



# Psychedelic attunements: rethinking set and setting and context

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## Abstract

Psychoactive substances are unruly, wobbly, and mercurial in ways that trip up grammars designed to control, anticipate, and harness them. We explore how frameworks of 'context-dependency' and 'set and setting' struggle to handle such unruliness, even as they have become programmatic for understanding psychoactive effects across clinical psychiatry, harm reduction practices, Indigenous eco-cosmologies, the history of churches, and more. Moving beyond mechanistic notions of interaction effects and a deterministic science of context, we import the concept of attunement from the critical humanities to reclaim and uplift the trickery and the fickleness of substances misapprehended as controlled technologies with predictable outcomes. We trace this through the contextual and affective governance of psychedelic medicalisation, alongside the illuminating literature on the Indigenous Amazonian brew ayahuasca. Considering how ayahuasca resonates across ancestral, counter-colonial, and capitalistic fields of attunement that render experience multiple and indeterminate, we show how the fields themselves vibrate, condense, melt, overlap, and transform through bodily and sensory experience. This matters at a time when psychedelics are being rapidly pulled into medical, market-based, and infrastructural pathways that risk tuning them to a narrow band of possibility.

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## Introduction

This paper introduces the concept of psychoactive attunements to examine how drugs fold into cultural and social worlds, neurological receptors, and ideological and governing frameworks to intensify, dull, and augment life. We are dissatisfied with how non-pharmacological variables tend to be treated in dominant understandings of drug effects, through catch-all terms such as ‘context’ and ‘set and setting’ (Zinberg 1984; Hartogsohn 2020; Carhart-Harris et al. 2018) that are always at risk of glossing enormous heterogeneity, failing to explore interactions with drug-specific effects, or—in the case of set and setting—recapitulating stale oppositions such as between the ‘psychological’ and the ‘physical’. Set and setting theory has endured as a foundational insight in drug research by recognising the importance of extra-pharmacological factors, like interpersonal relations, sensory cues, and spatial and environmental dynamics, influencing decades of work in psychedelic science and therapy, psychopharmacology, anthropology, history, and other disciplines. However, the theory often functions as a general acknowledgment that *context matters* without engaging the dynamics and frictions in how experience absorbs and transcends context in varied ways. This paper considers how psychoactive substances ‘tune’ our capacities to affect and to be affected. We examine how they do not behave as stable stimuli that are modified by contextual factors but are mercurial agents that dynamically interact with bodies in unruly and sometimes completely unexpected ways. We contend that the process-oriented language of “attunement” in the critical humanities and social sciences (Stewart 2011; Brigstocke and Noorani 2016) can enrich our understanding of how pharmacological substances become felt, transformed, contested, feared, celebrated, and lived, thereby providing a clearer view of their ‘effects’—whether stimulating, sedating, transforming, commodifying, ontologising, ancestralising, or other.

Our interest concerns psychoactive drugs in general, though we focus on psychedelics which have furnished much cross-cultural literature on their atmospherics, including the messy and colourful transcending of expectations, the affective tones of visionary navigation, the synaesthetic sensorium of ritual, the shapeshifting presence of spirit and authority, and the dance of safety and exposure. The concept of attunement allows us to sketch a process language for getting at the complexity of psychedelic phenomenology in situ. Such tuning, as we will show, is never clean or absolute, but partial, unstable, and sometimes openly contestable, a feature we track to demonstrate how forces shape—without determining—what psychedelics *can* do, including their wobbly, unruly potentials where the usual frames of reference dissipate, melt, and stop making sense. Indeed, we find this baked into the common therapeutic notion of psychedelics as opening experience to subtle energies and healing through symptom enlargement or amplification rather than suppression or elimination.

Yet, this unruliness is also what medical and therapeutic frameworks seek to contain and manage as the substances are tuned towards more standardised epistemologies, infrastructures, and commercial norms of psychiatry and medicine. The growing acceptance of such tunings raises the spectre of alternatives to medicalized pathways, including those that long predate medicalisation and have been a source



of knowledge, practice and inspiration for it. To explore this, we frame the Indigenous Amazonian brew ayahuasca as a site where diverse, overlapping, and competing “fields of attunement”—ancestral, counter-colonial, and capitalistic—have been encountered and cultivated, all through unstable bodies, dynamic environments, and social regimes.

What follows is deliberately exploratory. We want to offer the psychedelic humanities a vocabulary that is neither socially nor pharmacologically reductive (see Noorani et al. 2023: footnote 3). Pharmacologists describe this in terms of the enigmatic idea of ‘interaction effects’ between a mixture of social, pharmacological and other variables (e.g. Dworkin et al. 2023), but the logic of investigating interaction is still built on isolation and re-combination. We suggest the concept of attunement invites another vocabulary, which focuses on experiential contrasts across different contextualised substances. This resonates with analytical shifts from the plural to the multiple (Mol 2002; Sanabria 2021). Whereas the register of the multiple articulates different ‘enactments’ of psychoactive substances in situ, we uplift the trickery and the fickleness of psychoactive drugs that are misapprehended as controlled technologies with predictable outcomes. For this reason alone, we hope our approach may be appealing to clinical trialists who recognise that any given individual cannot be read from charts that plot distributions of drug effects as measured on populations. We are interested in the dissonant effects, decompensation processes, and sudden reversals or plot twists, that all wrench open the deterministic sciences of reduction, at a time when these sciences are championing interaction as a new frontier of study.

