view also uses

a top-down vantage point of power, easily utilized by those in authoritative power to

define and create categorical distinctions which are then applied to those not in power;

difference is allowed and incorporated as long as those differences can be objectified,

categorized, and used to further the agenda of the linear style of reporting metaculture. In

other words, difference is accepted if it is allowed to be defined by the linear style, as

well.

Opposing this view is the pictorial style of reporting culture. Here, the boundaries

between different conceptualized groups are vague and unclear.

> Borders become hard places of heightened importance. Instead of mere lines or
> walls separating distinct groups whose identity and meaning are *seen* as inhering
> essentially within (from the cultural core, or the past, or another deep, inward
> part), the borders become complex places where identities are generated.[24]

Erowid creates an identity, through their hosted web-content, which is also co-created by

the community that emerges within the experience-vault, while this community engages

in self- and other-identity creation through their narratives and rhetoric used, as well.

This sort of view stresses the agency of the reporting voice, as opposed to a typical

authoritative voice of the scholar found in the linear view.

Adopting a narrative-based approach to studying religious experience, however,

opens the question of epistemology. Are they mediated or unmediated, partially or

wholly, by the experiencer's tradition? These questions in turn pose further inquiries of

universality and pluralism: are these narrations essentially describing the same

phenomena across personal traditions of the experiencers, or does each personal tradition

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[23] *Ibid.,* 14.
[24] *Ibid.,* 16, original emphasis.

facilitate its own *type* of experience. In other words, do my personal history and views, while influencing the experience through mediation or not, create *I-influenced experiences* similar to *Christian-influenced religious experiences* or *neo-Shamanic-influenced ecstasy*? Is there a universal thing that is "religious experience", and does it acquire properties and values from traditions? Or, alternately, do my history and views create a unique phenomenon of *I-experience* similar to the distinctions between unique *Christian Mysticism* or *neo-Shamanic ecstasy*? Are there no universal experiences, but rather only specifically *Christian Mystical* experiences, *neo-Shamanic trances* and *altered states of consciousness*, etc.?

While finding yet more answers to these questions is beyond the scope of this research, they seem to predominate the literature of religious experience. One answer to these questions is that the experiences being narrated are always mediated and interpreted by the individual via their sociocultural factors they have learned in life, such as a religious tradition they are part of. One proponent of such a view is Wayne Proudfoot. Being mediated, "religious experience, emotion, action, belief, and practice must each be identified under a description that is available to and can plausibly be ascribed to the subject of that experience, the holder of that belief, or the agent."[25] In other words, because the experience is mediated, it must be able to be communicated because essentially it is a product of the experiencer's mind, and any claim to ineffability is merely a protective strategy, barring any questions of whether or not the experience was truly of a supernatural origin. As such, Proudfoot actually opposes the use of subjective narratives and advocates for a strict description of the phenomenology of religious

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[25] Proudfoot, Waryne. *Religious Experience.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 234.

experience. Other scholars hold similar views regarding the question of mediation, such as David Yamane and Joseph Baker. While Yamane pushes for a narrative approach, Baker sees a need for quantitative sociological data that can suggest the probability of religious experiences, something he concludes to be rooted in "stakes in conformity," i.e. one's socioeconomic situation is indicative of if they will report and/or have a religious experience.[26] However, both of these scholars see sociohistorical factors as mediating and shaping all experience and its interpretation.

The alternative viewpoint to this is that there is a possibility that people have unmediated experiences that are shared across traditions with a common core of aspects that are universal across religious traditions. Peter Moore lays out four theoretically distinct elements of mystical accounts: retrospective interpretation, reflexive interpretation, incorporated interpretation, and raw experience.[27] Furthermore, the analysis must include considerations of doctrine, practices, and institutions which are an influence on the experience itself, as well as the way it has been recollected and described.[28] These influences should be considered in regards to interpretation, as well as selection of details written in the accounts. Indeed, Moore goes into deeper analysis concerning the complex and interdependent relationship between nature and culture, natural and supernatural, biological and social; the social influences not only affect subsequent interpretation after the experience, it also affects how the actual experience is

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[26] Baker, Joseph O. "The Variety of Religious Experiences." *Review of Religious Research* 51, no. 1 (September 1, 2009): 39-54, 42.
[27] Moore, Peter. "Mystical Experience, Mystical Doctrine, Mystical Technique." In *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis.* Ed. By Steven T. Katz. (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1978)*,* 108-109.
[28] *Ibid.,* 109.

perceived.[29] However, while Moore acknowledges the role of interpretation and mediation, almost to the point of seemingly arguing for complete mediation of all experience, the aspect to note here is that he allows for the existence of *raw experience*.

Sallie B. King also addresses the epistemological models used in the interpretation of religious experiences. Her work, she says, has two purposes. The first is to critique the pluralist conception of mysticism and the epistemology which it is developed from, arguing that the model is inadequate and in turn reduces mysticism to mere doctrine. King's second purpose is to suggest an alternative model for the study of mysticism.[30] The assertion that specific doctrinal mystical experiences (e.g. Buddhist *nirvana* or Jewish *devekuth*) are not the same is problematic in that it assumes we lack the evidence to establish similarities, all the while assuming we *do* have evidence to establish differences.[31] However, acknowledging the limitations of studying inner experience, neither of these assumptions can be supported.

King provides a convincing example of how mystical experiences can indeed be unmediated by using coffee and music. She argues that no amount of verbal-culture tradition can actually convey what coffee tastes like or what a particular musical piece sounds like; rather, one must actually experience each first-hand to know them.[32] As an alternative, King suggests using a Buddhist-phenomenological epistemological model. This model posits that prior to reflection, all experience is "primitive," with no distinction between the subjective and objective components of the experience.[33] The reflection we

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[29] *Ibid.,* 110-112, 114-117.
[30] King, Sallie B. "Two Epistemological Models for the Interpretation of Mysticism." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56, no. 2 (July 1, 1988): 257-279, 257.
[31] *Ibid.,* 263.
[32] *Ibid.,* 266-267.
[33] *Ibid.,* 271.

assign to experience, "this division is a product of reflective analysis and is in no way part of experience as immediately, or 'primitively,' given in the present."[34] This notion hinges on the idea that,

> we are reflective beings and do look back on our experiences in order to understand it, we are deeply in the habit of construing our experiences as an experience of a subject perceiving or conceiving an object... we ordinarily live our lives as spectators of our experience, rather than in the immediately given presence of primitive experience.[35]

This conception of how we encounter experiences can explain why mystical reports vary between theistic and monistic accounts;[36] the individual cannot readily discern subject and object in their experience of primitive "consciousness-of". Further complications arise in discernment when accounting for the self-transformative nature of mystical experience, as well.[37] This leaves King with a provisional definition of mystical experience "as a form of primitive experience (a form of experience prior to the division of experience into subject and object components) in which there is radical transformation of the experiential self sense, and radical axiological and existential grounding."[38]

Just as a consensus on the epistemological approaches to adopt with religious experience is still under debate, so too with the relationship it holds with psychedelic substances. As early as 1951, Mircea Eliade proposed that shamanism is the technique of

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[34] *Ibid.*

[35] *Ibid.,* 272.

[36] In this context, *theistic* is a conception of a god, such as the Christian god, or multiple gods, as seen in the Hindu collection of groups. Monistic, or monism, is seen as there being only one ultimate source of *being*, which can not only be indicative of a singular god, but that the self is synonymous with that singular god as well.

[37] *Ibid.,* 274.

[38] *Ibid.,* 275.

ecstasy.[39] Yet, as seems to be central to the discussion with shamanism, many scholars feel that only particular people and cultural groups qualify as "authentic" shamans. The shaman, for Eliade, is the "great specialist in the human soul; he alone 'sees' it, for he knows its 'form' and its destiny."[40] Despite seeming to be inclusive to anyone that can demonstrate skill in the techniques of ecstasy, Eliade only considers indigenous groups to be authentic, and his view on psychedelics, or as he called them, "narcotic intoxicants," is not forgiving, either. Indeed, Eliade sees these substances as "indicative of the decadence of a technique of ecstasy or of its extension to 'lower' peoples or social groups."[41]

> Nearly three decades later, Michael J. Harner argued that,
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> undoubtedly one of the major reasons that anthropologists for so long underestimated the importance of hallucinogenic substances in shamanism and religious experience was that very few had partaken themselves of the native psychotropic material (other than peyote) or had undergone the resulting subjective experiences so critical, perhaps paradoxically, to an empirical understanding of their meaning to the peoples they studied.[42]

As this quote shows, Harner fully recognizes the importance of the subjective experience of psychedelic use when considering religious experience, as well as its place in shamanism. He questions whether or not such substances have helped to innovate beliefs such as the reality of a supernatural world or the existence of a disembodied soul or souls, both of which are prevalent in psychedelic and religious experience narratives.[43]

While Harner advocates for a participant role in substance use to fully understand their anthropological and religious relevance, he doesn't consider neoshamanism, or the

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[39] Eliade, Mircea. *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy.* Second paperback edition. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 4.
[40] *Ibid.,* 8.
[41] *Ibid.,* 477.
[42] Harner, Michael J. *Hallucinogens and Shamanism.* (London: Oxford University Press, 1982), vii.
[43] *Ibid.,* xiv.

adoption of shamanic practices by non-indigenous peoples. However, Robert J. Wallis and Alexander S. Dawson do. Wallis aims to acknowledge the impact "neo-Shamanisms" have on the socio-politics of ecstasy by, "exploring neo-shamans with reference to their origins, practices, representations of the past in the present, engagements with archaeological monuments, and interactions with indigenous peoples."[44] Wallis does this with "experiential anthropology", as he is both an academic scholar and neo-Shaman. Here we have a reminder of Harner's position that partaking in indigenous practices is necessary to fully understanding a people's subjective experiences. This approach of "going native", while still rather taboo[45] in the field of anthropology, is key to understanding neo-Shamanisms. Going native leads to "autoarchaeology", "in which self-reflexivity considering and taking into account our own socio-political locations and motivations is crucial to understanding the past and presentations of it in the present."[46] Wallis's appeal to narratives, while not in the exact same sense of narrative as this research's usage (i.e. an individual's narrative of history for the former, as opposed to a narration of an experience for the latter) is there. Embracing a multitude of interpretative narratives that add to the ongoing debate rather than only bolstering academic standpoints that are privileged over other, alternative positions, Wallis argues, is key.[47] In other words, allowing the voice of the author/actor to contribute to the debate in question and not privileging academic or other traditional forms of authority, allows a more nuanced

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[44] Wallis, Robert J. *Shamans/neo-Shamans: Ecstasy, Alternative Archaeologies, and Contemporary Pagans.* (London; Routledge, 2003), xiii.
[45] Going native has historically been advocated against in anthropology due to concerns of the phenomena cultivating biases and risking the loss of objectivity of the research in favor of subjective standpoints by the now insider-*and*-outsider researcher.
[46] *Ibid.,* xiv.
[47] *Ibid.,* 11-12.

and subjective approach to religious experience through narratives. However, with the case of Wallis, such monolithic standpoints of the authoritative voice, instead of the agency of the individual's narrative, has allowed four main charges to be made against neo-Shamanism. These charges are: 1) decontextualizing and universalizing of 'shamanisms'; 2) psychologizing and individualizing 'shamanisms'; 3) reproducing and reifying cultural primitivism; and 4) romanticizing indigenous shamanisms.[48] Wallis refutes these charges in saying "when the nuances of indigenous-neo-shamanic interaction in a global setting are taken into account, some differences between Shamanisms and neo-Shamanisms start to fade."[49] Therefore the promotion of "situational pragmatism" in which the fruits of the shamanism in question are examined is essential. These fruits, particular to Wallis as opposed to the fruits James speaks of in *Varieties*, are self-transformation, community benefits, and social and political critique; all of which can be located in the narratives of focus.[50]

Alexander Dawson also discusses shamanism, but more so in the light of peyote use and the inherent racism which is tied to its legislation throughout history. Since Europeans first encountered peyote via the Inquisition, three affective responses have dominated the conception of peyote: disgust, enchantment, and curiosity.[51] It is with these three affects that systems in both Mexico and the U.S. have been developed wherein peyote can be used legally, but only for indigenous bodies.[52] Dawson argues for the agency of indigenous actors in their interactions with outsiders; the shaman seems to

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[48] *Ibid.,* 49.
[49] *Ibid.,* 228.
[50] *Ibid.*
[51] Dawson, Alexander S. *The Peyote Effect: from the Inquisition to the War on Drugs.* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2019), 7.
[52] *Ibid.,* 8.

be more of a liminal character than one of stasis. They are "connected to insider and outside worlds, their status dependent in part on their capacity to translate each for the other. This is why shamanism is not a practice that easily moves between authentic and inauthentic or pure and impure. It is instead relational, built around transactions…"[53] It is with this that Dawson, similar to Wallis, contemplates whether or not there is validity in "white shamans" appropriating anything at all. A double-standard is effectively called out, wherein we (Westerners) are more comfortable with outsiders crossing into the "universal (whiteness)," as opposed to the opposite: white shamans.[54]

> Whites, by contrast, as representatives of universality, of modernity, commit acts of betrayal when they seek to enter those spaces reserved for the specificity of indigeneity. They are heretics, charlatans, hippies, frauds. Worse still, they have appropriated something from the other.[55]

This literature review has shown how the topic of religious experience has been debated among academia with William James in 1902, and then later in the mid-20th century and to the present. Among this literature questions of phenomenology and epistemology are of the main concerns with these experiences, as well as their relationships with psychedelics. Including shamanism into the discussion introduces questions concerning authenticity of who can be a shaman, as well as who can use psychedelics in a shamanic context. While this review, nor this research, will attempt to answer these questions, I hope that the theoretical foundations with which I draw from will be apparent. Furthermore, among the archives of Erowid one will find the works of where interest has intersected at religious/spiritual/mystical experience, shamanism, and psychedelics. The narratives of psychedelic-use provide a rich repository of primary

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[53] *Ibid.,* 162.
[54] *Ibid.,* 168.
[55] *Ibid.,* 174.

source data to approach the study of religious experience. The individual, "amateur" quality to these experiences suggest links to neo-shamanism as well.

