

Interview with Dr. Jacques Mabit: A Criticism to Queering Psychedelics, Queer Theory and Reflections on the Nature of Homosexuality,

by Shelby Hartman¹

1. *I am writing a story for Chacruna on the Queering Psychedelics conference. What are your thoughts on the event?*

Today, sexual identity is a highly sensitive topic, very often influenced by “political correctness,” which makes it difficult to talk about the issue in a serene manner without stirring some controversy. There is no denying the suffering caused by discrimination or the social oppression experienced by people whose sexual behaviors do not match the dominant model. This suffering often provokes reactivity to any evaluation that appears to contradict their own approaches or simply propose other nuances. This emotional hypersensitivity, proportional to the suffering that sustains it, tends to hijack the discourse and silence those who apparently contradict it. And this has led the discussion to become swamped in an ideological confrontation that has taken root in public discourse or in quick formulas that prevent a deeper approach to these issues. In this sense, the creation of spaces that offer an open discussion of issues relating to sexual identity are very positive, since they allow a consideration of their existential and spiritual dimensions, which remain mysterious, little known, and require further investigation.

The so-called “emerging groups,” which derive from an exclusion, have a specific ideology informed by the search for identity and demand to be seen and heard. At the same time, though, they must allow dialogue by mutually listening to the “other,” too, if they are to avoid becoming trapped in closed self-referential systems.

Now, we can ask whether the Queering Psychedelics Conference meets this criteria of open and adversarial debate between the distinct views and understandings and stances necessitated by such complex issues. To begin with, it is striking that, on the one hand, the issue of sexuality is defined from the perspective of queer theory, which denounces any form of “pathologizing”² of sexual conduct and, on the other, appeals to a “medicine” to explore the topic. Ayahuasca is an ancestral medicine and its

¹ This interview was conducted by email, in Spanish, on April 14th, 2019, and was later translated to English and published in NEIP’s site. This interview happened prior to Queering Psychedelics, a conference promoted by the Chacruna Institute for Psychedelic Plant Medicines, held in San Francisco in June 2019 (<https://chacruna.net/queering-psychedelics/>).

² Although other authors consider all “sexual identities” to be equally anomalous, including heterosexuality.

practitioners are curers, “medics,” as they call themselves,³ which would suggest there is “something” to “cure” or “heal” in people who “suffer” from these behaviors. I don’t think this is the approach of the organizers.

Having chosen ayahuasca as the central theme in this conference, it is strange that there are no indigenous representatives, especially healers from these ancestral traditions, so that they can contribute their knowledge on these themes.⁴ This exclusion considerably limits the discussion by ignoring the approach of experts in this area. It could be perceived with displeasure as a form of appropriating or recuperating their sacred medicine on the part of the groups representing indigenous masters like those of UMIYAC (the Union of Indigenous Ayahuasca Healers of the Colombian Amazon) who state the following:

*“Only the abuelos curacas [elder leaders], the true sages, can perform cures and interact with the spirits. The curacas [leaders] can see and recognize sicknesses. [...] In ancestral medicine, one has to learn respect for the abuelos curacas, respect for yagé [ayahuasca] and respect for oneself. You have to be humble vis-à-vis yagé. [...] There are also “whites” who travel the world wearing headdresses, commercializing yagé and calling themselves taitas [healers]. These are people with no knowledge and unauthorized by true taitas or curacas to practice medicine. It is sad because **it is an appropriation of our ancestral practices**; and it shows a lack of respect towards our cultures, towards our sacred medicine and towards the senior curacas.”⁵*

The complex and polemical topic of sexual identity makes it necessary to differentiate the kinds of suffering associated with unconventional practices; between those of external origin (social pressure, whether political, ideological, religious, institutional, etc.) and those that are internal (psychological, emotional, existential, spiritual, etc.). To do so, it is presumed necessary to approach this topic from an open and transdisciplinary angle that includes different views and understandings and stances on

³ For example, the association of indigenous healers of Colombia is called UMIYAC: Unión de Médicos Yageceros de la Amazonía Colombiana, the Union of Ayahuasca Healers [literally Medics] of the Colombian Amazon.