In what follows, we use the term ‘psychedelic’ while recognising it is an equivocation when carried across cultural worlds that name these and similar substances through different ontologies. Our retention of the term psychedelic here is in part to engage the dominant discourse through which these substances are currently being medicalised. We begin the article with attunement in the context of medicalisation, given medicalisation’s growing dominance in how psychedelics are rendered governable and legitimised at a global level, but also to tease out its limits in understanding the lived, compositional realities of these substances. The ayahuasca examples then demonstrate attunements that resonate across bodily disciplines, colonial mirrors, sensory contortions, ancestral atmospheres, cosmological ecologies, market asymmetries, and more. The goal, here, is neither to separate nor to infuse ‘drug’ and ‘context’ but to provide a way for ayahuasca’s multiplicity to register across varied attunements while appreciating how different realities are constituted through the brew.

## Medicalized tunings

Historically, psychedelics have been defined in academia as catalysts for healing, spiritual transcendence, madness, social disruption, and more (Dyck and Elcock 2023; Hartogsohn 2020), occupying liminal and paradoxical positions within the humanities (Langlitz 2024). Yet as psychedelics are increasingly incorporated into medicine, their effects are also tuned through infrastructures that are simultaneously epistemic and economic, shaped by and in turn shaping clinical trial research, credentialled roles, and logics of liability, insurance, market-economies, and so forth. In this



sense, 'psychedelic therapy' already operates as a form of affective governance—not only offering care but scripting which moods are sought, parried with, or denied (therapeutic hope, catharsis, fear, insight, rather than say, communion, celebration, or even revenge), which experiences are significant for treatment, and which therapeutic relations are permitted. Although the emerging medical psychedelics sector seeks to draw from a diverse well of cultural lineages, the capitalistic infrastructures of this paradigm may render the affective potentialities of the substances less pluripotent than at first glance.

This transformation of psychedelics comes atop a longer history of medicalised tuning. Innovations in psychopharmacology and the global expansion of psychiatry during the mid to late twentieth century reshaped the affective landscape of societies across the globe, emphasising drug medication-based treatments over psychotherapy (Luhmann 2001). Emotional experience became increasingly commodified, and pharmaceutical companies redefined illness and normalcy along the lines of market interests (Dumit 2012). Considering this period, Rose (2007) located biomedicine in a broader terrain of "life itself," where the drive to patent, regulate, and advertise psychoactive substances normalised drug-based interventions but also attuned them tightly with market imperatives. As such, these drugs have flourished as part of the functional architecture of modern societies to become a "way of life" that provides mood regulation for societal pressures, including those of neoliberal capitalism (Elliott and Chambers 2004). This has raised questions about how psychedelic therapies—which are varied across and within societies—embody sociocultural differences that far exceed the norms of medical standardisation, to the extent that Langlitz and Gearin argued they "should be evaluated as an integral element of entire forms of life" (2024:14). A core challenge facing the medicalization of psychedelics, we suggest, is precisely the indeterminacy of their attunements with sociocultural 'set and setting,' which renders context unusually important yet with far less clarity over just how far that significance reaches.

One of the most morally charged issues with the broader psychoactive tuning of modernity resides in the habit-forming or addictive capacities of drugs, for instance where stimulants (or 'uppers') and depressants (or 'downers') are susceptible to problematic repetitive usage. Determining what makes drugs habit-forming is challenging—habit formation is profitable even as it is harmful, and subject to the myriad contextual dynamics of substance use. Although psychedelics, unlike amphetamines, appear to be largely non-addictive in the traditional pharmacological sense (Johnson et al. 2018; cf. Noorani 2025), their uptake in capitalist frameworks still generates a different kind of extraction. The rise of microdosing culture (Wong and Raz 2022), where users take small, sub-hallucinogenic doses to enhance productivity or creativity, points to a habit-forming logic that is not dependent on the substance as such but on the promise of being continually *tuned*.<sup>1</sup> Folded in with self-tracking technologies, productivity discourses, and coaching economies, microdosing provides another means of self-optimization labour. In this sense, the extraction of microdos-

<sup>1</sup> We see an ironic shift from Timothy Leary's call to 'tune in' in his infamous slogan, "turn on, tune in, drop out", where tuning in has been taken to signify something more like gaining awareness of the artifice of the whole capitalist system or 'game'.



ing is not driven by kinds of chemical compulsion but environmental pressures to remain flexible, motivated, and affectively “on” or ready. This logic also shadows the how ketamine and psilocybin have been described as quick-fix solutions for mental health crises (Gearin and Devenot 2021). This is part of a wider pattern in which psychoactive life is folded into the rhythms of work and consumption, shaping what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) called “affective labor”—the commodified performance of optimism, calmness, patience, attentiveness, and other feelings. Across service economies, from psychedelic wellness retreats and clinical medicine to taxi driving, workers are often expected not only to deliver tasks but to radiate certain dispositions. This affective labor helps sustain markets for pharmacological products that promise to support the repetitive emotional demands of work.

These contextual dynamics of drug use can be thought of in terms of adaptive “tuning” or “resonance,” recursive processes that echo neuroscientific concepts like neural entrainment, adaptive resonance theory, and synaptic scaling (Buzsáki & Draguhn 2004; Grossberg 2013; Turrigiano 2008). Understood in this light, psychoactive attunement is less about the unvarying properties of a substance than about the confluence of neurobiological, mental, social, economic, and other forces that make up the composite lived effects of the chemical agents, including how patterns of use take hold, dissipate, or intensify over time.