Current interest has culminated at this triple-intersection with an emphasis on the "experience-in-practice" available through the narrative modality; exactly what the Experience Vaults of Erowid provide. Furthermore, I wish to follow the notion that we can only create and understand experience through language, and language can only be created and understood through experience; in other words, as Leon Schlamm puts it, "experience and language are inseparable, each epistemologically contaminated by the other."[56] Now I turn my attention to the more contemporary topics of New Age religion, drug narratives, and the Psychonaut religion.

Since at least 2002 most Western religion groups have integrated therapeutic notions and it is most evident among New Age spiritual groups; however, as Thomas DuBois reminds us, shamanism and neoshamanism is commonly merged with a wider self-help or personal realization framework in North America.[57] As I will show later, the inclusion of a therapeutic discourse in both shamanism and Psychonautica discourse supports the argument that the community which emerges in Erowid's Experience Vault may be the coalescing of individuals that could identify as psychonauts and belong to a Psychonaut religious group.

More than just a fad, James Tucker asserts that New Age religion(s) is a manifestation of the contemporary therapeutic culture.[58] However, New Age is much

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[56] Schlamm, Leon. "Numinous Experience and Religious Language." *Religious Studies* 28, no. 4 (December 1, 1992): 533–551, 533.
[57] DuBois. "Trends in Contemporary Research on Shamanism," 115.
[58] Tucker, James. "New Age Religion and the Cult of the Self." *Society* 39, no. 2 (January 2002): 46–51.

more than the contemporary therapeutic culture. Wade Roof asserts that Boomers'

(individuals born between 1946-1964) search for meaningful spiritual styles altered the

religious landscape of America in the 1990s through four patterns which are also

prevalent in New Age ideologies: "the reemergence of spirituality, religious and cultural

pluralism, multilayered belief and practice, and transformed selves."[59] I suggest this

transformation of selves can be correlated to the therapeutic culture of today that emerges

within the Psychonautica discourse. Furthermore, as Roof reminds us, Boomers are the

largest demographic in the 1990s, so understanding contemporary America isn't possible

without considering Boomers' values, beliefs, and opinions.[60]

Boomers moved freely across religious boundaries, combining elements from a

multitude of traditions to create their own individual meaning system. The values of

individualism and choice expresses itself in "dynamic and fluid religious styles."[61] A key

concept that Boomers' ushered into American religion is privatized religion. Religious

identities become "less ascribed, and more of a voluntary, subjective, and achieved

phenomenon. America's religious pluralism feeds into this 'new voluntarism' by

demonopolizing any single version as *the* religious truth and by making a wide variety of

religious options open to everyone."[62]

A second key concept is multilayered spirituality. Not only are multiple

associations with vastly different groups relatively common, but layers of experiential

meaning are added, such as Vegetarian- or Neo- designation. "Religious identity, for

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[59] Roof, Wade Clark. *A Generation of Seekers: the Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation.* 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper SanFrancisco, 1993), 1.
[60] *Ibid.,* 2.
[61] *Ibid.,* 5.
[62] *Ibid.,* 195.

them [Boomers], is rooted less in a self-contained doctrinal heritage or inherited family faith than in their own experience."[63] This is likely so for their offspring, as well, most of whom would fit the Erowid demographic (see below). Furthermore, as of the 1990s, Boomers have experimented more with syncretistic faiths than any other generation.[64] This, as well, may be said about the following generation seen in Erowid's Experience Vaults. The Boomer generation also saw a shift from theological language to the self-affirmation language - "I feel", "I believe" - a trend which is suggestive of the blending of the therapeutic discourse into the later development of Psychonautica discourse in the 21st century.[65]

Third, and last of the key concepts that Boomers' ushered into society is that of congregations. Roof sees congregations as having their own culture of "a set of symbols, values, and meanings that distinguishes it from others." Not only do congregations tend to share similar religious backgrounds, polity, and social contexts, differing congregations "differ in the stories they tell about life...Each congregation has its own 'style,' its own set of encoded meanings about sacred realities."[66] We can see these patterned stories and unique style of meanings emerge within the Erowid Experience Vault using the inclusive discourse of Psychonautica.

Although I refer to New Age spiritual groups, and the category of "New Age" used for the discourse designations may seemingly imply that "New Age" denotes a conceptualization of a distinct New Age tradition comparable to Catholicism or even a Psychonaut group as conceived by Andrew Monteith below. Indeed, Steven Sutcliffe

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[63] *Ibid.,* 201.
[64] *Ibid.,* 202.
[65] *Ibid.,* 203.
[66] *Ibid.,* 204.

argues that initially upon conception, the "New Age" category, instead of being an actual

group or "movement", functioned instead "as an apocalyptic emblem and later as a more

idiomatic humanistic signifier."[67] The "encoded semantics" of the early New Age

practitioners were sufficiently inherited by the Boomer generation. As previously

mentioned in regards to generational inheritance of religious propensities between

Boomers and the following generation (Erowid's likely demographic, explained below),

the Boomer population adopted and transformed this inheritance into a "popular idiom in

contemporary spirituality."[68]

     Essentially Sutcliffe is arguing for a reconceptualization from a "movement", or

grouping, to a "lexical term utilised and interpreted within a series of social

collectivities."[69] As such, he recommends New Age refer to and be a focus on "small

group practice, auto/biographical identity construction and popular discourse on

'spirituality', largely but not exclusively in Anglo-Americanised cultures."[70] In this light,

"New Age" resists denoting a particular tradition, and instead points to "popular

religion".[71] Later, in response to Heelas's conception of "spiritualities of life",[72] and in

defense of "New Age" simply being popular religion, Sutcliffe argues that the "New

Age" phenomena consists of

> A mosaic of cultural practices and beliefs that are exchanged amongst
> practitioners with differing degrees of intensity and at various social and cultural

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[67] Sutcliffe, Steven. "Category Formation and the History of 'New Age'." *Culture and Religion* 4, no. 1 (2003): 5-29, 8.

[68] *Ibid.,* 21.

[69] *Ibid.,* 18.

[70] *Ibid.,* 19.

[71] Maldonado, Luis. "Popular Religion: Its Dimensions, Levels and Types." *Concilium* 186, no. 4 (1986): 3-11. Maldonado sees popular religion as the quest for more simple, more direct, and more profitable relationships with the divine.

[72] Heelas, Paul. *Spiritualities of Life: New Age Romanticism and Consumptive Capitalism.* (John Wiley & Sons, 2009). Read: "New Age".

levels across boundaries of separate 'world religions' as well as across the boundaries of 'religious' and 'secular' as dichotomised formations.[73]

This conceptualization of not only a conglomerate of phenomena and dispositions which surface among Roof and Tucker, but as nuanced lexical designations used in everyday life with particular social and cultural purposes that transcends "religious" and "secular" boundaries is best how "New Age" is conceived of categorically within this thesis. "New Age" does indeed contain discourse that could be designated as both "religious" and "secular". However, as will be stated again below in more detail, I categorize "New Age" discourse as religious, and extract the secular rhetorical items, reassigning them to categorizes that I suggest more adequately encompass the contextual notions within these reports.

The practice of telling stories about drug use and narrating past psychedelic experiences has its own history as well. Susan Zieger suggests that through the "artificially stimulated mental conquests" of the nineteenth-century American authors engaged the imperial tropes of travel, exploration, and conquest that shaped that century's conceptualizations of geographic space. American autobiographical drug experiences appropriated this British model of narrative as well as their imperial model, bringing a seemingly contradictory pairing of "vigor and obscure spiritual introspection", or in other words, the traditionally considered masculine qualities with its female counterpart.[74]

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[73] Sutcliffe, Steven J. "On the Metaphysics of 'Life' and the Production of 'Religion' in *Spiritualities of Life: New Age Romanticism and Consumptive Capitalism." Culture and Religion* 12, no. 4 (December 1, 2011): 479–488, 485.

[74] Zieger, Susan. "Pioneers of Inner Space: Drug Autobiography and Manifest Destiny." *PMLA. Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 122, no. 5 (October 1, 2007): 1531–1547, 1531-1532.

While these autobiographies were considered to be absent of politics and esoteric in nature, Zieger suggests that the "emergent genre engage[s] the relations among subjectivity, imperialism, and embodied and geographic space" within American literary and cultural studies.[75] Zieger further asserts that because of its idealized nature into an idiosyncratic, esoteric, and ineffable knowledge, "hallucinogenic knowledge ultimately gestures mainly to the social power of its subjects."[76]

While Zieger's research is mainly based on drug autobiographies from the 19th century until presumably the very beginning of the 21st century, I would suggest that the narratives of Erowid's Experience Vault could be consistent with her argument. With the dominant demographic of Erowid being young, moderately educated Americans (outlined below), it wouldn't be too assumptive to conclude that the exploration tropes found within the narratives stem from such a sociohistorical context as the British imperial model and/or American manifest destiny model. It further raises questions concerning the integrity of the narratives if the demographic were to shift. Would such tropes and events be as prevalent if the demographic reflected a different majority? These are interesting questions; however, such inquiry is outside the scope of this research. Moreover, such research would likely involve mastery of a foreign language, culture, and all such discursive elements such as tropes, figures of speech, etc.

The current concept of a "psychonaut" is relatively new in comparison to the rest of the topics this research involves. Terence McKenna, one of the most noteworthy psychonauts, is seen as a subcultural icon, guru, and comparable to a paradisiacal innovator; but, most importantly as the originator of the Psychonaut ideology, and for

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[75] *Ibid.,* 1532.
[76] *Ibid.,* 1545.

much of the Psychonautica discourse, as well. This religious group gets its foundation

from McKenna in three ways: 1) a coherent and influential cosmology; 2) a blending of

religious ideology and sociopolitical ideology (noting they may not even be different

things); and 3) the shift from a negative framework of interpreting psychedelic

phenomena to one that sees it as "healthy, beneficial, productive, and necessary for the

completion of humanness."[77]

McKenna's ideas have saturated and shaped Psychonaut culture, "influencing

cosmologies, ethics, politics, and even religious experiences themselves."[78] These four

aspects of influence can be seen directly via Psychonautica discourse. I suggest that

Montheith's assertion of McKenna's importance emerging in public discussions of

varying levels of anonymity can be applied to the publicly available Erowid Experience

Vault trip reports. This further suggests that a Psychonaut group/community/congregation

is located within the Erowid Experience Vault narratives, and it emerges through their

use of *Psychonautica* discourse. The discursive elements used to construct this discourse

is provided by Erowid throughout it's many vaults containing not only religious, spiritual,

and mystical literature and media, but also secular literature such as academic and legal

texts.

McKenna's cosmology espoused science as an important tool for unlocking the

secrets of the universe. Evolution and scientific discovery are also esteemed, alongside

psychic self-discovery through transcendence.[79] By experimenting and exploring the

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[77] Monteith, Andrew. "'The Words of McKenna': Healing, Political Critique, and the Evolution of Psychonaut Religion Since the 1960s Counterculture." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84, no. 4 (December 2016), 1081–1109, 1082.
[78] *Ibid.,* 1083.
[79] Albanese, Catherine L. *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 504-509.

brain with the use of substances, one could access alternate realms and receive "corrective tuning" from the Gaian Mind.[80] McKenna held that the changes done by the substances are what allowed Psychonauts to have their experiences of exploring alternate realities. This is a major theme throughout the narratives of Erowid. Additional themes would be the sentience of the substance consumed and the existence of "machine elves."[81] Further cosmological influence is "time". For McKenna, time could be transcended,[82] and substances allowed individuals to rise into a "higher topological manifold of temporality."[83] This perception of time is also a prevalent pattern throughout the Psychonautica discourse of Erowid. The Psychonaut ideology which McKenna has left in his legacy holds striking resemblances with the discourse that I call Psychonautica. Psychonautica discourse creates a coherent and rich cosmology of various entities and realms which users frequently visit, blends secular and religious discourses, and generally views psychedelic substances as positive, if not sacred items. The narratives of Erowid appear to hold ideological leanings in line with what McKenna championed.

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[80] Abraham, Ralph, Terence K. McKenna, and Rupert Sheldrake. *Trialogues at the Edge of the West: Chaos, Creativity, and the Resacralization of the World.* (Santa Fe, N.M: Bear & Co. Pub., 1992), 16.