⁴ Editorial note: The program to the Queering Psychedelics conference can be found here: <https://chacrana.net/queering-psychedelics/>. Ayahuasca was not the central theme and there was an indigenous representative present.

⁵ “Conversaciones entre Médicos y Seguidores del Yagé: Gobierno Proprio, Territorio y Conocimiento Ancestral, Elaborado por el Comité Técnico de Unión de Médicos Indígenas Yageceros de la Amazonía Colombiana (UMIYAC)” www.umiyac.org, Text presented at the 5th Congress of the Latin American Association of Anthropology, 16th Congress of Anthropology in Colombia, Bogotá, 6-9 June 2017. See: https://neip.info/novo/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/UMIYAC_Medicos_seguidores_yage_ALA_5_jun_2017.pdf

Editorial note: This paper was presented at panel co-organized by Bia Labate in Bogotá, and published in a site edited by Bia Labate, NEIP. Bia Labate is Chacrana’s Executive Director. Chacrana has promoted the conference Queering Psychedelics.

the issue, convened from a more general perspective such as "Sexual Identity and Ayahuasca." Yet, from the moment that this conference adopts an ideological line defined and posited on the basis of a theory (queer theory) with moralist connotations,⁶ and that sets out from the arbitrary assumption, not definitively demonstrated, that all suffering is exogenous, there is a risk of abandoning scientific debate in order to create an ideologically uniform space from which any dissonant voice is excluded. This can only lead to participants engaging in a kind of mutually self-congratulatory confirmation of their pre-established ideas.

The convening of the conference by a LGBTI lobby raises the question of the representativeness of the participants when, historically, this collective has occupied a marginal or peripheral condition. A body that proclaims itself the representative of people dealing with issues of sexual identity inevitably lacks impartiality, particularly when it appeals to compassion as an argument in favor of special treatment. This fallacy, invoking the persuasive clamor of emotions to provoke conditioned responses, very easily leads to proselytism. A "false dilemma" is implicitly established (join our group or you lack compassion), incompatible with the spirit of the sciences, neutral, and without any bias other than to remain open in search of the truth. The organization of this event in parallel with Gay Pride in San Francisco nurtures this biased view, meaning that many homosexuals who do not share the ideology of this collective or this kind of public demonstration may, with good reason, feel excluded from this debate.

The fight against discrimination requires identifying the people or groups victimized by it. Paradoxically, though, this contravenes the queer concept that rejects the classification of individuals into universal and fixed categories. As an approach it is self-contradictory in its fight against discrimination, since, as Gabriela González Ortuño⁷ eloquently puts it, queer theory, *"by asserting that all human sexual desires are equally singular, denies this peripheral condition and renders invisible the discrimination faced by LGBTI people when they are perceived as marginal, thus promoting an institutionalization that is on some points in accordance with the heteropatriarchal discourse."*

⁶ Moralist is understood here not as the rational scientific qualification of a fact, but its valorization in terms of a morality that defines it as good or bad by appeal to philosophical, ideological, or religious referents. The term "discrimination," for example, has no connotation of good or evil in science, since it is simply an operation of differentiation or selection. Queer theory, however, considers discrimination "bad," making its evaluation moral in nature.

⁷ Ortuño, G. G. (2016), Teorías de la disidencia sexual: de contextos populares a usos elitistas. La teoría queer en América latina frente a las y los pensadores de disidencia sexogenérica [Theories of sexual dissidence: from popular contexts to elitist uses. The queer theory in Latin America in front of the thinkers of sexogenérica dissidence in various sources], *Revista Especializada en Estudios Latinoamericanos*, 3(5), 179-200.