Unlike common symptom-management drugs like antidepressants or anxiolytics, psychedelics are being medicalized for occasional rather than regular or daily use, and also usually as an enhancement to psychotherapy. Some hail this as a paradigm shift when compared with existing pharmacotherapies (Schenberg 2018). By and large, they are perceived as catalysts that unlock or amplify the psychotherapy process, which would imply that their psychoactive effects are tuned by a plethora of talk therapies, from cognitive behavioral therapy to psychoanalysis and somatic psychotherapy (Aday et al. 2024). However, their atmospheres of consumption are also being tuned by various emerging industrial regulations and governance requirements: medical stipulations on their prescription and use, reimbursement constraints, provider credentialising processes, clinic permitting and insurance requirements, and so on (Cohen 2024; Gearin et al. 2026). In this way, the psychedelic session might be described as a pharmacological event crafted by atmospheres of care, bureaucracy and actuarialism. In amongst these, practices and processes of attunement operate at multiple levels. We turn now to a grammar for teasing these out.

## Retuning attunement

Appearing in early humanistic psychology (Rogers 1961), attunement is an organising concept in contemporary psychotherapy that was popularised by psychologist Daniel Stern’s work on the emotional and communicative interactions between caregivers and infants (1985). In psychedelic science today, the concept is being taken up as the necessity of certain kinds of emotional awareness and responsiveness on behalf of the therapist (The Royal College of Psychiatrists 2025; Sienknecht 2024; Rosenbaum et al. 2024), and under the banner of ‘cultural attunement’ as referring to cultural competence in psychedelic psychotherapy (Ching and Kelmendi 2025). In psychedelic therapy, attunement raises special epistemic challenges. Unlike psycho-



therapy without psychotropic drugs, a patient on a high dose of psilocybin may suddenly embody alternate realities that make therapeutic attunement challenging. This, we suggest, invites closer attention to what attunement *is* and what it might mean for psychedelic therapy, and for other modes of psychoactive substance use, given that the concept affords much more than interpersonal features of therapy.

The humanities literature on attunement casts a much wider net, finding its roots in philosophers like Immanuel Kant, Martin Heidegger, and Jakob Johann von Uexküll who offer different renditions of affective and embodied life. In parsing this literature on attunement, Brigstocke and Noorani (2016) distinguish four broad traditions of scholarship. Firstly, attunement is depicted in Kantian scholarship as ‘free play’ between imagination and understanding. Here, understanding ordinarily seeks to bring the unified presentation of the senses given by the imagination under a determinate concept or rule. In contrast, attunement refers to something less final: a good fit or harmony between the processes of understanding and imagination, where both imagination and understanding are active—the former continually forming rich and coherent patterns; the latter always seeking intelligibility while not ‘pinning down’ the contents of experience into conceptual closure. This idea of attunement as free play of the understanding and imagination offers frameworks for healing, substance-assisted therapy, or flourishing in general. We might focus on the promotion, by the healer, therapist, or guide, of the proliferation of sensations, images, meanings, and possibilities, as well as ways of making sense of these. Attunement in this tradition evokes the “songs of life” that Kubala (2023) calls for in reference to Deleuze and Guattari’s (2009) schizoanalysis, their song-like quality an evocation of Kant’s view that the harmonies of attunement are necessarily beautiful.

A second tradition of approaching attunement focuses on how we “calibrate our bodies as instruments” in pre-conscious or non-conscious ways that ensure we are already tuned for encounters. Here we can draw on the extensive social science literature on atmospheres (Anderson 2009), including Stewart’s (2011) work referring to atmospheres not as inert contexts but charged and vibrant fields that envelop, linger, dissipate, and consolidate within the textures of lived experience. Their intensities, Stewart explains, are present in the feeling that *something is happening*—whether in physical spaces, landscapes, and environments, or in dreams, imaginaries, memories, and sensory shimmers. Atmospheres are local, and may arise from labor pressures, racial or gender expectations, and ecological and climate rhythms, where atmospheric attunements are “palpable and sensory yet imaginary and uncontained, material yet abstract,” providing the “live background” of living. Considered in this light, psychoactive drugs are chemical agents that attune to settings and contexts of consumption which provide indeterminate “building blocks of felt atmospheres” (Gearin et al. 2026). They do not merely alter perception but modulate our resonance with prevailing fields of attunement, whether amplifying, dampening, or reconfiguring such force fields—like capital, ecology, medicine, ancestry, counterculture etc.—that permeate the textures of living with psychoactive substances. It is not only because of situatedness, but also because of this recursivity whereby the atmospheres arising from drug use in turn have causal power, impacting and conditioning further drug use in that context (Becker 1953), that making predictions about the effects of psychoactive sub-



stances in any general way is difficult. As Emilia Sanabria has written of ayahuasca use amongst neotraditional urban practitioners in Brazil,

Sometimes the same batch is served on different occasions but the effects are evaluated as having been different. There are multiple reasons for this. The first is that the energy *baxada* (drawn down) in the *salão* (collective ritual space) is understood to *potencializar* (make more potent) the effect of the brew. The collective effect is adduced to individual effects, such that if everyone in the *salão* is *passando mal* (having a bad time) or in a particularly elevated mood, these energies are understood to spread among other participants. (Sanabria 2021).

