

Future Ayahuasca Care Spaces: An Experimental Speculative Exercise

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Abstract

With the rapid advancement of psychedelic-assisted therapy (PAT) trials, psychedelic clinics are set to become a tangible reality in the near future. Questions abound concerning the therapeutic modalities that will be adopted, the human and material infrastructures that will enable the delivery of this novel form of healthcare, and their funding model – which will have direct implications for who can access PATs. In this paper, we reflect on the process of designing, organizing and holding a speculative space to imagine possible future ayahuasca care spaces. Ayahuasca healing practices are (still) mostly indissociable from their ritual settings, placing them in complex and ambivalent relation to “psychedelics” and PATs. Speculation enabled us to collaboratively address questions of appropriation, commodification, standardization and pharmaceuticalization of plant medicines, and explore the more-than-human contours of care. Our goal was to shift the parameters of our interactions with key interlocutors in “the field” in ways that enable co-laboration and co-re-definition. We discuss the process of creating this speculative space of encounter, defining its parameters, and designing the framework within which such a conversation is even possible.

Keywords: ayahuasca; care spaces; psychedelic-assisted therapy (PAT); speculation.

Espaços Futuros de Cuidado Com Ayahuasca: Um Exercício Especulativo Experimental

Resumo

Com o rápido avanço das terapias assistidas por psicodélicos (TAPs), tudo indica que as clínicas de terapia psicodélica devem se tornar uma realidade tangível em um futuro próximo. Existem, porém, uma série de questionamentos importantes a respeito das modalidades terapêuticas que serão adotadas nesses espaços; das infra-estruturas humanas e materiais que vão possibilitar a oferta dessas novas formas de cuidado; e dos seus modelos de financiamento, que terão implicações diretas para definir quem pode ou não acessar as TAPs. Neste trabalho refletimos sobre o processo de projetar, organizar e conduzir um ambiente especulativo e colaborativo para imaginar possíveis espaços futuros de cuidados com ayahuasca. Em sua maioria, as múltiplas práticas de cura envolvendo ayahuasca (ainda) são indissociáveis de seus contextos rituais, o que as coloca em uma relação complexa e ambivalente com os “psicodélicos” e as TAPs. Nosso objetivo ao pensar especulativamente sobre o futuro dos espaços de cuidado com ayahuasca é abordar de forma colaborativa questões como apropriação, comercialização, padronização e farmaceuticalização de psicoativos e plantas de poder; examinar como são negociadas as diferentes abordagens da produção de evidências científicas nesse cenário; e explorar os contornos mais-que-humanos desses tratamentos. Outro objetivo deste exercício é contribuir para deslocar os parâmetros de nossas interações com os principais interlocutores no «campo» de forma a permitir a co-laboração e a co-redefinição. Nossa proposta aqui é discutir o processo de criação deste espaço especulativo de encontros, de definição de seus parâmetros, e do desenvolvimento de uma moldura que possibilite que uma conversa como essa possa acontecer.

Palavras-chave: ayahuasca; espaços de cuidado; terapia assistida por psicodélicos (TAP); especulação.

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INTRODUCTION

For those who have been tracking the global expansion of the Amazonian plant medicine ayahuasca for some time, we are in a strange, perhaps predictable future of intense resource extraction, cultural appropriation, and pharmaceuticalization. How can we escape from such future anteriors? Why are entrenched imaginaries so hard to escape? What would ayahuasca care² spaces look like if they were not trapped by these trends of pharmaceuticalization, standardization and extraction? This paper describes a series of speculative experiments that we devised and organized to co-laboratively (de la Cadena 2015) imagine multiple possible Future Ayahuasca Care Spaces (FACS), together with key interlocutors in our fieldsites, and in ways that enable co-re-definition. The objective of this paper is to examine our process of creating and holding a space of encounter, in which academics, clinical researchers, and urban practitioners could come together to discuss futures for ayahuasca care practices outside Indigenous contexts.