[81] McKenna, Terence K. *The Archaic Revival: Speculations on Psychedelic Mushrooms, the Amazon, Virtual Reality, UFOs, Evolution, Shamanism, the Rebirth of the Goddess, and the End of History.* 1st ed. (San Francisco, Calif: Harper SanFrancisco, 1991), 10, 16; "Machine elves" are entities which DMT-users commonly see and was first referenced and articulated by Terence McKenna.

[82] Monteith. "'The Words of McKenna'.", 1095.

[83] McKenna, Terence. "The Ethnobotany of Shamanism, Part 1." Lecture, November, 1988.

EROWID'S IDEOLOGY

Erowid was founded in October 1995 as a small project by two people who go by the pseudonyms Earth Erowid and Fire Erowid in hopes of furthering education about drugs and their safe use.[84] However, over the next few years it grew into a burgeoning library of information about psychoactive substances and related topics such as spirituality, religion, politics, and prominent personalities related to the subject matter. In 2008 the non-profit group "Erowid Center" was developed to take over operations of Erowid.org; it now runs Erowid.org and its sister site EcstasyData.org.[85]

Before going further, I would like to briefly address "religion on the internet." While traditional religious studies involves either texts or people to interact with in a face-to-face manner, this study only has texts as a resource. Even so, these "texts" are located on the internet which though it is used by people around the world for many purposes on a daily basis is still sometimes seen as a suspect source for serious studies of religion. Although this thesis is not primarily focused on the dynamics and theoretical implications of religion intersecting with the internet, as Heidi Campbell suggests,

> ...interrogating and analyzing research conducted on religion and the Internet for common themes provides a valuable case study approach. Through a critical literature review of this subfield of Internet Studies, five characteristics of religious practice online are highlighted—convergent social practice, embedded reality, networked community, identity as performance, and shifting authority—

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[84] https://erowid.org/general/about/about_crew.shtml

[85] Ecstasydata.org is an organization developed to test substances for integrity and adulteration. This service is for any substance, not only ecstasy, and outside lab data is published, as well.

which aid our understanding of how the Internet functions as a social and cultural sphere.[86]

I would suggest that these five characteristics can be seen coalescing through and around the Erowid narratives and website. Additionally, while the majority of these narratives are experiences of an individual's substance-use while solitary, the fact that they led the user to Erowid's Experience Vaults to share their experiences with one another speaks something of the community aspect that emerges despite the interface being digital.[87] However, to establish a contextual base to who these individuals are, I would like to review some statistical information regarding Erowid.

The Erowid Center, and by extension Erowid.org, is a non-profit group which reports that 85.41% of their funding comes from public donations. 39.7% of those donations come from sources that give $5,000 or more, and smaller donations ranging from $1 to $199 total 35.7% of their public donations. These donations come from 1,502 members, out of which 1,025 are from the USA and the remaining 477 are foreign sources. There are 821 donation sources who are non-members, as well. Erowid's report of their funding usage leans heavily on "Online Information Distribution" at $154K. The remaining budget is divided among "Experience Report Collecting" with $7.7K, "Research Improvement" totaling $2K, $50K to "Administrative" costs, and $6.4K budgeted to "Advertising and Promotions". In terms of traffic, the website's most recently published data, which is from 2013-2014, reports 90,000 unique visitors to the

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[86] Campbell, Heidi A., Charles M. Ess, and William H. Dutton. "Religion and the Internet: A Microcosm for Studying Internet Trends and Implications." *New Media & Society* 15, no. 5 (August 2013): 680–694, 681.

[87] Schütz, Alfred. "Making Music Together: A Study in Social Relationship." *Social Research* (1951): 76-97; Schütz's monothetic and polythetic experiences suggest the experiences, even when solitary, aren't really alone due to social factors. Interpretation/typification of the experience is monothetic and is done after the fact.

Erowid domain, who viewed 360,000 pages per day, with 15 million total visitors for the entire year; out of these 15M visitors, 55% were returning visitors from previous years.**[88]**

Because Erowid is a website that is accessible world-wide it can be hard to know exactly who the 90,000 unique daily visitors are. However, Erowid conducted its own surveys to determine its users' demographics in 2008. Conducted over 14 days, the survey received 20,820 responses. Based on those responses, Erowid found that 71.1% of its visitors were from the USA, 8.5% from Europe, 7.5% from Canada, 5% from the U.K. and Ireland, 3.2% from New Zealand and Australia, 1.9% from Mexico, Central and South America, and 3% from "other" countries. However, conducting independent research, I uncovered that according to Google's traffic data, 42.56% of Erowid's traffic was from the USA, 70.96% coming from "Western" countries, and 29.04% from "other" countries.[89] Erowid's 2008 survey also covered their visitor's ages and education levels. The majority of the website's visitors reported themselves as being 18-22 years of age (45.3%), the 15-17 age range was 17%, 23-29 year olds was 16%, at 6% was the 30-39 age range, and at 4% was the range of 40-49 years of age; Erowid's visitors also reported that more than 55% of them had "some college or more", and the remainder had no college.[90]

Although this does not definitively tell us who accesses Erowid regularly and participates in the Psychonautica discourse, from this data it could be reasonably

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[88] Erowid Center. "Erowid 2013 Organizational Prospectus." https://erowid.org/general/about/about_erowid_prospectus_2014.pdf (accessed April 3, 2020), 25.

[89] In this context, "Western" is USA, Canada, Australia, the U.K., Germany, Sweden, France, Poland, Belgium, and Brazil. "Other" countries are everywhere else. Traffic data that breaks up the remaining countries wasn't available at the time of this research.

[90] Specifications about college degrees was not provided.

suggested that Erowid's typical visitor is an 18-22 year old American with at least some college education; beyond this estimation, specifications are at best conjecture. Furthermore, I would suggest that Erowid's primary funding comes from either these "typical" individuals (18-22 year old, college educated individuals *located* in the USA), or from either individuals or organizations capable of donating $5,000 or more, located in the USA, as well. This could suggest that Erowid's current manifestation, and continuous renewal of reports and media content, is significantly influenced by the demographic of young adult Americans that find it worthwhile to donate to this organization because it meets their interests and perspectives.

The aesthetics of the website potentially allows us to further assess the interest of the website's user base. The landing-page of Erowid.org displays a background image of the belladonna plant, just one of the many plants and substances which are documented within the site. Overlaying this image is the statement, "Documenting the complex relationship between humans and psychoactives", as well as seven randomly revolving images of various pharmaceuticals, chemicals, and plants which function as links to their respective "vault" pages. "Vaults" are simply Erowid's way of categorizing their content into sections of the website. For example, the "Psychoactive Vault"[91] contains links to all of Erowid's content that is related to psychoactive substances and the "Freedom & Law Vault"[92] contains links to all of the content which deals with politics and legality issues around the topic of psychoactives.

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[91] Erowid. "Erowid Psychoactive Vaults." Erowid.
https://erowid.org/psychoactives/psychoactives.shtml (accessed March 31, 2020).
[92] Erowid. "Erowid Freedom & Law Vault." Erowid.
https://erowid.org/freedom/freedom.shtml (accessed March 31, 2020).

Central to Erowid's implicit constitution of *Psychonautica* is their "Mind and Spirit" vaults, or digitally maintained collections of information about consciousness and spirituality. Among all the home pages of Erowid's various vaults, only the "Mind and Spirit" page has quotes prominently placed at the top.

> To truly find God, truth needs to be found independently from the opinions of others. The truth has to be found in our hearts,[93]

and,

> I want to know God's thoughts...all the rest are details.[94]

These quotes are from A.H. Almaas and Albert Einstein, respectively. Almaas, an author and spiritual teacher, is best known for his modern approach to spirituality which incorporates psychology and therapy. Einstein, best known for his theory of relativity, was a German-born physicist. In each of these cases we have a dual representation of discourses. Almaas's *Diamond Approach to Inner Realization*[95] incorporates ideas drawn from religious and spiritual discourses as well as those from clinical psychology and so his discourse is a natural fit for Psychonautica. Einstein, instead, is a scientifically-minded physicist, and the inclusion of his quote might seem to require more interpretation. In terms of expected dispositions regarding religion, spirituality, or mysticism, one would expect there to be a stark contrast between these two figures. Yet, with Einstein, based on the quote that Erowid displays on their "Mind and Spirit" page, we might suggest otherwise. Indeed, we see the same blend of RSM and Secular ideology

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[93] Shield, Benjamin, and Carlson, Richard. *For the Love of God : Handbook for the Spirit*. Rev. ed. (Novato, Calif: New World Library, 2000).
[94] Einstein, Albert, Calaprice, Alice., and Einstein, Albert. *The Expanded Quotable Einstein.* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).
[95] Almaas, A. H. *Essence: The Diamond Approach to Inner Realization*. 2nd. ed. (Maine, USA: Samuel Weiser Inc., 1986).

in Erowid's presentation of Einstein as we do with Almaas's spiritual teachings. Both

figures also reflect Erowid' desire to be seen as an educational and scientific resource

about drug use and altered states of consciousness. While this may not be done with

promotional intentions, a *Psychonautica* discourse is being utilized to present Erowid's

"Mind and Spirit" vault, which is arguably the largest and most embellished vault they

maintain of the base five.[96]

Key to their goal of documenting the complex relationships between humans and

psychoactives is Erowid's collection of plant and drug vaults. Within the base section of

"Plants and Drugs" are 139 chemicals,[97] 68 plants,[98] 49 herbs,[99] 76 pharmaceuticals,[100] 24

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[96] "Mind and Spirit", "Plants and Drugs", "Freedom and Law", "Cultural and Art", and "Library".

[97] Erowid. "Erowid Psychoactive Chemical Vaults." Erowid. https://https://erowid.org/chemicals/ (accessed March 31, 2020); "Psychoactive Chemicals are chemicals which have mind- or emotion-altering properties. These chemicals range from the common to the extremely uncommon and include chemicals with a long history of use as well as those with little to no track record."

[98] Erowid. "Erowid Psychoactive Plant & Fungi Vaults." Erowid. https://https://erowid.org/plants/ (accessed March 31, 2020); "Plants listed in this section are those which have been used by humans for their mind- or emotion-altering properties. These plants range from the common to the extremely uncommon and include plants with a long history of use as well as those with little to no track record."

[99] Erowid. "Erowid Medicinal Herb Vaults." Erowid. https://https://erowid.org/herbs/ (accessed March 31, 2020); "Herbs listed in this section have been used by humans for their medicinal or culinary properties. They may also have psychoactive properties, but these are generally much milder than for those plants listed in the Psychoactive Plants section."

[100] Erowid. "Erowid Pharmaceutical Vaults." Erowid. https://https://erowid.org/pharms/ (accessed March 31, 2020); "Psychoactive Pharmaceuticals are over-the-counter or prescription drugs approved for human medicinal use. The inclusion of chemicals in this list is not intended to suggest that they are necessarily used recreationally. The substances described have mind- or emotion-altering properties or may be listed because they have possible interactions with recreationally used chemicals."

nootropics (i.e. "smarts" drugs),[101] and five animals.[102] Examples of each of these may

be, respectively, absinthe, caffeine, chocolate, and ibogaine; betel nut, ergot, mescal, and

yohimbe; anise, damiana, hemlock, and yarrow; alprazolam, fluoxetine, and sildenafil;

DHEA, melatonin, tryptophan, and vasopressin; and bees, black widow spiders, and

toads. Each of these items has its own vault page which may contain the following

information: botanical classification, common names, classification of effects, a

description, and links to pages which delves further into the "basics", effects, images,

health, law, dosage, and chemistry. Erowid also offers warnings which may be prevalent

for the chosen item, such as fake substances being passed as something other than what it

is. In addition, each item may have links to other pages or articles hosted by Erowid or on

external websites.

Erowid's "Experience Vault" hosts approximately 31,381 "trip-reports," defined

as "first-person descriptions of the use of psychoactives."[103] In these reports individuals

often describe their methods of use, mind-set pre- and post-trip, as well as other pertinent

information to this research (i.e. how their lives have changed as a result of the

experience, the societal and personal influencing factors that lead them to seek out these

experiences, what they felt physically, emotionally, and mentally during the experience

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[101] Erowid. "Erowid Nootropic (Smart Drugs) Vaults." Erowid.
https://https://erowid.org/smarts/ (accessed March 31, 2020); "Nootropics or Smarts Drugs are chemicals which are claimed to have mild to moderate positive mental or physical effects such as improvements to memory, cognition, and clarity of thought or "anti-aging" effects."
[102] Erowid. "Erowid Psychoactive Animal Vaults." Erowid.
https://https://erowid.org/animals/ (accessed March 31, 2020); "Animals listed in this section may produce chemicals with psychoactive or medicinal properties that are used by humans, or the animals themselves may use psychoactives."
[103] Erowid E, Erowid F. "The Value of Experience." Erowid Extracts. (Jun 2006); 10:14-19.

including what they saw and heard.) The narrators typically tell of extreme physical

manifestations of phenomena such as energy or vibrations throughout the body, or

alternately numbness or lack of awareness of limbs or the body. These tales also tell of

phenomena affecting the other senses as well, which include visual scenes or

manifestations of entities[104] and auditory occurrences such as static sounds or voices, and

on rare occasions phenomena affecting the senses of taste and smell.