This is connected with a third tradition of attunement that Brigstocke and Noorani describe as a form of embodied relationality and interconnectedness that “capacitates individual empathy and grounds the possibility of co-production.” Here, so many technologies for tuning into another offer ways of connecting with others’ emotions and affect. Experiences of emotional and energetic contagion in group settings of ayahuasca use (Gearin 2017: 207; Hanegraaff 2026) intensify relational interconnectedness and saturate shared atmospheres of reverence, grief, fear, joy, and other affects in ways that can be wondrously visual and sensory and subtle and intense.

Finally, Brigstocke and Noorani’s fourth tradition of attunement refers to encounters with otherness in the form of vast spatiotemporal scales, alternative realities, and even alter-selves, whereby they “bring us into contact with lost futures, haunted presents, and even different versions of ourselves” (ibid., 2016). Amongst psychoactive drugs, psychedelics in particular have been celebrated for their unruly effects, whether ancient and primordial or futuristic, offering mystical visions of the total, the void, the long *durée*, or skipping across timelines and alternative realities, potential medicines for exploring grief and trauma. These attunements can be perplexing and destabilising both acutely, and/or after the experience has ended (Argyri & Evans 2025), but also hold the promise of new and speculative possibilities. Living with psychedelics, in this sense, includes the measurable pharmacokinetics of when a person is under the immediate effects of consuming a substance, but also when they are sober but socialising with others under the effects (the realm of the ‘contact high’), or even simply when living with the memory of shifts in perception, identity, or personhood that were facilitated by drug experiences initially had long ago. This complicates the mechanistic thinking of “drug, set, and setting” by accounting for the many temporalities and social worlds that render the lived realities of psychoactive experience.

Bringing these traditions together, we might say that drugs change ‘affordances’ for drug users in particular environments. Affordances are defined by James J. Gibson (2014) as real and stable features of the person-environment relationship enabling certain actions to be performed in given environments for actors with given capabilities. For instance, a chair ‘affords’ sitting for (most) humans, while it affords hiding under for household cats. For Gibson, it was important to proffer a realist theory of affordances, such that “the affordance of something does *not change* as the need of the observer changes” (ibid.: 130, original emphasis). Gibson wanted affordances to be attributes of a shared, objective world that could be developed towards a resolutely



objective science of perception. They are therefore not collapsible onto individual needs, motives, or appetites. Gibson readily acknowledged the compromise that he is willing to make in noting the challenge for the reductionist scientist who “may boggle at invariant combinations of invariants that specify the affordances of the environment for an observer” (Gibson 2014), an antecedent to the challenges faced by the researcher of ‘interaction effects’ today. We prefer to keep a focus on the relative intransigence of (layered) attunements that ensure affordances be ready-to-hand. Echoing Rietveld and Kiverstein’s (2014) treatment of the role of skill in shaping affordances, we suggest drug attunements work by folding users into phenomenological states that render their capacities for action, feeling, and thought in given environments.

Perhaps a more receptive concept may be found in the early twentieth century work of Jakob von Uexküll, where the ‘*umwelt*’ describes the subjective sensory world that each organism inhabits, shaped by its unique perceptual faculties and attuned to the rhythms of its environment (Uexküll 2010). Unsurprisingly, attunement is central in the development of this concept, which Uexküll takes up in analogy to music. As with how instruments in an orchestra harmonise, for Uexküll each organism perceives and engages with the world according to the sensory capacities and affective registers that compose its *umwelt*. Perception, then, is an active process of tuning into one’s environment, shaped by recursivity between organism and environment (see also Buchanan 2008). Expanding the *umwelt*, in this sense, involves recalibrating these perceptual and affective capacities that enable individuals and collectives to attune to wider possibilities.

In this way, psychoactive drugs challenge a binary opposition between organisms’ (stable) capabilities and their (fleeting) needs and desires. To the extent that these changes are predictable, action possibilities open up that felt like they were impossible outside of the psychoactive experience—from facing a fear, to public displays of affection, to accepting deeply having caused harm or embodying others’ perspectives, human and more than human. These are not just embracing rare or challenging possibilities, but stepping beyond the bounds of what has been considered possible.

As Des Tramacchi (2006) noted twenty years ago, psychedelic substances like the potent molecule N, N-dimethyltryptamine (DMT) may expand the *umwelt* by dissolving the boundaries between self and other, subject and object. In such states, perception is not merely extended but, potentially, fundamentally reoriented as it offers novel forms of connection across human and more-than-human worlds. Yet, as Tramacchi explained, this expansion introduces challenges: while it opens up new sensory and affective possibilities, it can also overwhelm psychonauts and generate experiences of dissonance, confusion, ontological rupture (Argyri and Evans 2025) and ontological collision (Gearin, 2024b). The ability to navigate psychoactive atmospheres is shaped, to some extent, by the expectations and modes of attunement that users bring with them. For example, the historical framing of DMT as the “businessman’s trip” in 1970s America (Strassman 2000) reflects a utilitarian approach to psychoactive atmospheres that aligns with the capitalist rhythms of productivity. In such a framework, DMT becomes a vehicle for brief escapism or awe—offering a controlled burst of otherworldly exposure neatly contained between work meetings, thereby stripped of deeper, transformative and relational potential. In contrast,



Tramacchi's theorizes that DMT can be an agent of *umwelt* expansion, thereby emphasising something deeper. Here, DMT facilitates not fleeting escape, but tuning back in. The attraction of this is conditioned by an attunement field that already prizes returning to ground truths. Similarly, Gallimore (2013) speculates that DMT may have been an ancestral neuromodulator of the human brain, producing its own space–time, in much the same way that Gallimore suggests serotonin today produces consensus reality. The recent interest in extended DMT (or DMTx) infusions to stabilise and explore these new space-times illustrates the desire to know and potentially exploit the DMT world. With the accelerated interest in novel psychoactive drugs spurred by recent investments in psychedelic research and development, we might draw on the psychotropic phenomenology literature to theorise many such newly-common worlds, all caught in the tensions of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation (Deleuze and Guattari 2009).