Diverse ideological representations centered on specific topics have been heavily criticized for their tendency to appropriate ayahuasca with losses that fail to take into account the cultural matrix of the original groups. Such is the case of ideological currents like the one seen in this conference with the LGBTI lobby, or in other spaces promoting business interests, including haute couture houses (like the recent show by the Kenzo fashion house)⁸ or entertainment groups (a rave party in Buenos Aires with ayahuasca),⁹ and even by the ministries of tourism of Peru and Colombia that foment the creative touristic use of ayahuasca, attracting thousands of visitors in these countries. All of this forms part of a desacralization of a thousand-year-old medicine, transforming it into just one more product in the universal market of modernity. The sacred is, by definition, that which cannot be “touched,” except within a ritualized context and by consecrated and qualified people. In other words, ayahuasca’s domestication for purposes other than sacred medicine and therapeutic goals amounts to a profanation of the sacred.

2. *Some sociological research has found that ayahuasca can help people who are in the LGBTQI+ community accept themselves. What do you think of this?*

The first step to achieving personal equilibrium involves the acceptance of what constitutes our everyday reality. In this sense, an individual who has unperceived or unconscious homosexual tendencies or orientations, or who rejects or represses them, can take a step towards their own equilibrium and well-being by accepting the reality of their inner world.

Accepting a reality does not mean qualifying it in (positive or negative) terms, however, whether moral, medical, psychological, or spiritual. The psychotherapeutic function aims to bring to consciousness whatever is blocking the subject’s internal dynamism, without this possessing any moral connotation one way or another. Becoming aware of an inner dynamic is a liberating step in itself, but it does not automatically entail approval or disapproval of the different levels indicated above, nor mean that the process of overcoming [the repression] ends there. It is indeed desirable that, having untangled certain knots, the person makes use of this renewal and disposition of new psychic energies to move forward. For example, becoming aware of an artistic potential

⁸ Gearin, A. (2019), Ayahuasca exotica and high fashion on the Kenzo runway, *Kahpi* https://kahpi.net/ayahuasca-fashion-kenzo-paris/?fbclid=IwAR3HOL58MyWTw9NNs0oz3EUuR-_a0ogCUGkhifDINA3vZENvvOPLXBpAnNpk

⁹ “The sacred art of Indians has been transformed into entertainment,” Moses Pianko, a member of the Ashaninka tribe of northern Brazil told VICE at the 2016 World Ayahuasca Conference in Rio Branco, Brazil. In Tiernan, R. (2016), Millennials boost Columbia tourism in search for hallucinogenic plant, *Metro*, retrieved from <https://www.metro.us/news/millennials-threaten-ayahuasca-tourism/zsjpjd--8bwjplxnahfvu>

repressed by family pressure is one positive step; even more so if it can lead to a change in profession and a greater realization of the subject's personality, the artistic gift being a potential that everyone can agree is morally positive and healthy. Conversely, although the first step in the healing process of a depressive person is their acceptance of the depression, this does not mean that depression is healthy in itself, but rather that it offers an opportunity to access another way of living. To achieve this, ideally the person will continue to delve into the most intimate strata of their inner world.

As far as sexual identity is concerned, it involves a complex dynamic that does not cease with the simple acceptance of a social, medical, or ideological categorization. It is evolutionary by definition and homosexual expressions in childhood, adolescence or adulthood do not have the same connotations. The risk involves definitively fixing what may prove to be temporary, dynamic, and evolving. Beyond a first necessary level of self-acceptance, it is also desirable for the individual, when the time is right, to explore deeper dimensions at another level, such as transpersonal, transgenerational, spiritual, or semantic dynamics. In this case, the initial suffering may be converted into a motor for the great adventure of exploring your own life and Life at an ampler level.

In the end, every individual has the freedom to choose to explore or not these very profound dimensions, to seek the truth of their being. And this decision, in one way or another, must be respected absolutely, even if it contradicts our own ideas or explanatory models of life where nobody is necessarily owner of the Truth.