     The Experience Vault categorizes narratives on the basis of the particular

substance(s) taken by the authors. These narratives also typically include some

demographic and historical information about the individual who submitted them,

including their age, weight, gender, past drug use, and mental illness history, but nothing

that would be personally identifying. Another common occurrence within these narratives

is the inclusion of the environment as well as information about other people present

during the experience. Finally, the narratives tend to include a self-reflection about the

experience through which the narrator justifies, condemns, or authenticates their

experiences or the substance used. As such, this "experience vault" provides an archive

through which to explore how this virtual on-line community collectively narrates their

religious or religion-like experiences facilitated by psychedelic substances.

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[104] St John, Graham. "The Breakthrough Experience: DMT Hyperspace and Its Liminal
Aesthetics." *Anthropology of Consciousness* 29, no. 1 (March 2018): 57–76, 60; St John
reports that an entire bestiary of entities that appear during psychedelic experiences
exists.

METHODS[105]

I approach my methods with two angles in mind, that of quantitative and qualitative data. I will be taking a broad survey of the discourse used in these reports, but I will also be taking a deeper look at particular reports by providing excerpts which highlight key features of the Psychonautica discourse. The results produced by each approach are complementary and strengthen one another. The quantitative approach provides a generalized view of how the discourse is represented within this sample group, and in a particular manner, the Erowid Experience Vault as a whole. The qualitative approach will add richness and nuance to the dry statistical results, and give better insight to what Psychonautica discourse actually looks like and how these individuals are using it. This thick description shows the "complex, ironic, inconsistent, contradictory nature of human character, and too, of faith and doubt" of these narratives and their use of particular discourses to convey their experiences.[106] Having excerpts helps translate the statistical data by showing the commonalities these individuals share in their discourse choices.

A total of 75 narrative reports were used for samples. The reports were divided into five categories of "Bad Trip", "Mystical Experience", "Entities", "Medical Use", and "Preparation/Recipes"; these categories were preset and presorted by Erowid through

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[105] Refer to the Appendix section for tables and figures which correspond to the explanations of how the methods were approached.

[106] Coles, Robert. *The Spiritual Life of Children: The Inner Lives of Children*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990).

their available search feature.[107] In essence, this means the individuals who manage the

database's report publishing considers these reports to meet certain criteria in terms of

what the narratives represent. For example, a narrative sorted as a "Bad Trip" suggests a

largely negative experience with the substance, while one labeled as "Mystical

Experience" suggests some sort of transcendent experience, which presumably would

contain a higher percentage of RSM discourse than one labeled as "Medical Use". These

categories show us the concerns that Erowid's managers want the reports to reflect.

Furthermore, the "curator" can rank reports as 1, 2, or 3 stars; 3 stars is the best in

"quality" of report. This, according to Erowid, simply means the report is concisely

written, such as it stays on topic, isn't a "laundry list" of activities done, and isn't written

in a didactic manner.[108] This may suggest Erowid's interest in presenting a more

phenomenological approach to the way it's users narrate their experiences. The goal

seems to be to capture the experiences with as much fidelity to what the individual

actually perceives to have happened with all their senses, rather than a post hoc

explanation of why it happened. The Experience Vault isn't for reports which preach to

their audience about what to experience and how to construct their ideology; at least not

overtly. Indeed, Erowid users are active participants in not only their interpretation of the

experience, but their peers' as well.

Each category contains 15 reports. I chose five reports from each star ranking,

except where there wasn't five, then I substituted a 0 star report appropriately. (See Table

1 for the specific breakdown of them) This totaled 75 reports; however, as reports can be

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[107] See Appendix 1, Table 1.
[108] Erowid. "Experience Report Reviewing: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly". Erowid
Extracts. (Oct 2002); 3:18-20.

categorized by curators with multiple tags, several reports were cross-listed between the categories, and this effectively gave me a total of 68 unique reports. These reports, while not exactly a random sampling, can nonetheless be said to be a representative sample of the narratives contained in the vault, including both those reports that are ranked highly by the website's curators (3 stars) and those that they would consider less than ideal (1 and 0 stars), as well as some in the middle (2 stars).

I then categorized the rhetoric I collected into categories. However, I would like to bring attention to the fact that while I selectively categorize the discourse as I will describe below, as Andy Letcher states with his psychedelic discourse analysis, "it must be remembered that any way of grouping these and other substances, however natural it appears to be, remains discursive..."[109] As such, I used a division of secular and religious/spiritual/mystical (RSM) for the two base categories that the reports were separated into. A complete list of rhetorical items and their categorical designations is included in the appendix section; see Tables 2 and 3. These two categories reflect the two competing discourses throughout the psychedelic narratives of Erowid. I follow the lead of Letcher, wherein he categorizes psychedelic discourse into two similar base categories of "Dominant" discourses and "Resistive" discourses. The former arises from what Foucault calls "scientific classification"[110]; these discourses are based on observations of how they appear symptomatically to affect others and can be broken down further into "pathological," "psychological," and "prohibition." "Resistive" discourses, on the contrary, arise from practitioners in order to "find more faithful ways of representing

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[109] Letcher, Andy. "Mad Thoughts on Mushrooms: Discourse and Power in the Study of Psychedelic Consciousness." *Anthropology of Consciousness* 18, no. 2 (September 2007): 74–98, 79.
[110] Foucault, and Sheridan. *The Birth of the Clinic*.

their own subjective experiences." Resistive discourse consists of the subcategories of "recreational," "psychedelic," "entheogenic," and "animistic" discourses. According to Letcher, the category of "animistic" discourse in which entities are featured and substances and "Nature" are given conscious attributes, does the best job at conveying the practitioner's subjective experience.[111]

The secular category of discourse embodies the antithesis of the RSM category of discourse, and vice versa. The secular discourse is best thought of as the recreational idea of psychedelic-use, as well as the therapeutic- and medical-use of substances. As such, I further divided the secular discourse into "counterculture", "therapeutic", and "clinical" categories. Examples of rhetorical items that would be categorized into a secular group would be words and concepts such as *purging, wholeness/perfection, drug, fractals, hyperspace, psychoactive, psyche, medication,* and such. These terms reflect a worldview, that while seeking something beyond normal everyday experience, lack a sort of religious valence and reflect more of a biomedical understanding of the substances. However, Graham St John's study of DMT narratives sees many of these categories as spilling over into the RSM variety. As such, the therapeutic category for St John would be classified as RSM discourse. Indeed, he sees the therapeutic use of psychedelics as "self-shamanizing"; modern subjects are their own clients and healers seeking "remedies for alienation and "soul loss" compatible with desired liberation from dependence on biomedical solutions."[112] St John's depiction of therapeutic use of psychedelics holds similarities to how I've described Psychonautica discourse as being inclusive to a specific blend of RSM and Secular discourses. Furthermore, my category of Counterculture

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[111] Letcher. "Mad Thoughts on Mushrooms.", 75.
[112] St John. "The Breakthrough Experience," 62.

would be comparable to St John's category of "Ludic." The ludic modality is the pursuit of recreational use and pleasurable effects over divinatory or curative purposes. Even though one might be inclined to dismiss the ludic variety of psychedelic narrative as purely hedonistic and scant religious knowledge could be taken from it, St John instead proposes to follow Jon Ott,[113] and thinks of it as ludibund and ludible, each stemming from Latin *ludere* meaning "playful, full of play." Even if users are not using psychedelics in a "strictly entheogenic [manner], use may be no less serious, especially given that 'play' transgresses boundaries (not only that which separates consciousness from unconsciousness, and the material from the spiritual, but lawful behavior from its antithesis)."[114] Indeed, even a recreational use of drugs can transgress the boundary and lead to an RSM experience. This variability between St John's research and my own is a testament to the fluidity of the discourse which Erowid's user's employ when constructing their narratives. This blurring of discursive boundaries may be seen within the discourse that Erowid uses to construct its image, as well.

Alternatively, the discourse of the RSM category embodies everything we may think of as religious, spiritual, or mystical ritualistic use of psychedelics, notions of alternate realities, supernatural entities and occurrences along with their moral implications, and concepts that typically evade examination by scientific methods, i.e. souls, aura, chakras, etc. Yves Lambert says it best by "consider[ing] 'religious' any practice or belief which refers to a superempirical reality, i.e. a reality radically exceeding the objective limits of nature and man, provided that there is a symbolic relationship

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[113] Ott, Jonathan. "Pharmacotheon: Entheogenic Drugs, Their Plant Sources and History Kennewick." (WA: Natural Products Company 1996), 16.
[114] St John. "The Breakthrough Experience," 62-63.

between man and this reality."[115] Similar to the secular category, the RSM category is

further divided with these concepts in mind into "Western", "Eastern", "Religious

(RSM)", "RSM Experience", and "New Age" discourses. Rhetorical items within the

RSM base category appear as *God/Satan, ego death, chakra, enlightenment, alternate*

realities, sacredness, etc. As mentioned above in regards to the conceptualization of

"New Age" as being more of a lexical signifier for various phenomena that adopt a "New

Age" emblem, the categories of "Western" and "Eastern" function similarly. While

rhetorical items that fall under the "Western" and "Eastern" categories more than likely

could be argued to come from traditions such as Christianity, Catholicism, Buddhism,

and Hinduism (such as references to *Jesus, Buddha, chakras*, etc.) and are *not* cross-

cultural in their origin, it is still understood that what we consider "Western" and

Eastern" cultures do indeed include one another, and are *not* exclusively composed of any

one singular tradition, such as Christianity or Buddhism, respectively. In light of this,

"Western" will denote discourse that would typically stem from the historically dominant

tradition(s) discourse, i.e. Christianity in relation to "Western" and Buddhism and

Hinduism with "Eastern".

I am aware of the potential objection to specific words and their categorical

designations, such as considering the trope of entering a different reality as New Age

discourse as opposed to Counterculture or RSM discourse. However, I make such rigid

distinctions for the sake of methodology and establishing a coherent model of analysis.

Furthermore, in our everyday lives, at least some people do tend to make distinctions

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[115] Lambert, Yves, Yves Lambert, A Larson, and S Londquist. "Religion in Modernity as a New Axial Age: Secularization or New Religious Forms?" *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 3 (October 1, 1999): 303–333, 304.

between the religious and the secular. Erowid's differentiation between narratives

categorized as "Medical Use" and "Mystical Experiences" suggests that their user base

and managers find such differences meaningful. While some of the individuals writing

these reports may have deep philosophical insights into their use of discourse, I would

suggest that these individuals are inclined to make such rigid distinctions between secular

and religious in similar ways to other Westerners, due to the suggested demographic of

the average Erowid user. Considering my own position and discourse I am inclined to

favor and assign to particular categories, Jørgensen and Phillips suggest removing

yourself from a particular discourse and being discourseless is impossible, as you'll

always represent a position/discourse. Therefore, one should not pursue "truth" in

categorical representation. Instead, focus on how truths are created in discourses.[116]

Moreover, invoking Foucault, Letcher asserts one must acknowledge they aren't

objective, they are discursive - make your position explicit. He further suggests it is not

problematic to be located within the discourse since "there is no privileged position

outside discourse." Research is *dialogically* conducted and as such "scholars reflexively

situating themselves in relationship to the object of their research" is to be expected.[117] In

light of this, I call attention to the words *substance, drug, entheogen,* and *hallucinogen.*

All of these terms can be used to refer to the same substances in the reports; however,

each one holds a different connotation and is typically used within different, and

sometimes conflicting discourses. Which term each author uses reveals something about

their narration of their experience. I assigned *substance* and *hallucinogen* to the Clinical

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[116] Jørgensen and Phillips. *Discourse Analysis*, 14.
[117] Letcher. "Mad Thoughts on Mushrooms", 78.

category, *drug* to the Counterculture category[118], and *entheogen* to Western. Both *substance* and *hallucinogen* have clinical connotations to them, and *hallucinogen* is loaded with negative ideas of delusion and mental illness. Indeed, Michael Winkelman defines hallucinogens as "exogenous substances such as plants which contain compounds that can produce trance states, hallucinations, and can lead to disorientation."[119] The word *entheogen* is part of Western because of the implied divine experience with "God" one will encounter when using "entheogens".[120] While carrying heavy negative associations and possible links with Clinical or Therapeutic discourse, because of its namesake and the near complete consistency to use the word in the countercultural context, *drug* fits best in the Counterculture category. I follow this division with the words *psychoactive* and *psychedelic*; I assigned the former to Clinical and the latter to Counterculture. The terms *trip, journey,* and *hallucination* were categorized as Counterculture, New Age, and Clinical, respectively. *Hallucination* holds, similar to *hallucinogen* previously mentioned, negative, clinical connotations. *Trip,* while implying travel similar to *journey*, is particularly prevalent among discourses that are strictly secular and Counterculture oriented. *Journey,* on the other hand, is more often used in contexts of spiritual or mystical exploration and enlightenment seeking; therefore, it falls under the New Age discourse category. I practiced similar differentiations between references to *entities* and

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[118] *Ibid.,* 76-77; For Letcher, 'Drugs' is of the prohibited discourse because it normally references "two broad antithetical categories:" pharmaceuticals and illicit plants/extracts/chemicals.

[119] Winkelman, Michael. "Psychointegrator Plants: Their Roles in Human Culture." *Consciousness and Health, Yearbook of Cross-cultural Medicine and Psychotherapy.* (1995), 9-53.

[120] Letcher. "Mad Thoughts on Mushrooms", 84-87.