Individual differences in *umwelts* reflect the complexity of human experience which is shaped not only by human neurodiversity, but by variation in psychological and social contexts. This variability extends to how individuals experience psychoactive substances—what might constitute a transformative shift in consciousness for one could be more prosaic for another. These psychological and identity differences may occasion experiences that vary in diverse ways, given that “drug users don’t all value the same aspects of their drug experiences and many people don’t value these experiences at all” (Langlitz 2024:291). As affordances and values are toggled through the use of psychoactive substances within shifting attunement fields, attunement articulates at once the potential of beautiful experiences of harmony, coupling with enveloping atmospheres, technologies for connecting with others, and face-to-face encounters with the horrors of the infinite and the void.

### **Ayahuasca attunements: ancestral, (counter-)colonial, capitalistic**

Ayahuasca, long embedded in Indigenous cosmologies and shamanic practices—and more recently in diverse religious and neo-shamanic approaches globally—has attuned to a myriad of purposes other than healing and symptom relief, from inculcating ancestral identity to the enhancement of hunting abilities to supporting religious devotion, convivial pleasure, play, and entrepreneurial mastery (Luna and Amaringo 1999; Narby and Pizuri 2021; Kopenawa and Albert 2013; Gearin 2024). This section explores three fields of ayahuasca attunement. These are not discrete zones as they can exist simultaneously in the same context, even though we separate them as the analytic categories of *ancestral*, *(counter-)colonial*, and *capitalistic* by focusing on distinct examples. The essentialising of ayahuasca is an enduring issue in scholarship on the brew. We propose instead to approach ayahuasca and similar plant recipes and chemical compounds as having been cultivated through divergent attunement fields, considering these attunement fields as distributed material-semiotic sets of affordances that accompany particular ways of attuning to psychoactive substances.

Prior to the global boom in ayahuasca tourism in Amazonia—which is several decades old now (Suárez Álvarez 2023; Gearin 2024)—the brew was used across dozens of Indigenous settlements, especially in Western Amazonia (Tukano 2022). Brabec de Mori (2011) named two mutually exclusive 'traditional' styles: in the first,



specialists, usually males, sometimes called *médicos* or *vegetalistas*, consumed the brew for clairvoyance for curing illness and engaging social welfare and conflicts. In this style, the attending client, patient, or audience did not ingest the substance. Rather, the ayahuasca, along with tobacco and other plants, helps to attune the drinker's body as an instrument for gaining special knowledge and power from invisible dimensions. A second style involved groups drinking the brew to strengthen collective identity and to acquire special abilities and knowledge for hunting or warfare success (Rubenstein 2012; Shepard 2016) or for studying environments, including ecological, urban, and city environments where mysterious technologies like steam engines, hypodermic needles, cinemas, and military equipment emerged in Indigenous ayahuasca visions (Chaumeil 1992; Gearin and Calavia Saez 2021). Peter Gow (1996) traced the historical emergence in the mid-nineteenth century of usage among mestizo, urban laborers who collectively drank the brew as a balm for the stresses of the rubber and other colonial industries. While these are the dominant "traditional" Indigenous styles, others included for rites of passage (Langdon 1975) trading visions and building alliance across ethnic groups (Virtanen 2014) musical and artistic inspiration (Gebhart-Sayer 2016; Brabec de Mori 2012) and "entertainment" or conviviality, celebration, and festivals (Brabec de Mori 2011). In sum, ayahuasca has long appeared across diverse cultural registers and ontological applications. While we are selective in the attunement fields we trace below, the point is not to show how each are different contexts or settings that shape a drug response, but that ayahuasca is irrevocably multiple and defined by the bodies, ecologies, and cosmologies that it tunes and is tuned by.

## Ancestral

In this section, we focus on examples of Barasana shamanistic initiation, drawing mostly on two texts: anthropologists Stephen Hugh-Jones' *The Palm and the Pleiades* (1979) and Thomas Langdon's *Food Restrictions in the Medical System of the Barasana and Taiwano Indians of the Colombian Northwest Amazon* (1975). In Amazonian cosmologies, human bodies are not given entities but must be continually retuned through dietary, bodily, and other behavioral norms to guard against unintentionally becoming animal, sick, or immoral. Approaches to ayahuasca usage, here, have drawn from wider Amazonian logics of food shamanism that locate illness in the violation of dietary and other social norms (Langdon 1975; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1997:57), which acted as a "notoriously powerful sanction against environmental abuse" (Århem 1996:201) that attuned social life to more-than-human worlds. Barasana settlements emphasised the importance of tempering food intake, however they also emphasised the importance of ritual feasts. This reflected complementary values of restraint and indulgence, fear and tranquility, power and weakness, important for cultivating proper humanness (Langdon 1975:291). Hugh-Jones described ayahuasca, tobacco, coca, and similar substances as "anti-food" for the Barasana given that their role in contacting ancestors, animal spirits, and invisible dimensions must be undertaken with a clean and carefully prepared body that avoids most ordinary foods. He explained that these special diets aim to cultivate in elders and neophytes a greater mastery over psychoactive experience by tuning the body away from



ordinary consumption and toward ancestral and invisible dimensions. In this sense, the preparations for ingesting ayahuasca are part of the process through which bodies are remade and simultaneously tuned toward complementary values of society and the perceptual and affective challenges of drinking ayahuasca.