3. Do you think ayahuasca can help people accept their sexual identities?

Used in a correct, ritualized manner, with adequate preparation, a trained guide, and a later work of integration, ayahuasca is a tool for achieving reconciliation with ourselves, our surroundings, roots, and history, the world to which we belong, and the spiritual world. In this process of reconciliation, the affective-sexual dimension is evidently very important, but it cannot be isolated from other dimensions of life. It seems somewhat fictitious to want to separate sexual identity from other dimensions of our more global identity, as many scholars have pointed out.¹⁰

¹⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty speaks of this "embodied-being-in-the-world," the "body itself," which is also sexual in its relations, experiences, and bonds. For Merleau-Ponty, "An individual's concrete sexuality is the expression of an existential choice and shows us the need to reach the deepest layers of existence to understand it in a unitary sense." See Álvarez-Valdés, L. G. (2002), *La función integradora y expresiva de la sexualidad en Merleau-Ponty [the integrating and expressive function of sexuality in Merleau-Ponty]*, *Daimon Revista Internacional De Filosofía*, 25, 101-112, retrieved from <https://revistas.um.es/daimon/article/view/14741/181301>

Sexuality is very closely linked to the sacred; all traditions have recognized this fact. Sexuality contains the mystery of the encounter with the "other" and the process of differentiation from fusion to union. It possesses a mystical, religious, and spiritual dimension. If everything tends to be desacralized in contemporary modernity, sexuality becomes a simple object, a mechanics, a simple physiological function. Approaching sexuality from the viewpoint of specific groups reflects the tendency and mentality of social fragmentation into communities and a reductionism focused on local identities (sexual, racial, religious, professional, age-based, etc.). Used well, ayahuasca restores our capacity to look at ourselves with a more holistic view of our identity that surpasses the identification with a single dimension our whole being, specifically with the sexual, giving rise to a segmentation that aims to generalize or totalize the person and reduces us to merely being members of a "sexual community."

4. In your opinion, what is the purpose of ayahuasca and plant medicines?

The traditional use of ayahuasca and other master plants, bequeathed by the indigenous nations of Amazonia, is first of all as a medicine with a spiritual dimension or religious practice (in the sense of *religare*, to connect "sky and earth") that heals the body, mind, and spirit. It is not just a medicine, nor just a religion or a spiritual practice. It intimately associates the two dimensions of healing and spiritual liberation. Healing corresponds to the search for immediate well-being in the here and now, while spiritual liberation addresses metaphysical questions that go beyond the space of our embodied life. When the spiritual dimension is ignored, "salvation," in conventional theological terms, especially when the ritual part is left out, ayahuasca is reduced to a facilitator of psychotherapy with the risk of distancing or disconnecting from transcendence, the global meaning of life. Symmetrically, if the dimension of healing with the whole body of gestures and associated medical practices is ignored (blowing, sucking, diets, etc.), there is a risk of transforming its use into an instrument of sectarian religious practices. We cannot, therefore, speak of the effects of ayahuasca and other master plants without specifying the use made of them, in what context, with whom, with what intention.

Queer theory seems to indicate a use of ayahuasca essentially intended to respond to the need for greater personal acceptance and confront sociocultural stigmatization; in other words, to provide a healing response. At the same time, it is part of a way of thinking that rejects every form of transcendence, of objective and natural spiritual referents, of a semantic dimension of suffering, of sacredness, or in other words, that excludes a priori the dimension of spiritual liberation and destiny.

By separating these two dimensions of healing and spiritual liberation, a kind of internal dissociation is induced that splits the person in a harmful "schizophrenic" dualism. I'm afraid that the Queering Psychedelics Conference focuses only on the dimension of

healing, omitting the dimension of salvation and, in the end, favors this dualism and desacralization of ayahuasca.

5. *Have you administered ayahuasca to people in the LGBTQI+ community? If yes, what have you learned from this?*

People who come to the Takiwasi Centre have never arrived with the intention of “treating” issues related to homosexuality. However, the life history of addicted patients who choose to undertake long-term treatment very often includes homosexual relations, associated or not with drug use. And, among the visitors participating in the seminars or retreats (diets), themes related to homosexuality frequently surface.