God or a deity of some sort; New Age with *entities*,[121] Western with *God*, and either New Age or Eastern when referencing "gods", i.e. neopaganism or Hinduism/Buddhism, respectively.

Other items of interest include my categorization of *altered states of consciousness* to Clinical and *eternity* to Western. While *altered states of consciousness* may fit into New Age or Therapeutic, I believe that it is more aligned to Clinical as it uses the concept of conscious states other than the normal "waking consciousness". I categorized *eternity* to Western due to the ideas of "eternal damnation"; "timelessness", as opposed to "everlasting" or *infinity*. I assigned the concepts of *realization, profundity,* and *transformation* to the Therapeutic category. On the other hand, I categorized the idea of becoming "enlightened" or "awakened" to RSM Experience. With the former few, while it seems that these concepts could easily fit into the RSM Experience category (and they do), it seemed more appropriate to consider that not all experiences that mimic the outcomes of RSM experiences are in fact religiously themed. Therefore, I find it more appropriate to highlight the therapeutic aspects of these concepts. Similarly, *enlightenment* can be found in many discourses, and more easily plays into the RSM experience of someone finally discovering ultimate or divine knowledge, or being bestowed or graced omniscience.[122] While these designations and categorizations of the discourse patterns are not perfect, and as previously acknowledged some can be argued to

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[121] Monteith. "'The Words of McKenna'.", 1098; According to Monteith, entities, alternate realities and realms, and ego death are all prominent in McKenna's discussions of substances.
[122] Spilka, Bernard, George A Brown, and Stephen A Cassidy. "The Structure of Religious Mystical Experience in Relation to Pre- and Postexperience Lifestyles." *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 2, no. 4 (October 1, 1992): 241–257, 244; Spilka, Brown and Cassidy conclude that mystical experiences are likely to have seven components, all of which appeared within the reports in one fashion or another.

fall into different categories, they are helpful in establishing a coherent model in how to approach the discourse in Erowid. By dividing the discourse into clear categories, the emergence of a *Psychonautica* discourse can more easily be seen.

RESULTS

The results of the narrative analysis came out very close between Secular and

RSM discourse totals, and in my opinion, was skewed by a rhetorical item I chose in the

Counterculture discourse: "trip". The word "trip" appeared 459 times throughout all the

rhetorical items, or 14.31% of the total items. "Trip" was twice as common as the next

top item of appearance, "psychedelic", which is also from the Counterculture category.

Furthermore, the top three most occurring rhetorical items of "trip", "psychedelic", and

"drug", all belong to the Counterculture discourse. Aside from "trip", and perhaps

"psychedelic", there were no outliers to skew the data; "drug", "reality"[123], "OEV/CEV"

(Open Eye Visuals, Closed Eye Visuals), and "entities"[124] all ranged from 163 to 155

times of appearance.

Including the item "trip", Secular rhetorical items accounted for 52.84% of the

total items counted, and the Counterculture items were 40.31% of the total.[125] In this

model, New Age rhetoric totaled 21.42%, while RSM and RSM Experience accounted

for 10.60% and 8.92%, respectively; these categories were also the top 2nd, 3rd, and 4th,

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[123] Both the word "reality" and tropes that involve a change of reality in some manner, i.e. visiting another reality/land; realizing that you've been in an alternate reality the whole time; encountering things/beings from other realities, etc.

[124] Not only the word "entity", but also the encountering of a being/entity that is *not* God, a god(dess), demons/angels, or other personalities or specialized entity that belongs to a discourse that is already accounted for, including Neopagan gods and goddesses. An encounter can be a strong awareness, a sighting or vision, voices, or an actual interaction with discourse and physical touch.

[125] See Appendix 1, Figure 1.

also respectively. Subsequently, Therapeutic and Clinical were 5th and 6th, and Western and Eastern came in at 7th and 8th, all respectively.

Removing the rhetorical item "trip" changes the results significantly. The total changes in favor of the RSM base-category with 55.04% after the weight of "trip" is removed.[126] The Counterculture items also dropped roughly 10% overall, lowering the gap between itself and the New Age category down to only a 5.01% difference.[127] Removing the skewed effect of "trip" also gives a better idea of the top-five rhetorical items that appear in the narratives: psychedelic, drug, reality, OEV/CEV, and entities.

Refining the results to the different sample groups provides alternate results, as well.[128] Within the Medical Use group of reports, the rhetorical item "drug" was most prevalent with 67 occurrences; much further behind was "psychedelic", the second most prolific item with seven occurrences. However, when the term "drug" is omitted, or even switched to the Clinical category due to the likelihood of the term and its idea within a "Medical Use" grouping to being a reference to *pharmaceutical* "drugs", the dominant rhetorical category of items changes to the Clinical discourse category. Beyond this, the Medical Use sample group was scant for noteworthy rhetorical items and patterns, likely, in part, due to the aforementioned didactic quality these types of reports are mostly written in. Likewise, this may be due to the likelihood that substances we typically don't consider psychedelic may be used with a strict medical intent. While this scenario could produce an experience of interest to us, the chances are low.

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[126] See Appendix 1, Figure 2.
[127] See Appendix 1, Figure 3.
[128] See Appendix 1, Figure 4 for sample group results.

The Preparation/Recipe sample group was similar to Medical Use in that the Counterculture discourse category was the most prevalent, and its term "trip" was the most occurring item at 51 appearances. However, removing "trip" makes the rhetorical item "entities", belonging to New Age, the highest ranking at 35. Following "entities" is "reality", also in New Age. The Counterculture items "OEV/CEV" and "psychedelic", however, still hold prominent spots with 23 and 22, respectively.

The remaining three sample groups, "Bad Trip", "Mystical Experience", and "Entities/Beings" show patterns, as well. Across all the sample reports, the "Bad Trip" and "Mystical Experience" groups held the highest rhetoric count for all the discourses except for the Clinical and New Age categories, of which the Medical and Entities sample groups held top positions, respectively. The Mystical Experience sample held the most Western, Eastern, Therapeutic, RSM, and Counterculture rhetorical items among the groups. The top items in the categories that the Mystical Experience group ranked highest in were "God", "meditate", "bliss", and "trip" or "psychedelic,"[129] respectively. Surprisingly, the "Bad Trip" group ranked highest over the Mystical Experience group in RSM Experience rhetoric by one item; the rhetorical item of "terror" over "oneness".[130] The Entities/Beings sample group held the most New Age rhetoric due to the item of "entities" belonging to its discourse.[131]

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[129] Depending on if "trip" is omitted from the results.

[130] Podmore, Simon D. "Mysterium Horrendum: Mystical Theology and the Negative Numinous." *Exploring Lost Dimensions in Christian Mysticism: Opening to the Mystical*, ed. Louise Nelstrop (London: Routledge, 2016), 93; Podmore interprets Otto as implying it is possible to have an experience where the *tremendum* (wrath) completely eclipses the *fascinans* (love), and turns the experience into *mysterium horrendum*, or something akin to a demonic experience. See Otto's *Idea of the Holy* (1917).

[131] St John. "The Breakthrough Experience," 60; In St John's study of 340 DMT users over 20 years, 66.5% of the accounts contained discourse mentioning entities.

These results bear a striking similarity to St John's study in which reports of DMT use conflate the spiritual, scientific, and carnivalesque aspects within their trips, similar to the transcendent rhetoric used here.[132] Indeed, considering the results on the whole, it seems to suggest the emergence of *Psychonautica* discourse among this sampling of Erowid's psychedelic narratives. Just as the dual discourse of RSM and Secular are both present throughout the pages of Erowid, so they are within the discourse Erowid's users choose in conveying their experiences. In the next section I will examine some representative samples of the narratives to further illustrate this point.

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[132] *Ibid.,* 66.

EXCERPTS

This first excerpt is from a user named Kuato based on their experience using

LSD and cannabis. Kuato's narrative contains rhetoric which reflects the all-

encompassing nature of the *Psychonautica* discourse.

> ...Ian then made some business connections with Rob and his little shaggy brown-haired dealer friend Dan. These dealers knew a local washed-up hippy woman who they got acid from. Most of the acid they bought from her was fairly weak, as in people would do four hits of it and not cross into the *'psychedelic'* threshold of '*ego-death*' and *'life-changing' mystical experiences*.
>
> I wanted to try acid simply out of curiosity and I planned on starting with a small dose. I had no delusional aspirations of *connecting with any kind of higher power* and thought acid was just going to be a cheap thrill. I was about to learn that on large doses, acid is a very expensive thrill. My only prior experience with *drugs* was weed and alcohol. I had already seen the Fear and Loathing movie, but it did not prepare me at all for the weird, wild *Native-American, Buddhist, and beatnik shit* I was going to be dealing with.
>
> ...And then finally I was rewarded with a new painting of my field of vision further down the hill that still had about a five second delay. I felt like my brain was flying apart in all directions and it was no longer able to process sensory information. And then I began to worry that my completely frozen and flat field of vision was starting to wobble and was about to fall over and shatter into pieces of glass and I was going to wake up screaming, *seeing reality for the first time. Good trip.*
>
> Then my vision caught back up with real time on the bottom of the hill and I was relieved... until I watched myself disappear. As soon as I began moving in real time again, I looked down and literally watched my feet disappear and very quickly my whole body disappeared after it. *I presume I became 'one with nature' at this point*. And I'm pretty sure I was *transcending* some hardcore shit. I'm also sure I had a very intelligent facial expression at that moment…
>
> ...And I began to realize, 'Hey! It doesn't really matter that *God's evil* because he's so powerful that you have no choice but to love *Him* 'cause if you don't, he'll completely destroy you! I love *God*!'
>
> And, strangely enough, this was a happy thought at the time. Earlier, I decided that I hated *God* because *He* was being a real asshole to me and when I started to think that I hated *Him*, *I could feel Him reflect the hate back onto me a trillion times stronger*. And once I loved *Him* and gladly followed *His* orders, I was happy and the *trip* was just starting to turn good again…[133]

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[133] Kuato. "Zeesersow: An Experience with LSD & Cannabis (exp57725)". Erowid.org. Apr 7, 2007. erowid.org/exp/57725, emphasis added.

Kuato's report mentions the words and phrases "psychedelic", "ego-death", "'life-changing' mystical experiences", "drugs", "tripping", "becoming one with nature", "transcendence", and "God". Reminiscent of a New Age discourse, arguably these terms could be said to stem from Western discourses such as Christianity (*mystical experience* and *God*), Eastern discourses such as Buddhism (*ego-death* and *transcendence*), and secular-psychology and counterculture-drug discourses (*psychedelic*, *life-changing*, *tripping*, *drugs*, and *becoming one with nature*). The terms which are typically located within the counterculture discourse, "psychedelic", "tripping", and "drugs" are what set this *Psychonautica* discourse apart from simply a New Age discourse. Moreover, Kuato's report contains tropes which are common among *Psychonautica* narratives. Kuato tells us that they didn't expect to "connect to a higher power", nor to encounter "Native-American, Buddhist, and beatnik shit" (which they inevitably *did*), all of which are relatively common for *Psychonautica* narratives. Likewise, Kuato conveys the notion of an "alternate reality" in which if the wrong action during the trip was to be taken, they would be "seeing reality for the first time". While this excerpt fails to show Kuato entering into an alternate reality, elsewhere during the report they do indeed, in hindsight, perceive themselves as leaving our "normal" reality – a very common trope for *Psychonautica* and mystical experience narratives, both. The trope of experiencing a "bad-trip" until one "accepts" their current experience/trip is also present through Kuato's initial hatred for and towards God and their subsequent acceptance and surrender to Him, which allows Kuato to begin having a "good" experience/trip. This mixture of rhetoric through particular terms, phrases, and tropes is indicative of the pattern which emerges through the *Psychonautica* narratives on Erowid.

Additionally, the rhetorical thrust this narrative takes should be noted on its similarity to the much accepted quality of religious experiences writ-large[134] of a positive transformation or shifting of consciousness, as perceived by the experiencer. This can be seen with Kuato, as previously mentioned, in that he/she initially held no significant expectations and even talks almost contemptuously about the matter, referring to it as "*Native-American, Buddhist, and beatnik shit.*"[135] Kuato goes from simple curiosity about a ludic experience with no expectations of having anything transcendent happen to considering that they may be seeing reality for the first time and have transcended "some hardcore shit."[136] Kuato ends the experience with a newfound love for God - a complete shift from his/her hatred for Him. While not emblematic of a "traditional" religious conversion narrative, the structure of his/her approach - irreligious-turn-religious - is what would typically be recognized as a religious conversion.

A second example illustrates the Western discourse that these individuals draw from even when the rest of the discourse used is more New Age in quality. Nervewing does a particularly good job at using evocative language, going into thick description of their experience using a multitude of psychedelics.[137]

> Part of my experiment was to determine whether or not memantine made me feel and think of the cold just because I took it in the dead of winter. Though it was almost 90 degrees outside, I once again found myself at the mercy of winter's spears, shards of ice piercing my bones and zapping my muscles into uncontrollable shivers. I felt raw, exposed, curled up on a dry winter night, severely underdressed, where the frost hangs in the air and the wind saps all semblance of heat. I found myself drifting amidst the same dark winter landscape as before, pillars of trees screeching into the auroral sky. Vast dark

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[134] James, William. *The Varieties*; Spilka, Brown, and Cassidy. "The Structure of Religious Mystical Experience"; St John. "The Breakthrough Experience;" Wallis, Robert J. *Shamans/neo-Shamans*.
[135] Kuato. "Zeesersow: An Experience with LSD & Cannabis (exp57725)."
[136] *Ibid.*
[137] See Appendix, List of Sample Reports and URLs.

fields would interject my journey, grids and intersecting planes and the same looming spectral lo-fidelity beings that drifted this realm aimlessly...