Adolescent boys' rite of passage, which lasted for months, involved neophytes systematically stripping back different food groups from their diet while learning metaphysical and other knowledge, until they were ready to drink ayahuasca and encounter ancestral beings during challenging rituals, followed by more dieting and restrictions, and then finally, a period when a full diet is slowly re-introduced to cement humanness and adult identity (Langdon 1975:292). During this process, the initiate's body is reconstructed through a demanding sensory and alimentary discipline that gradually attunes bodily and perceptual sensitivities to a wider forest lifeworld of animals, plants, rivers, skies, and ancestral forces. Before an initiation process studied by Hugh-Jones (1979), boys' diets were reduced to just manioc starch and some insect species. They cleansed their bodies in the river, had their hair cut by women who also painted their bodies with red designs of the flesh of the *He* ancestral beings. As dusk approached, they were carried into the long house on the shoulders of elders and fed special berries to boost stamina. Hugh-Jones describes how the house itself became a charged atmosphere as the communal dwelling mirrored the wider cosmos and welcomed ancestral figures and forces within it. The novices drank ayahuasca and mostly appeared frightened and confused; some vomited and some fell to the ground (Hugh-Jones 1979:64). The ritual introduced them to the ancestral *He* spirits that reside in the flutes and whose shapeshifting voices include animal-like tones of jaguars and anacondas. Here, the ayahuasca, we could say, is not simply a substance that produces effects but emerges as part of a broader orchestration of performances, flutes, and ancestral presences unfolding within the house and the boys' own bodies. In this form of ancestral attunement, ayahuasca helps to remake bodily receptivity and perception to a cosmological ecology.

Over the following days, the initiates perform various ordeals and performances—including hunting displays, dancing, whipping, and other acts of endurance and courage. They are given special plants to enhance their singing and dancing abilities. This contact with the *He* spirits is both feared and sought by the boys. It invites the novices to maintain strict bodily discipline and composure within the ancestral atmospheric field. This attunement is notably unruly and affectively intense as it emerges through exposure to forces that can overwhelm participants.

Toward the end of the ritual cycle, the boys begin to emerge from the most dangerous and challenging phase. Their bodies are restricted from most social contexts and many foods for some time, given that contact with the *He* produces volatile and vulnerable bodily states that can endure for days and weeks. During this period, they rest and perform some tasks, such as crafting ornaments attire, which mark their gradual reintroduction into ordinary social life. A wider range of foods is slowly reintroduced, restoring bodily strength while consolidating their status as adult men. However, as mentioned, the body remains porous to the potent forces it has encountered and further dietary and behavioural restrictions continue to guard against illness and spiritual danger. Gradually, these restrictions ease as the initiate becomes more accustomed to their new adult bodies.



## (Counter-)colonial

Published in 2013, *The Falling Sky* is an unusual collaborative text authored by Yanomami shaman and political activist Davi Kopenawa and the French anthropologist Bruce Albert. It offers a remarkable account of Yanomami shamanism as both a cosmological practice and a critique of extractive industries, modern materialism, and what Kopenawa calls the “people of merchandise”. It shows, among other things, how initiation and psychoactive plant ingestion forms a body capable of perceiving and diagnosing colonial destruction. The title of the book is drawn from a creation myth in which shamans work to stop the sky from collapsing, including when outsiders come to mine minerals and oils that *Omama* placed underground to hold up the sky. Kopenawa’s complex shamanic-ecological knowledge is living and accessed through his body: “The xapiri’s [spirits] words are set in my thought, in the deepest part of me.... They are very old, yet the shamans constantly renew them,” he explained. At a young age, Kopenawa experienced a shamanic calling through dreams and nightmares after witnessing disease epidemics that killed many of his relatives. But it was not until he survived tuberculosis contracted in Manaus and returned to the forest—newly concerned about colonial society—that he trained in shamanistic practices, which included taking *yãkoana* (a psychedelic snuff),<sup>2</sup> remaking his body so as to domesticate the xapiri spirits who destroyed his ordinary human body and recomposed it with their immortal “images” and qualities.

The xapiri exist at the center of Yanomami shamanic knowledge and inhabit the shaman’s body through the use of psychedelic snuffs. They arrive “dancing on their mirrors” Kopenawa explained, “like television images. They take paths invisible to ordinary people, fragile and luminous like what white people call electricity. This is why their intense brightness vanishes as soon as they break. These innumerable spirit paths come from very far but get close in an instant, like words in a telephone talk.” (Kopenawa and Albert 2013:111). They are defined by movement, visual brilliance, sonic vibration, and by special powers of navigating atmospheric proximities. They “float down through the air from their mirrors to come protect us,” naming “the waters of a sweet river,” “the disease-free forests where they ate unknown foods,” and “the edges of the sky where, without night, one never sleeps.” The book describes Kopenawa’s challenging initiation and training period of entering a world of spirit-images distributed across the forest, the sky, animals, and the ancestral order, becoming attuned to its songs, brightness, and fragile luminescent paths. Kopenawa’s initiation constitutes a body that can work with the xapiri for the Yanomami, drawing the “value of growth” back into the ecologies, gardens and settlements that sustain an abundance which humans and non-humans depend upon. After their initiations, the shamans must continue to persuade, convince, and care for xapiri so that they remain in their bodies to assist in healing, knowledge, protection, and other activities. In this way, the shaman’s body becomes an ongoing resonant space of engagement and negotiation with the ancestral environment. As Shepard noted (2014), for the Yanomami, the forest’s “value of growth” is what allows life to flourish, and to live, the