The first thing that can be observed is the variety of life histories and forms of manifestation of homosexuality, from the most marked and perceived as “from birth” to the most fleeting linked to the desire to experience “something different,” or to acts of prostitution linked to the need to obtain drugs. In other words, we could say that “homosexuality,” as such, does not exist, but extremely varied forms and practices of homosexuality and, more widely, of experiencing and living sexuality in general. Based on this observation, I would not know how to define and understand the term “homosexual identity,” which seems to me more like a conceptual construction than an objective reality.

The second observation is that constitutive or structural homosexuality in people who tend to define themselves as “gay” is always the result of a life history, a construction that is not only sociocultural but also inscribed in a particular psychoaffective matrix. We can point out only some of the most frequent, though not exhaustive, characteristics of the constructions elaborated within these matrices.

The family structure tends to be classic with a strong predominance of the mother-child relationship with a weak or absent paternal figure, in the case of male homosexuals (and vice-versa for women). In this context, an intense, almost metaphysical fear of the opposite sex lurks in the unconscious background of the person, leaving no other possibility than to establish affective-sexual relations with people of the same sex. Otherness becomes confused with similarity, the “other” is a pseudo-other, a peer (similar) rather than a counterpart (different). Exploring this dimension of the fear of the self’s death or destruction by the “female-maternal” (in the case of male homosexuals) is extremely difficult, distressing, and cannot be undertaken without support at the same level from which it originates; that is, the metaphysical or spiritual.

Childhood sexual abuse is also frequently observed, which seems to affect the perception of sexual identity: in these cases, there very often exists an amnesia of these traumas, especially when incest is involved, but they can return to consciousness with the use of ayahuasca. If anthropology sustains that the basic initial differentiation constitutive of humanity is associated with the incest taboo, then it would be worth reflecting on the possible variants or declensions that may arise from the transgression of this universal law in the multiple expressions of sexuality.

There are also cases of homosexual identity inherited transgenerationally, whereby the person is born with this baggage and perceives it as constitutive of his or her deepest self. Normally, spiritual inheritances follow gender lines and come from the alternate generation (from a paternal grandfather to his grandson or a maternal grandmother to her granddaughter). However, if, for example, a man's maternal grandfather transmits his spiritual energy to his daughter and the latter to her son, the latter will receive a male spiritual inheritance (from his grandfather) through a woman (his mother), which entails a strange primordial overlapping that may affect the male-female differentiation. At this level too, transpersonal and transgenerational, the psychoaffective field overflows into the existential or spiritual domain and the meaning of life. The understanding is that in these cases, the use of ayahuasca (or another therapeutic method) that is limited to healing will not bring to consciousness these dimensions that transcend the psychoaffective.

It should be noted that the various mechanisms briefly described here that, among many others, may favor the constitution of a homosexual identity are not intended to account for homosexual expressions only. We also find them in people who recognize themselves as heterosexual. The law of cause and effect does not apply here in a mechanical form, since it is part of the still-mysterious complexity of human life that refuses generalizations. It is enough to evoke, for example, the question of inheritances of past lives in certain traditions to signal the fact that the topic must remain open and that further discussion is possible.

The reductionism to moral connotations with "false dilemma" arguments in one sense or another (good or bad) hijacks the possibility of approaching this situation from the clinical, rather than moral, observation of the mechanisms that generate deep suffering. The temptation to deny this suffering is very strong, both on the part of homosexual persons, for whom it represents a great challenge, and on the part of the postmodernity, which, in its tendency to desacralize society, prefers to attribute this suffering exclusively and arbitrarily to the surrounding world, social pressures, or moralist, religious or political ideologies.

It is up to each individual to decide whether they wish to pursue or not their freedom to explore their deepest self, without being bound to the kinds of dogmas and prejudices found in both "conservative" and "liberal" mentalities or schools.