The colossus, the colossi, the colossal, whatever they are, unclear in number, unclear in form, unclear in collectivity – they and it ushered me up the stairs, looming spectral sentinels with ritual smog a veil over their eyes. The colossus wailed at me for hours, scrubbing my memory mostly clean the way one would scrape the fat from bone. Their shouts were nothing to the kaleidoscopic zenith spiraling above them, looming, always one thing looming over another, all gray, all a lacework of intricate vessels and conduits cast in cold concrete relief. The great sky above, those upper waters of the firmament were a testament to an even greater screaming, something deafening, something bigger, golden mycelia from the twisted infected world above seized me and the colossus rose to meet me at eye level, its gaze vivisecting me and casting my neurons aside like bycatch, cleaning and gutting me before the even greater beyond could taste me…

My roommate came home later to me babbling with a certain fear and fascination about my 'experience', which I had labeled as not even being an experience, but exposure to something… not even a thing but a state? Some word that doesn't capture the non-existence of that existence. Perhaps language is not meant to address such absurd contradictions and betrayals of normal reality…

This was probably the most intense trial I have subjected myself to, both for the number and intensity of the substances involved. I did not go into this thinking I was subjecting myself to a trial, it was more aimless hedonism. But I came out shocked and changed, my perspective on how I use drugs shaken to the core. I think it prepared me for taking a step back with my drug use for the following months where my living situation wasn't conducive to it. But alas, nothing stays the same and the siren song would come calling again…[138]

Psychonautica discourse, being inclusive rather than exclusive, typically consists of discourse which transcends fixed, hard boundaries. Nervewing uses at least four different types of discourse which emerges through their various tropes and ideas, as well as the overall structure used. Key to *Psychonautica*, and which is the case for nervewing's report, is not simply the presence of a multitude of discourses; rather, it is the inclusion of religious/spiritual/mystical discourses (typically also of a major tradition, e.g. Christianity) along the side of New Age and secular discourses - Counterculture discourse primarily, but Clinical and Therapeutic discourses are commonly scattered

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[138]nervewing. "The Colossus: An Experience with Memantine, 3-MEO-PCE, LSD, 4-AcO-MiPT, 4-HO-MET, 2C-C, Clonazepam & Aripiprazole (exp112152)". Erowid.org. Aug 4, 2018. erowid.org/exp/112152.

throughout.[139] It is this unique blend of discourse which emerges particularly amid

Erowid's Experience Vault community that constitutes *Psychonautica* discourse.

Nervewing's report follows a trajectory which is common in these reports, and

which was already seen with Kuato. Nervewing's initial recreational approach turns into

an intense experience that makes them question their use of psychedelics, in which they

allude to the experience's "siren song" like appeal of psyche exploration. This trajectory

and curiosity of mind exploration, key tropes within *Psychonautica*, can be seen in the

next excerpts, as well.

Nog's report, in which he experiments with nitrous oxide,[140] further shows the

make-up of the *Psychonautica* discourse through its tropes and themes that blend

recreational intent and expectations with religiously-oriented results. Like others, Nog

ends his report with allusions to ineffability and a deeper importance to his experience.

> Not before this experience would I have ever entertained the notion of achieving what can only be called a 'religious experience' from something such as nitrous oxide. In the past I had used the gas as means to surf the bizarre, to fracture my ordinary perceptions for the sake of amusement. This time, however, the experience was so overwhelming that I felt compelled to share it with others. I'm surprised and delighted to find that I'm not alone on this one!
>
> ...The appearance of this [painting of an oriental dragon symbolic of untapped collective human potential] moved my spirit on a profound level, and when I began to return to ordinary space I discovered that my mouth was wide open with gleeful laughter, but that my eyes were tightly shut, squeezing tears of despair down my cheeks. Somehow, I was holding in my consciousness the experience of profound and ecstatic joy, as well as utter despondency, at the exact same time. Instead of feeling paradoxical, it felt entirely appropriate. I felt radiant, as though shimmering with immutable joy and completeness, yet simultaneously surrounded by a limitless black expanse of endless poverty.
>
> Today, I'm still struggling to absorb the experience. Reading over this report, I feel I've accomplished little more than to belittle the experience with the conceit of vocabulary. When attempting to communicate the full impact of this experience to others, my mouth opens in silence, and I discover that I'm attempting to speak with my chest.

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[139] See Appendix, Figures 3 and 4.

[140] See Appendix, List of Sample Reports and URLs.

Perhaps this is a good indication of how unexpectedly meaningful this encounter with N2O was for me.[141]

Nog's report, as previously mentioned, follows a similar trajectory as Kuato's and nervewing's. Interesting to this report is the unique blending of Eastern, RSM, RSM Experience, and Counterculture discourses which emerges through the Eastern imagery he sees and the paradoxical emotions of profundity, ecstasy, and utter despondency which he doesn't feel was paradoxical at the time. This type of reflection that Nog provides, and was the case with nervewing, usually includes questions of the report's effability. Nog's report shows him struggling with this issue seven years after the experience.

The next excerpt from Lucyfer's report is an excellent example that shows nearly all the RSM Experience rhetoric blended with New Age discourse. Lucyfer's report is also illustrative of the extreme experiences one can encounter, and how *Psychonautica* discourse emerges through the individual's attempts to convey the event.

> Before I could see what was going to happen next, everything started fading to white. I could see nothing but burning white light, like I was looking directly at the sun from 100 feet away. What I saw was.....the ultimate truth. The answer to every question. The reason reality is the way that it is. I existed within the past, present, and future simultaneously. I couldn't see my own hand in front of my face. I dissolved into infinity. I was existing in an infinite number of dimensions, living an infinite number of lives simultaneously for an infinite amount time. Though my memory of this is hazy, I believe I re-lived every event of my entire life during the peak. I could fit our entire universe into a period at the end of a sentence. Time was a point of nothingness. I was everything, yet I was nothing. I was in pure ecstasy. I felt the unconditional love of the universe penetrating every pore of my body. If only this could have lasted forever. I suppose this was a taste of the beautiful part of ego death, but my stay in this ineffable place was cut short when I was suddenly catapulted into hyperspace, where I experienced every ounce of pain any human being could ever possibly experience at one time. The love rapidly shifted to evil in its purest definition. I saw many miserable people I had seen throughout my life, including the homeless and starving. My brain's sensory filter was gone; every last bit of information that could physically be processed at once was flowing through my head at light speed.
> I was dropped out of hyperspace directly into a hallucinatory prison facility. I saw hundreds of pitbulls, white supremacists, and naked black men running around. It

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[141] Nog. "Heads & Tails: An Experience with Nitrous Oxide (exp72840)". Erowid.org. Jul 30, 2015. erowid.org/exp/72840.

was a state of sheer pandemonium. I have never been so unbelievably horrified in my entire life. I was now sure that this is where I would die. I was taken to the showers where I was bitten repeatedly by pitbulls and raped by the white supremacists and black men simultaneously. I was sobbing hysterically screaming for it stop. It was physical and emotional torture beyond your wildest dreams. I felt every single sensation, including their penises in my anus and the razor-sharp teeth of the vicious dogs.

Who knows how long this actually went on for, but eventually this torture ended and I was back in JAC's room. I saw all of my friend's faces covered in knife wounds and deep, bleeding cuts. Puddles of blood were all over the room. My joints were still in severe pain from the physical torture I had just experienced.

I looked at the clock, and it read 9:00 P.M. (or something along those lines).

Minutes after I came back to earth, I realized that the purpose for human existence was to love. Love is our higher purpose. I now understood that the ego I had developed my entire life was an illusion all along. Our egos push us away from our ability to feel compassion towards others. As your ego fades away, you slowly dissolve into pure unadulterated LOVE. The illusion of separation created by our egos has been the root cause of suffering all across our planet, and sadly this is the reason the majority of the world kills each other for absurd purposes like religion and resources. Religions like Christianity hide behind the idea that there is an afterlife because they are afraid of death. There is nothing to fear, because when you die there is no "you" to fear anything. THE ONLY THING THAT SEPARATES US FROM OTHER FORMS OF LIFE IS OUR ABILITY TO THINK. Our ego is composed of our thoughts. When we stop relying on our ego, we cannot experience negative emotions. When we stop thinking, our ego ceases to exist, and then we can live a life of pure love, peace, and prosperity. The more we rely on our ego, the more we push ourselves away from the moment which is all. Nothing outside the moment we are in right now will ever exist. Yesterday never is, and tomorrow will never be. Time is infinite. The past, present, and future are all occurring simultaneously. We are merely observers. Free will is an illusion.

This was by far the most profound experience of my entire life.[142]

Lucyfer's use of *Psychonautica* discourse is especially rich as he discusses the ultimate truth of a burning white light, dissolving into infinity, existing and experiencing infinite dimension and lives, time distortions, ego-death, hyperspace, love shifting to evilness only to shift to love again, and of course, the reflection of the experience's profundity. Comparable to the previous excerpts, Lucyfer's use of *Psychonautica* discourse includes the ludic trope of recreational use shifting to a meaningful experience; however, it is not present in this particular excerpt.

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[142] Lucyfer. "Heroic Dose-Induced Nightmare: An Experience with LSD (exp98623)". Erowid.org. Apr 2, 2018. erowid.org/exp/98623.

The excerpt from Lucid's report, in which he uses DMT and cannabis, shows an experience contrary to what I've presented thus far. Indeed, Lucid approaches the experience with mindful preparation which seems to be oriented to an Eastern discourse. This helps show that while it holds a prevalent place in the discernment of where *Psychonautica* discourse is emerging, the trope of recreational-use-turn-meaningful, isn't necessary.

> After taking about 15 minutes to meditate and get myself centered I decide it is go time, empty my lungs, and lean forward to the pipe. Taking one gigantic hit is the style I have adopted for smoking DMT, and as I released the smoke and leaned back into the couch, reality melted away. It appeared as though I was passing backwards through a portal.. total tunnel vision. Simultaneously I was experiencing/hearing the loudest, most electric shredding sound that I have ever heard/experienced. It must have been the fabrics of time shredding, because after this moment I was no longer in the physical realm…
> …You see, during my first DMT Out of Body experience, after my consciousness returned to my body I went through a spell of about 5 minutes where I was shaking violently and consistently, but all the while I felt immensely calm and even pleasurable. As I predicted, this happened again. For about 6 minutes my entire body vibrated with this incredible energy force that I have never felt besides when re-entering my body on DMT. It is almost like pure ecstasy charging through my body as my soul reinvigorates my flesh. After the 6 minutes I settle down into my body and my skin starts to feel like it glowing with heat. My head feels super charged.
> …This is what I remember most from this entire 'revelation' ordeal. I cannot remember exactly what the revelations that I learned in that place where, but I do remember asking myself during the comedown 'Will they allow me to share the information I just received or should I keep it to myself??'. This is a very strange thought, and yet I remember it as being exactly as I worded it here. This tells me that A. Clearly I felt the information was almost so sacred that people should discover it for themselves B. Clearly I felt there were other forces that revealed this information to me, and I was questioning whether or not they would want me sharing it. I was very shaken by these revelations when I was in the moment, and not in the sense that I was concerned for my well being or anything, but rather just completely and utterly blown away by it…[143]

Lucid's experience is interesting and particularly useful for illustrating the *Psychonautica* discourse because, not only is there a mixture and blending of RSM and Secular discourses, but also due to the fact that his discourse shifts from Eastern oriented to Counterculture, RSM, and then to a Therapeutic oriented discourse. This example is

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[143] Lucid. "Masters of the Universe: An Experience with DMT (exp94632)". Erowid.org. Oct 27, 2016. erowid.org/exp/94632.

also particularly interesting because it, similar to the excerpts previously discussed,

shows the individual reflecting and struggling to make sense of their experience,

effectively showing how they pull from multiple discourses to shape their experiences.

While the previous excerpts have followed similar patterns, Psychonaut's report

of his mushroom use provides us with different content. Indeed, Psychonaut's report is

particularly interesting in that he uses specific reference to known religious traditions,

showing that this sort of discourse is acceptable alongside explicitly religious discourse,

as well as sexual notions.