<sup>2</sup>This is a potent resin made from the bark of *Virola elongata*. Although its technically different to ayahuasca (a drink that is made from other plants) both contain a key psychoactive molecule: DMT.



xapiri images must consume the image of the forest's value of growth. In this sense, the shaman is like a holographic mediator of the wider exchanges between spirits, forest abundance, gardens, illness, and social reproduction.

Kopenawa's cosmological critique of white capitalist society fully came into focus after his initiation. The things white people extract from the depths of the earth—"minerals and oil"—are "not foods," he explained. They are dangerous "sorcery substances," fragments of the sky, moon, sun, and stars that *Omama* hid in the cool depths of the earth to ensure cosmological stability. To tear them out loosens the metal foundations that hold up the sky, unleashing disease-bearing vapors, cannibal beings, and epidemic illness. Cesarino (2014) draws a contrast here between two different economies, but also between two irreducibly different attunements of life and value. He described the ontological conflicts between the eco-cosmology of Kopenawa's shamanism and commodity-driven capitalism. Modern materialism, Cesarino explained, animates objects by the consumers who own them, giving meaning to the "empty vessels" or originally alienated objects that become defined by their owners. For Yanomami, foods, minerals, medicines, and other "objects" are animated by xapiri spirits that have their "image" inside them. Kopenawa's shamanic world is organized through attunement to these spirit-images and their forest abundance, and to the resonant exchanges between humans and nonhumans, whereas commodity accumulation severs such relations and fixes value in extraction and ownership. Attempting to understand metropolitan lifeworlds, Kopenawa explained during a trip to Paris: "In their cities, one cannot learn things of the dream. People there ... only set their gaze on what surrounds them: merchandise, television, and money." His critiques of the "people of merchandise" is informed by the reciprocal economy embodied in xapiri spirits. Kopenawa's psychoactive attunements facilitated the ability to heal and protect, and also provided the cosmological grounds from which to diagnose mining, merchandise, and white greed as threats to the forest and to the sky itself.

Another colonial field of attunement can be traced through Michael Taussig's two books *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man* (1987) and *The Nervous System* (1992). Drawing on encounters with *yagé* (ayahuasca) healers working in the aftermath of rubber-boom violence in the Colombian Amazon in the 1970s, Taussig examines how visionary and healing practices became entangled with the contradictory social worlds produced by the colonial magic of primitivism, where a "politics of epistemic murk" engendered both terror and healing. "So it has been through the sweep of colonial history where the colonizers provided the colonized with the left-handed gift of the image of the wild man—a gift whose powers the colonizers would be blind to, were it not for the reciprocation of the colonized, bringing together in the dialogical imagination of colonization an image that wrests from civilization its demonic power." (Taussig 1987:467) Whereas Kopenawa's text foregrounds a colonial encounter in which shamanism diagnoses problems of modernity, Taussig engaged another field of attunement. Considering the power of *yagé* visions to "alter the course of misfortune" in the Colombian Amazon, Michael Taussig (1987) noted how Indigenous healers, during late-night ayahuasca sessions, included a "fragmented joke-riddled incompleteness of ways of talking" as they treated their colonists with *yagé* (Taussig 1992:7). His exploration of *yagé* reveals how visionary experiences unfolded within atmospheres steeped in the violent histories of the Amazon's rubber



boom. In an example involving urban labourers seeking healing from an Inga shaman, he noted: “The power of this *yagé* night came only in part from what could be called “mysticism,” and that mystery concerned the quite unconscious way in which whites like Elisio and his two companions from Boyacá attribute magical power to the “Indians.” (1987:441). *Yagé* sessions intertwined with what he called the “nervous system;” an attunement field made up of the collective, embodied response to colonialism and capitalist exploitation (1992). These *yagé* attunements can appear like cinematic montages, Taussig argued, where participants are thrust into “picture fragments”, disjointed visions that blend personal fears with historical and present situations. “The “mystical insights” given by the visions and tumbling fragments of memory pictures oscillating in a polyphonic discursive room full of leaping shadows and sensory pandemoniums are not insights granted by depths mysterious and other. Rather, they are made, not granted in the ability of montage to provoke sudden and infinite connections between dissimilars” (1987:441). The nervous system, here, is a conduit for colonial anxieties, social tensions, and racial violence. *Yagé* visions tuned drinkers into a colonial nervous attunement field that is actively experienced, navigated, and contested through the body.