Before proceeding, some words regarding ayahuasca are needed. Ayahuasca is a herbal brew from North-Western Amazonia commonly made up of plants from the species *B. caa-*

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- 1 We would like to thank Silvia Mesturini and Joe Dumit for their precious contributions in the early stages of this process, as well as all the participants who took part in this ongoing experiment of imagining otherwise futures for ayahuasca. Our research was made possible by the generous support from the ERC Starting Grant n°757589 “Healing Encounters: reinventing an indigenous medicine in the clinic and beyond” based at CERMES3 (Université de Paris Cité, EHESS, CNRS).
 - 2 Care is a contested and messy concept, frequently tied to moralizing, gendered and human-centered values and practices. Our deployment of care here is informed by Mol, Puig de la Bellacasa and Hobart and Kneese, in that it situates care not as an abstract unplaced ethical dilemma but as an everyday praxiographic enactment (Mol, 2008; Mol *et al.*, 2010). The speculative sensibility deployed here invites us to radicalise how we think care as a “roadmap for an otherwise” and a set of orientations to endure in precarious worlds (Hobart and Kneese, 2020). Care also necessarily implies a recognition and thinking-with more than human beings that Puig de la Bellacasa reminds us is never innocent (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017).

pi and *P viridis*. An estimated 160 Indigenous nations (Tukano 2022)³ - occupying a wide diversity of Amazonian territories and marked by complex histories of colonial encounters - gave rise to and maintained a huge diversity of practices glossed under the Quechua name “ayahuasca.” As Indigenous scholar and activist Daiara Tukano puts it:

In a global context where ayahuasca is currently used more by white and privileged non-Indigenous people than by Indigenous peoples, in which scholars, scientists, and religious leaders are holding broad discussions about the expansion, legalization, commodification, syncretization and synthesizing of this medicine, it is necessary to address questions concerning the autonomy of Indigenous peoples in these discussions. (our translation)

Over the course of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, ayahuasca has been adopted as a sacrament in syncretic Christian religious practices and taken up in a variety of neo-traditional spiritual, somatic or neo-shamanic healing circles as it moves from the forest to the city. Widespread testimonials of its healing potential led to exploratory clinical experiments to assess its therapeutic potential (Maia *et al.* 2022). Clinical research has examined ayahuasca from a pharmacological perspective, defining it as a psychoactive beverage with psychedelic properties derived primarily from the molecule DMT (N, N-dimethyltryptamine). Fitting ayahuasca into a single definition is impossible because ayahuasca practices are composed of a multitude of different cultural practices. Understanding the complex and multiple entanglements involving ayahuasca requires going beyond the biomedical focus on the “substance in itself”, and even beyond the separation between “set”, “setting” and “substance” (Dumit & Sanabria 2022). But above all, it requires the acknowledgement – as expressed in the Declaration of the Fifth Indigenous Ayahuasca Conference⁴ – that ayahuasca is the intangible cultural and genetic heritage of Indigenous peoples and that as “ancestral and traditional Indigenous knowledge” (Dumit & Sanabria 2022) its futures cannot be written without Indigenous peoples.

A key notion in the biomedical field of “psychedelics” (that is, as articulated from a biomedical perspective) is that the environment in which these substances are experienced is a determining factor in their efficacy. This is a rather radical proposition within the molecularly reductionist paradigm of biomedicine. However, it is one that needs to be carefully differentiated from the attention to territory, energy or more-than-human presences that are articulated in Indigenous and traditional spaces. Biomedical understandings of psychedelic efficacy perceive the “container” in which the experience takes place as “part of the drug” (Dumit & Sanabria 2022). This has profound implications for the kind of care settings that are being envisaged as psychedelics are mainstreamed and infrastructure is built for their

3 See <https://www.daiaratukano.com/post/uma-medicina-ind%C3%ADgena-as-origens-da-ayahuasca-antes-da-globaliza%C3%A7%C3%A3o> (accessed 31/03/2023).

4 The Declarations of the five Indigenous Ayahuasca Conferences are available here: <https://ayahuascaconferenciaindigena.org/en>.

rollout to the public. What we mean to highlight about the specificity of these interventions is that the setting, or space, is integral to the care practices that can be held by them. Imagining the configurations of these care spaces is thus indissociable from envisioning the form and contours of the care practices that are being conceived. If this is true for psychedelics in general, it is even truer for ayahuasca.

Decades of academic research have strengthened specific ways of thinking and defining ayahuasca - as an illegal substance (ICEERS, n.d.), a treatment for depression (Palhano-Fontes *et al.* 2019), a sacrament (Blainey 2021) or as a psychedelic that induces neuroplasticity (Almeida *et al.* 2022), for example. When reflecting collectively on our research, we began to think of this as a kind of spell that imposes a truth to what ayahuasca “is,” and that makes it difficult to imagine other ways of encountering ayahuasca outside these definitions. Inspired by science fiction authors, such as Ursula K. Le Guin (1989, 2018) and Octavia Butler (1993, 1998, 2000), and philosophers and thinkers such as Donna Haraway (2016) and Bayo Akomolafe (2024), we were called to make space for other ways of defining ayahuasca, eschewing a single definition - to stay with the trouble, to hold the crack open. Hard definitions and dominant imaginaries tend to reinstate the status quo, and silence other ways of living and thinking, strengthening colonial institutions and thought architectures. In an interview, Octavia Butler directly stated that “there’s no single answer that will solve all of our future problems. There’s no magic bullet. Instead, there are thousands of answers – at least. You can be one of them if you choose to be.”⁵