> "It's her again." I explained to my roommate. This time around the room seemed to become this entity as opposed to the last time I came in contact with her when it seemed like she was inside my mind. I felt euphoria like I never have before as the walls completely disappeared in the room, replaced instead by a multitude of figures engaged in intercourse. The colors and patterns I saw were so vivid and wild that they were almost incomprehensible to me. The feelings of the body high, euphoria, and sense of connection to humankind all seemed to blend into one very complex emotion: the deity wordlessly explained to me that I was having sex with everyone in the world at the same time. I closed my eyes and ran my hands through my hair and over my face as I fucked the world, something I typically do when rolling very hard. I still felt the very strange feeling that I was Hindu, and the entity I was communicating with also seemed very Hindu. I came to the conclusion that she was probably Kali or Parvati or some incarnation of the universal Hindu energy, Brahman. In any case, I felt a sense of infinite love as everything I looked at in my dorm room seemed to be made of figures having sex. The colors and the patterns reached their peak and I felt as though my soul was having an orgasm. "I'm a rock star," I explained to my roommate. It sounded funny when I said it, but it was the best way I could describe my feelings at the time. My roommate and I decided to venture out into the hallway at some point during this time for some reason; then I remembered that we had to pee. We checked our reflections in the bathroom mirror to discover that our pupils looked like saucers, dominating our irises. After awkwardly running into someone that lived on our floor, we returned back to the room. I was still peaking, feeling like I was not only having sex with the world but with this goddess of love that I had recently met also. The tip of this peak felt like the end of an orgasm, and as I looked around the room everything seemed wet. It was almost as if the goddess had orgasmed as well. "Did I just throw up? What happened? Everything looks wet." I said to my roommate. He simply said, "I dunno. I feel like I'm gonna bust a nut." I laughed, and we continued to joke and laugh about various things until I started losing my mind…
> …We all laughed and joked about it, but it was an experience that I will never forget.[144]

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[144] Psychonaut. "Absolute Love and Hate: An Experience with Mushrooms (exp91471)". Erowid.org. Sep 26, 2019. erowid.org/exp/91471.

The flow of Psychonaut's report is noticeably different in that there is not a shift from secular to religious in his disposition and approach to the experience. In fact, it almost seems that the experience was expected, and therefore embraced. This was seen with Kuato, in which accepting the experience leads to positive outcomes. While it might seem that Psychonaut's report is mainly Eastern, and *not* emblematic of *Psychonautica* discourse, this is not the case. Indeed, *Psychonautica* emerges when the room shifts into the entity itself and a room of intercoursing bodies, simultaneously. It emerges further with his use of the phrases "body high", "rolling", "infinite love", "peaking", and with the unforgetable-ness of the experience; essentially, Psychonaut blends Eastern, Counterculture, New Age, and Therapeutic discourses in his understanding of this experience.

The last excerpt I present is from Vastness. Fittingly, this report is excellent in illustrating the vastness of *Psychonautica* discourse and its ability to transcend boundaries. Indeed, Vastness's report covers all the discourses beginning with Eastern and New Age ideas of an atheistic orientation, only to shift into New Age and Western tropes and rhetoric to help understand his experience.

> Some parts of the experience as ever, defy words…
> …I had tried to stick to my usual routine of gym, meditation, positive habits and exercise…
> …I decided rather than clearing my mind to try to take a more active role in the experience, and tried to feel my astral self and my chakras – I have been reading a little about chakras recently and although I am not entirely sure I believe in them – I had an insight of sorts during a period of sober mediation that appears to have benefitted me in controlling difficult feelings in everyday life. So I tried to focus on my energy body…
> …I decided to try to probe this further, and had an urge to just close my eyes, and try to listen to the sensation, to feel, again, my "astral self". During my sober meditations, as I mentioned, I became aware of some kind of tingling, erratic, unstable energy in my chest, which I identified as my heart chakra – upon reading further (earlier, while sober), an energy blockage in the heart chakra seemed to match a lot of the negative psychological issues I had been struggling with – and still am to some extent – anxiety, demotivation, apathy, trouble connection with others… and I was granted/thought of/had the insight into a visualisation I could do envisioning a golden orb in the center or my

chest, like I was consciously stabilising this blockage and allowing the life energy of the cosmos to flow through me unimpeded…

...Suddenly I just stopped still, standing bolt upright, looking at a white tile on the wall – this time I felt another presence reaching through the void – one of something Almighty, of inconceivable power and as it observed me the power of its gaze sent an invincible feeling of divine, otherworldly power surging through my limbs, and at that point I felt like I could truly could weather anything – indeed, had a duty to, and would be granted strength by god. I realised again that life was all around us, not as we understand it, but awareness, consciousness in some form. I realised also that I was but a vessel for the Almighty Lord God of All Creation (I'm using a somewhat Christian metaphor here although I explicitly am not Christian, don't subscribe to the Jesus mythology at all, yadda yadda, it's just what came to my mind – arguably because my upbringing was Christian)...

...this is the cosmic joke of the game of human life – these things have been put here for a reason, challenges to help us grow and fulfill our divine purpose, and we need to live with them, overcome them, indeed we have a sacred duty to do so, as best we can, and to help others to do so, as best we can, but there is just no reason to surrender to them – only to surrender to the whims of the gods / the universe / fate, or whatever reality is, which is surely something stranger than any of us can ever imagine.

This is probably the closest I got ever to developing an actual, honest to god, belief in god, afterlives, prelives, and an ethereal realm beyond what we can perceive in the material. I don't know what to make of this now – I'm just so cynical and bound to neurological/mechanistic explanations of human interpretations of divine phenomenon. But during this trip I felt without doubt that god is real, the gods are real, death is not the end, ethereal beings are always with us, and there is an ethereal plane inaccessible to us but always around us.

Is it true and not a delusion?..[145]

Vastness approaches the experience with preparation, yet is overwhelmed with the profundity of it all. This excerpt helps show how these individuals wrestle to find adequate rhetoric in conveying their experiences. Vastness could have easily discussed his astral body and chakras in alternate terms such as soul or consciousness and energy, respectively. He could have easily not discussed the psychological issues he was dealing with. Likewise, Vastness could just as easily have referenced an Eastern or neo-Pagan god(dess), and not the "Almighty Lord God of All Creation." However, Vastness did choose his particular discourses, and the fact that he chose from not one or two, but from eight different discourses, indicates *Psychonautica* discourse emerging.

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[145] Vastness. "The Illusion of Material Reality: An Experience with Methoxetamine & 2C-B (exp113858)". Erowid.org. Dec 20, 2019. erowid.org/exp/113858.

DISCUSSION[146]

The majority of rhetorical items within the reports examined come from an RSM discourse, as opposed to a Secular one. Furthermore, this prevalence in the RSM discourse is shown in the close rankings between Counterculture and New Age rhetoric; first and second place by a 5.01% margin, respectively. The close margin is suggestive of a correlation between the Counterculture and New Age discourse, if not a religious, spiritual, and mystical discourse, more broadly speaking. These results may also be influenced significantly due to the suggested demographic of Erowid, whose typical user is an 18-22 year old, college-educated American, who may be able to donate to the organization. Such an individual is likely to have been raised in a Western household, with Western values, and most definitely located within a Western influenced society.

Further suggestions of this demographic being reflected in the results may be the prevalence of the Western items over Eastern; while the overall totals are only less than a percentage apart, the top ranked items of "God" and "meditate" are 2:1 in appearance. This result may also be suggestive of the likelihood that the narrator holds a Western background from which their rhetoric choices are generated.

The prevalence of Western, Eastern, and New Age rhetoric, as well as RSM rhetoric, totaling 44.97%, shows the existence of religiously, spiritually, and mystically located discourse within these reports. These patterns have appeared as words, phrases,

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[146] Due to the skewing effect of the rhetorical item "trip", as well as possible arguments for it's inclusion with the "shaman/neoshaman" item of the New Age category, I will provide discussion with it omitted from the results.

tropes, and symbols. The results also suggest that the reports' rhetoric is influenced by socio-cultural and economic positions, as previously discussed.[147] Furthermore, as seen by the Medical Use and Preparation/Recipes sample group's lack of noteworthy rhetorical items, narration-modality does affect the appearance rate of items; these two groups contained more reports of a didactic or instruction modality. The only positive correlation between non-autobiographical modalities and discourse is that of Clinical rhetoric. This, however, seems evident as the relationships between Medical Use and Clinical are obvious.

Most importantly, the near equal split in RSM and Secular discourse greatly suggests that unity among the community of Erowid has not been established consciously, but by way of the rhetoric of their reports, and that they are engaging in religiously-oriented practices of psychedelic substance-use which spans across multiple religious, spiritual, and mystical discourses. While it is not absent from these reports, the results highly suggest that these individuals are *not merely* engaging in recreational activities, and instead can be considered in a more *ludic* sense. With the top items being "God", "meditate", "religious/spiritual/mystical", "reality", "terror", "realization", "hallucination", and "trip", these individuals are searching for *something*, and are no doubt finding something that *transcends* mere drug-use. This suggestion applies to the second top items as well, "eternity", "ego-death", "sacred/divine", "entities", "oneness", "medication", "purge", and "psychedelic". Now to a deeper analysis of the results.

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[147] Baker, Joseph O. "The Variety of Religious Experiences." 9-54; Proudfoot, Wayne. *Religious Experience.*; Yamane, David, Polzer, Megan, and Yamane, David. "Ways of Seeing Ecstasy in Modern Society," 1-25.

The results of this research suggests that there is a religious community that has coalesced around and within the Erowid Experience Vault. This community is evident in their use of Psychonautica discourse. Psychonautica discourse is composed of a variety of other discourses, but most notably in this particular Psychonaut group are the New Age, Counterculture, RSM and RSM Experience discourses, with Western, Eastern, Clinical, and Therapeutic discourses existing, but at much less rates. Also shown in these results, the RSM Experience discourse that appeared contained many of, if not all, the features which scholars typically agree upon as constituting a RSM experience. Furthermore, in light of each of these points - a group existing, their use of a multitude of discourses (in particular RSM *and* Secular discourses, and of those, New Age and Counterculture discourses), psychedelic substance use with an inclination to particular motives and outcomes, and inclinations to RSM discourse - it seems that these results suggest a positive correlation between this group and what scholars typically conceive of as a shamanic group.

Stephan Beyer sees shamanism as "our shared human ability to sacralize the world."[148] For Stanley Krippner, shamanism doesn't have rules to follow, it is eclectic. It "often incorporates different traditions, different perspectives, and different points of view. They have often taken what Westerners bring into the picture and made it their own. They make it part of their own tradition."[149] Additionally, he holds that it is also highly syncretic due to it originally being a spiritual *movement*, or spiritual technology,

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[148] Webb, Hillary S. "Expanding Western Definitions of Shamanism: A Conversation with Stephan Beyer, Stanley Krippner, and Hillary S. Webb." *Anthropology of Consciousness* 24, no. 1 (May 2013): 57–75, 58.
[149] *Ibid.*, 70.

and not a religion.[150] Traditional shamanism is also conceived of having four schemata: the shaman acts as a guide and interpreter to a neophyte's experience; substances are believed to reveal esoteric knowledge and as such are utilized for divination purposes; the substance facilitates access to alternate realms which are otherwise inaccessible during regular consciousness; and the shaman's experiences often include perception and interaction with spirit beings or entities which defy normal explanation.[151]

Erowid's community can be likened to the Psychonaut religion due to their shared use of blended RSM and Secular discursive elements, or *Psychonautica* discourse. Subsequently, this particular manifestation of a Psychonaut religious grouping can be related to shamanism in light of their collective use of RSM discursive elements to portray a reality in which alternate realities and realms exist, supernatural and divine entities exist, "known-reality"[152] is an illusion, they (the user) are equivalent or equal to God/a god, etc. Moreover, this group displays eclecticism and practices inclusivity of perspectives, beliefs, and philosophies. I suggest as well that the narratives of Erowid contain all four of the schemata that traditional shamanism typically has. While these users are not interpreting other's experiences overtly, they are internalizing any experience report they've read, and subsequently interpret their own experiences using past knowledge they have encountered within the Experience Vault. This creates a self-sustaining feedback loop of interpretation among the Experience Vault community, and as such Psychonautica discourse emerges.[153] By way of correlation this group shows

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[150] *Ibid.*, 73.

[151] Saniotis, Arthur, and Maciej Henneberg. "Craving for Drugs Is a Consequence of Evolution." *Anthropos* 107, no. 2 (2012): 571–578, 573.

[152] Waking, "normal", non-altered consciousness; or, as close to that as can be conceived.

[153] Straus, Roger A. "The Social-Psychology of Religious Experience: A Naturalistic Approach." *Sociological Analysis* 42, no. 1 (1981): 57-67; Strauss discusses sociocultural

striking similarities in its constituent qualities and could be seen as a shamanic or neoshamanic tradition.

However, while we may be able to find correlations and draw similarities, arguing that this particular Psychonaut group can be likened to shamanism, we shouldn't call psychonauts shamans, and Psychonaut religion a shamanic (or neoshamanic) tradition, because, as Hillary Webb says, "*shamanism* is simply an anthropological construct", and it becomes "problematic to analogize across cultural lines." Assigning cross-cultural labels can be political, destroys the unique experiences of individuals with a *catachresis* (linguistic error), and applying exotic other labels is "*museumification*," or "a way to label and then shelve the living specimens of our inquiry."[154] Furthermore, even though our use of these terms of "psychonaut" and "shaman" aid us in positioning ourselves as outsiders in relation to our research, we must remember they are not reflections or constructs of culture itself.[155] It is all discursive.

The importance of the New Age discourse in the emergence of Psychonautica discourse should be addressed. As the results show, these narratives, while a unique blend of a variety of discourses, are comprised of 25 percent of New Age discourse. This New Age discourse lends the Psychonautica discourse many features that were instead found in the Clinical and Therapeutic discourse categories. The particular methods that I chose to employ in this analysis were to highlight the RSM and Secular divide first and foremost, and as a by product of the process the subcategories were developed.