### Capitalistic

The boom in ayahuasca tourism in Amazonia in recent decades was made possible by networks and investments from entrepreneurs coming from wealthy Northern countries, such as France, the United States, and Australia, to the extent that many of the dozens of international retreat centers serving ayahuasca in Peru are owned and run by foreigners who contract local healers (Peluso 2017; Gearin 2024). As Fotiou argued, these retreats and circulations often rely on romanticized images of Amazonian shamanism while erasing the historical and social complexity of Indigenous practices and lifeworlds (Fotiou 2016). The rise of ayahuasca healing retreats involves dynamics of commodification where shamanistic and ecstatic experience is offered as a purchasable, curated experience for tourists and spiritual consumers (Peluso & Alexiades 2006). These retreat packages include what might be called an affective contract: an expectation that clients will feel something transformative. In such settings, the excitement, longing, or hope of being on retreat can combine with transactional expectations as retreat-goers invest emotionally in a promise of psychedelics already primed by promotional materials and curated atmospheres of the retreats. These atmospheres tap into various imaginaries—primitivist, therapeutic, and spiritual—as well as the medical hype around psychedelics that permeates YouTube, Netflix, and other media today (Evers et al. 2026; Noorani 2020). This can turn the retreat space into a stage upon which transcendence can and *should* be felt and performed.

This staging, however, sits in uneasy tension with the diverse cultural lifeworlds from which ayahuasca practices emerged, as briefly outlined above. The rise of tourism redirects ancestral attunements from their relational and environmental contexts toward the expectations of the visitors. The *mariri*, or spiritual force, is transformed into an intercultural encounter marketed to visitors seeking healing or transcendence. Yet, this intercultural encounter can also be read as a recent, global example of the



much older pattern of ayahuasca materializing alliances across ethnic groups (Virtanen 2014), including when it now produces intercultural healing through “productive misunderstandings” that stretch across ontologies and worldviews from Iquitos to London (Losonczy and Cappel 2014). However, in the commercially-oriented contexts of ayahuasca tourism, subtle tensions and *unproductive* misunderstandings can arise when the promised wonder and ecstasy fail to align with the realities of digestive discomfort, rustic amenities, visionary chaos, or the jarring presence of other participants. Here, the *mood* of transcendence is fragile and open to moments of doubt, awkwardness, or disappointment.

For some retreat participants, this fragility is one reason that returning home after the retreat becomes such a charged concern and opportunity. Many global psychedelic users emphasize that sustained healing and transformation typically occur over a more incremental and longer-term time horizon that required techniques for translating, unpacking, and wrestling with the consequences of psychedelic experiences in everyday life: what is commonly known as “integration.” Psychedelic users may attempt to integrate their experiences through psychotherapy, coaching, or wellness activities. The contours and very relevance of this integration appears to hinge on how societies have come to separate “profane” daily routines from extraordinary, shamanistic, or mystical experiences. Drawing on Durkheim’s sociological theory of the sacred and the profane, Ido Hartogsohn (2020) argued that the “difficulty of integrating the psychedelic experience back into ‘profane’ everyday life” reflects “the inherent difficulty of integrating the unusual and extraordinary into the usual and mundane” (211), which reflects a metaphysics rooted in Christian and European histories (Gearin 2024:218). While focusing on psychedelic integration as commodification, Emilia Sanabria and Luis Tófoli argued that the rapid mainstreaming of psychedelics risks narrowing ‘integration’ into a standardised, market-friendly product, losing sight of its collective, cultural, cosmological, and other possibilities (2024). Here, integration is reframed as an individualised checklist or app-based service detached from political or relational dimensions that drive psychic distress. They argue that such commodification takes on the characteristic of global digital and capitalist infrastructures that individualise psychedelic healing (Sanabria and Tófoli 2024), thus reinforcing broader capitalist moods. Ayahuasca attunements are cultivated as possibilities for change that are packaged as experiences and extended into everyday life through the labour and service of integration.

## Conclusion

We have sought to offer the lexicon of attunement and attunement fields as an alternative to approaching the situated determinants of psychoactive use in terms of a litany of potentially interacting variables, brought together variously under the umbrellas of ‘environment’, ‘set and setting’ and ‘context’. Drawing on multiple traditions of conceptualising attunement beyond the heavily-technologised operation it has come to denote through psychology, we offered some contrasting portraits of attuning to ayahuasca. Each portrait illustrates how ayahuasca’s experiences and effects come



to be ‘made up’ through different attunement fields. We hope this lexicon opens a programme of inquiry into psychoactive attunement.

Psychoactive substances and their contexts tune one another in wild and weird ways, despite competing efforts to locate their agency primarily in biological and molecular pathways or historical and social ones. We suggest that what Langlitz (2012: 125) calls the “wildness” of psychedelics — their wondrous, unpredictable capacities that refuse both pharmacologism and social constructivism — and what Davis (2019) tracks as their “weirdness,” the strange and nonlinear entanglements of nature and culture they provoke, are effects that take shape across fields of attunement, not properties intrinsic to molecules, contexts, or their interactions. It will always be a challenge to break down such attunements into parts because of how they are recursively self-constituted.

Culturally, the proliferation of use of established psychiatric medications in recent decades has come along with the rise of movements embracing and celebrating neurodiversity, where those identifying with (while perhaps adapting) psychiatric classifications can more deeply attune with their own experiences of neurodivergence and the complex effects of psychotropic drugs in augmenting their experiences. Such attunement both reveals and animates struggle against what neurodiversity scholar Robert Chapman analyses as the oppressive nature of a capitalism oriented around neurotypicality (Chapman 2023). In this way, tuning should not be understood as simply capture given that the same chemicals that facilitate the reinforcement of belief, cosmology, and ideology can also loosen the grip of governed atmospheres by heightening frictions, disclosing hidden shimmers, or inspiring other ways of sensing and feeling that transcend expectation and context in unruly ways.

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