HEALING ENCOUNTERS

Our anthropological research project is called *Healing Encounters: Reinventing an indigenous medicine in the clinic and beyond*, and our aim is to provide an in-depth ethnographic inquiry into the reconfigurations induced by the globalization of ayahuasca. Our study investigates three interrelated ideal-type sites in which ayahuasca healing practices circulate: “Healing in the City” examines the constellations of elements brought together in neotraditional urban practices to think about the creation, stabilization and transmission of new ritual forms; “Healing in the Laboratory” examines encounters across valuation practices and asks how evidentiary practices concerning the use of compounds such as ayahuasca in psychiatry are constructed and negotiated; finally, “Healing in the Forest” examines the contemporary reconfigurations of indigenous shamanic practices and cosmopolitics where understandings of wellbeing center the territory and include other-than-human-beings (Sanabria 2019). In each site, we have been gathering empirical insights whilst holding the ethical commitments, engagements and insight from each of the others. As the project has unfolded, we have come to understand this as a

5 You can access the interview here: <https://commongood.cc/reader/a-few-rules-for-predicting-the-future-by-octavia-e-butler/>

particularity of our approach, putting our focus on the transformations that take place in the circulation and situations of encounter between elements and actors in each.

We arrived at speculation as a method as a response to the challenges of articulating the myriad positionalities and commitments we had to these very different sites we were moving through as a group. Throughout 2021, our team conducted a series of encounters with ICA-RO, an interdisciplinary team of Brazilian ayahuasca researchers - mostly from the biomedical sciences - giving rise to the idea of collaboratively designing an experiment. What would we do if we had no financial or human resource limitations? How would we manage and overcome the epistemic differences that structure or respective fields? What concessions would each discipline need to make to obtain funding, and which streams of funding could we realistically seek out? What constraints would publication norms in our respective fields impose on the experimental design? The thought experiment was deeply productive, even only to reveal that as a collective, within the realities of pandemic urgency and precarity, we did not have the bandwidth to take this process forward beyond the speculative, in a way that recognized the realities of precarious employment for many of us and the challenge of creating an experimental design for ayahuasca that was able to fully honor our epistemic differences. This co-laborative experience paved the way for other collective speculative practices, such as those we describe there.

This article presents our way of approaching speculation as a method for anthropological work. We describe this speculative movement and some of the practices we experimented with our co-laborators. The article details some of the lessons learned from these attempts to hold complex encounters; namely that critique is easier than imagination; that holding space is a form of care; that speculative research methods do not sit easily within existing academic and ethical frameworks, and that speculating is different from consensus-building.

FROM PARA-ETHNOGRAPHY TO SPECULATIVE ANTHROPOLOGY

Our team adopts the concept of encounter as an analytic and a method, examining the transformations that take place in and through encounters (Sanabria 2019). The concept of encounter – inspired by that of partial connections (Strathern 2005) – is propitious to analyze this global assemblage as it provides a method to track the flow of practices, knowledge and substances without appealing to a conceptual vocabulary of pre-existing parts and wholes (De la Cadena 2015; Strathern 2005). Beginning from the middle ground of spaces of encounter enables us to describe how different world-making projects encounter and re-define one another as they compose a shared but partially diverging world in their interwoven endeavors (Sanabria 2019). In methodological terms, we have worked to open up and “hold” spaces of encounters where co-labourers from our various field sites come together to discuss and exchange perspectives on ayahuasca’s expansion and transformation. What do Indigenous peoples have to say about clinical experiments with ayahuasca? What different positions do practitioners in the city, forest or lab have regarding the ethics of administering this medicine?

In the original project formulation, Emilia Sanabria conceptualized these spaces as para-sites (Marcus 2013), that is as ad hoc spaces of collaborative reflection, alongside other fieldwork situations. Para-ethnography invites experimentation with ethnographic forms by creating para-sitic spaces to register the potential for reflexive capacity in fieldwork situations (Marcus 2013: 208). The idea was to hold workshops with co-labourers in view of iteratively and collaboratively redefining the inquiry. Para-ethnography was formulated to address the challenges of doing ethnography in fieldwork settings dominated by scientific knowledge and a technocratic ethos.