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structuring of religious experiences: the triggering of a religious experience due to the framing, predispositioning, programming, and triggering by groups.

[154] Webb. "Expanding Western Definitions of Shamanism.", 61.

[155] *Ibid.*, 64.

While New Age spirituality resembles shamanistic and mediumistic spiritualities that presuppose a state of "soul loss" or "spirit possession", respectively, it more closely aligns with modern psychiatry.[156] A notion which was seen in Roof's work with Boomers,[157] that of *individualism*, is conceived of in New Age spirituality as the *self* being a shadow of it's true divine nature. Within the psychedelic narratives of Erowid this is seen as an awakening or enlightenment; a feeling of completeness or perfection. As Roof suggests, individuals will come together and discover one another through their language, despite a formal leadership being absent.[158] This cohesion and discovery of a community via discourse is apparent in the reports of the Experience Vault. While some see individualism resulting in the breakdown of community, and therefore might refute the emergence of a community via Erowid, I would argue that the "means" of *individualism* creates the "end" of community, and shouldn't be seen as the "means" inhibiting the "end", that is to say that individualism leads to community and doesn't lead to its breakdown.[159] Indeed, it is through the individualism of unique rhetoric and beliefs that the users of Erowid interact with one another and create meaning of their somewhat shared experiences.

Also present in the narratives, similar to New Agers, are claims to extraordinary abilities and powers, as well as past lives, cosmic energies, fate, and personal accountability.[160] Additionally, New Age spirituality favors decentralization and

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[156] Tucker, James. "New Age Religion and the Cult of the Self." *SOCIETY-NEW BRUNSWICK*- 39, no. 2 (2002): 46-51, 47.
[157] Roof. *A Generation of Seekers*.
[158] *Ibid.*, 255.
[159] *Ibid.*, 256.
[160] Tucker. "New Age Religion and the Cult of the Self.", 48.

inclusivity as to who can become a healer.[161] Psychonaut religion, in turn, favors

decentralization and an inclusive attitude as to who can become a psychonaut. No rules or

guidelines exist as to who can use psychedelic substances, except, of course, possible

federal and state regulations.

> Tucker suggests that
>
> New Age religion, or whatever we call it, does not do the things that traditional religion does. It does not bind people to a larger group or society nor require them to submit themselves to a higher authority. Indeed, it does just the opposite...New Agers mostly reject the social world and any kind of authority beyond the self.[162]

I suggest that this non-binding feature of New Age religion which Tucker describes is

carried into Psychonaut religion via the inclusion of New Age discourse into

Psychonautica discourse. Indeed, the very notion of how these reports are generated, i.e.

use of an *illegal* substance, and the likelihood of entrance into an entirely new realm and

dimension, "reject[s] the social world and any kind of authority beyond the self."[163]

So what does all this mean? That is hard to say. However, I believe we can say

this: the psychedelic trip reports of Erowid's Experience Vault contain a rich resource of

potential religious, spiritual, and/or mystical narratives. The group that submits these

narratives, while statistically fitting a young adult American demographic, nonetheless

seem to simulate traditional shamanic groups. This simulation of religious behavior

shows through the actions they take and the discourse they choose to use in conveying

their experiences, and which in turn aids in the creation of the group. If we are to take

seriously any one of these points, I believe it warrants a closer look at psychedelic

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[161] *Ibid.*, 49.
[162] *Ibid.*, 50.
[163] *Ibid.*

narratives, and in particular, Erowid's Experience Vault, by the religious studies

community.

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APPENDIX: REPORT STATISTICS AND RESULTS

List of Sample Reports and URLs

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	Three Stars	Two Stars	One Stars	Zero Stars
Table 1. Sample groups and their constituent reports - Each report is listed with their report # assigned by Erowid and their star-rating 0-3.				
Bad Trip	8142	93659 98623 99340 96796 113791	107759 103831 88579 110553 110555	112926 100568 91471 110776
Entities/ Beings	110903 107477 101088 96444 91566	112152 112946 79749 83979 113791	113858 113511 106818 101367 113774	
Preparatio n/Recipes	94343 6520 1519	83979 105830 106331 102320 107135	108910 112930 97118 112302 106773	113181 69414
Medical Use	109021 100654 89425 83553 86922	113863 113869 108771 104802 104074	106317 84623 98302 91671 113035	
Mystical Experienc e	113283 72840 96444 91566 94343	113460 112152 99092 94632 96614	113858 113349 102258 111028 112845	

Table 2. RSM Discourse Categories - Listed are the five categories that constitute the RSM discourse. Their respective rhetorical items and number of appearances are listed beside each discourse.	
Religious/Spiritual/Mystical discourse items	
Western	God/Jesus/Satan/the Devil, etc. - 63 Eternity/eternal - 22 Hell - 9 Heaven - 6 Angelic - 4 Saint/saint's name - 3 Entheogen - 2
Eastern	Meditate – 28 Ego-Death – 18 Hinduism/Buddhism – 12 Chakra – 11 Yoga - 11 "gods" (i.e. Shiva, Visnu, etc.) – 6 Mantra – 2 Karma – 1 Zen - 1
New Age	Reality/Dimension/Alternate Worlds, etc. - 163 Entities or Beings - 155 Energy or light - 62 Love - 25 Shaman/neoshaman - 18 Journey - 13 Magic - 13 god(s), neopagan gods and goddess - 9 "Beat the game", life is a game, etc. - 8 Ethereal - 6 Otherworldly - 5 "Powers", telepathy, heightened senses, etc. - 4 Aura - 2 "Relocating of consciousness", changing perspective into an object or other being - 2 3rd eye - 1 Vibes - 1 Intuition - 1

	Deja vu - 1
RSM (Religious, Spiritual Mystical)	Religious/spiritual/mystical - 51 Soul - 41 Sacred/Divine/Sacrament, etc. - 36 Ecstasy/Euphoria - 33 Afterlife, having died and being aware of it, etc. - 32 Bliss - 31 Abyss/Emptiness/Void - 20 Devils, demons, angels, etc. - 17 Evil/Holy - 15 Prayer - 12 "No change", life has always been this way; i.e. contentedness - 11 Chanting - 5 Bless(ed) - 4 "Animism", i.e. the substances having anthropomorphic qualities such as sentience - 1 Esoteric - 1
RSM Experience	Terror/Doom/dread/sorrow, extreme negative emotions, etc. - 63 Oneness - 62 Time distortions - 33 Paradox - 24 Ineffability - 22 Enlightenment/Awaken - 20 Awe - 16 Truth - 14 Beauty - 9 "Realness", i.e. a particular lucidity that exaggerates the realness of the experience - 8 Overwhelmingness - 1

Table 3. Secular Discourse Categories - Listed are the three categories that constitute the Secular discourse. Their respective rhetorical items and number of appearances are listed below each discourse.	
Secular discourse items	
Therapeutic	Realization/Epiphanies, etc. – 57 Purge - 46 Profundity/Significance, etc. - 45 Transformation of self, values, etc. - 21 Heal/Cure/Growth - 15 Perfection/Wholeness/Purity/Completion - 13 Emotional Wellness - 3 Willpower - 1
Clinical	Hallucination/Hallucinogen/Hallucinatory, etc. - 67 Medication - 46 Substance - 26 Psyche/Dream - 21 Psychoactive/Chemical of the brain, i.e. Serotonin, etc. - 18 Drug Abuse/Overdose/Addiction - 6 Clinical - 1
Counterculture	Trip/Tripping, etc. - 459 Psychedelic - 218 Drug - 187 OEV/CEV/Visions - 158 Out-of-body-experiences - 62 Set/Setting, Guide/Sitter - 44 Peak/Come-up, Crash/come-down - 39 Hyperspace, Breakthrough - 34 Fractals - 32 Body-high, being high/fucked-up, etc. - 23 "An Error", doing something (the psychedelic) and its results are disastrous, i.e. death, end of reality, etc. - 14 Terence McKenna - 8 DMT elves - 5 Vortex - 1 Psychonaut - 1 Looping, i.e. experiencing the same events over and over, perceived as an infinite progression - 1

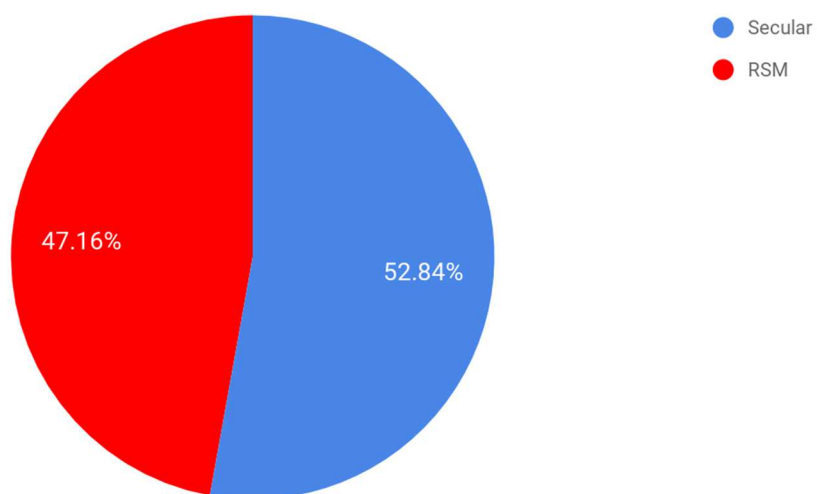## Figure 1. Total Rhetorical Items

"Trip" included

Secular
RSM

47.16% 52.84%

Figure 2. Total Rhetorical Items Alternate Model

"Trip" omitted

Secular
RSM

44.96%
55.04%
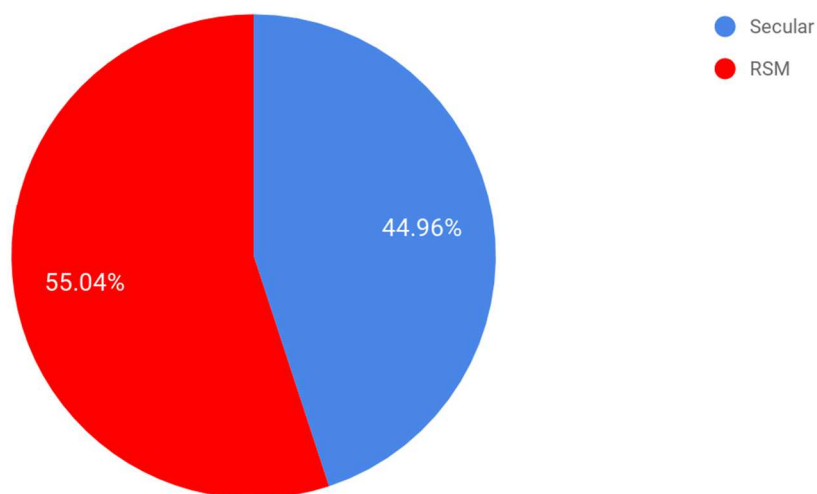
Figure 3. Total Rhetorical Items per Mythos

"Trip" omitted

Western 4.0%
Eastern 3.2%
Rsm 12.4%
New Age 25.0%
RSM Experience 10.4%
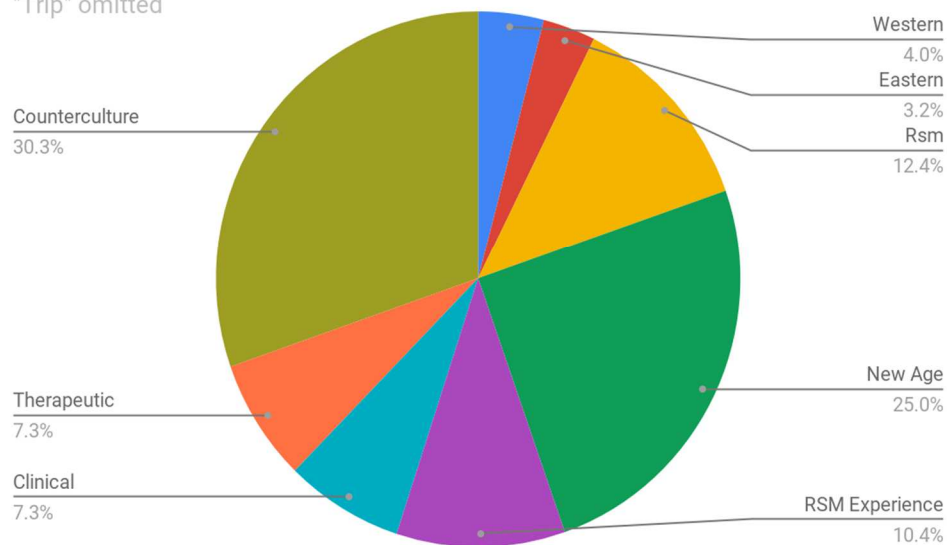Counterculture 30.3%
Therapeutic 7.3%
Clinical 7.3%

Figure 4. Total Prevalence of Rhetorical Mythoi within Sample groups

"Trip" omitted

Legend:
- Western
- Eastern
- Clinical
- Therapeutic
- Rsm
- New Age
- RSM Experience
- Counterculture

Y-axis: Total Items per Mythos
X-axis: Sample Groups (Preparation/Reci, Medical Use, Entities/Beings, Bad Trip, Mystical)