As we began experimenting with para-ethnographic approaches, we came to feel that this framing did not fully move beyond racial, gendered and disciplinary hierarchies (of whiteness, expertise, cisnorm, heterosexuality and masculinity) even as it tried to create a framework to overcome these. For many of us, womenx, transpersons, people of color, or otherwise racially marked as migrants, or for those of us whose primary accountabilities reside outside the ivory tower – the space of the University is always already a para-site. As we sought to open up a space within the academy that was welcoming to our co-laborators it became increasingly evident to us that holding space (designing the encounter) was key. We came to understand that space holding is itself reproductive of certain futures (or of analytics that generate specific versions of futures) and that holding space differently is in itself a speculative gesture. We began to conceptualize a process of speculating collaboratively. Thus, speculation arose as a core methodology for building transversality within our intra-project collaborative processes. In this sense, speculation played a key role in answering a project design challenge: that of holding together and creating contact zones between the different areas or “sites” of the project, and their at times radically divergent commitments, ethics, or ontologies.

Deeply inspired by speculative projects such as the Wakanda Dream Lab⁶, we began with the recognition that “we cannot build what we cannot imagine,” a potent vision given to us by Afro-American poetess Lucille Clifton. In this sense, speculation is the act of collectively imagining other possible futures and creating otherwise realities that first need to be collectively envisaged, articulated, shared, debated and given form.

We propose to think about speculation as a research practice and method, and to broaden this perspective since speculation also involves the whole process of designing this collective experiment. Thus, speculation can be thought of as a “border zone,” or a space of encounter, that attempts to hold and encompass differences without aiming to reach a synthesis or a single and unified story or narrative. On the contrary, we attempt to hold differences and divergences, and from there articulate a vision with which we do not have all to necessarily agree. The multiplicity of perspectives articulated during these speculative exercises contributed to making explicit one possible vision, as well as its blind spots.

6 See <https://www.wakandadreamlab.com/wakanda-dream-lab-anthology>

Our speculative approach is also in dialogue with Afro-futurism and black feminist approaches (Butler 1993, 1998, 2000; Davis 2018; Gumbs 2020, Imarisha & Brown 2015; Lorde 1981) who teach us about hope in difficult times, and the importance of eschewing singular answers to the problems that besiege us. Butler’s magisterial *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* (1993; 1998) reveal how wounds from the past do not disappear but need to be collectively addressed. At the same time, these books don’t leave us drifting in a dystopian world, full of sorrow and impossibilities: they make us responsible for creating collective futures, and for imagining better worlds. Bringing this approach into our speculative movement led us to think about a kind of hope that seems bitter at first sight because it denies the possibility of a saving answer that shall bring us a perfect future, full of joy. In the words of Angela Davis (2018) “freedom is a constant struggle.”

When thinking about the futures of ayahuasca, this enabled us to address the complexities and tensions that surround ayahuasca, without bracketing off the profound impact of colonialism, appropriation, extractivism, racism, power abuses and gender violence. It enabled us to look at the overlapping encounters of “city”, “forest” and “lab” without overlooking the impacts of capitalist proprietary regimes, psychedelic corporatism, the medicalization and psychologization (Peluso 2016) of ayahuasca, particularly for Indigenous peoples and territories.

For us, holding complex encounters necessarily implies bringing tremendous care to the ways that holding space for this complexity enables past and ongoing forms of violence to be present, to be spoken, and to be heard (Tuhiwai Smith 1999). In this process, we came to understand one of the specificities of our project as placing the focus not only on the encounters themselves but also on the multiple challenges that arise when attempting to hold these encounters in all their complexities and unevenly distributed legacies of harm and hope. Thus “care” came to define not only the object of our speculative design (as in ayahuasca care spaces) but also the main orientation that transversed our discussions and approach to holding space for the discussions that took place.

EXPERIMENTS IN SPECULATION

1. MOVING-WITH AS AN EMBODIED IMAGINARY PRACTICE

Our first collective experiments with speculative practices included the use of tarot and oracle decks (such as Kim Krans’ Archetype deck) and the adoption of bodily and experiential practices. During one in-person team event, Piera Talin led a practice inspired by the Social Presencing Theatre (SPT) developed by Arawana Hayashi.⁷ This exercise cultivates the develop-

⁷ Social Presencing Theater (SPT) is a methodology developed for exploring emerging future possibilities. It uses simple body postures and movements to dissolve limiting concepts, access intuition, and make visible both current reality, and the deeper – often invisible – leverage points for creating change. <https://arawanahayashi.com/spt.html>

ment of an embodied awareness of one's own limiting conceptions and invites transformation, resonating with the Afro-futuristic approaches that guide our way to imagining change.

In a very spontaneous and experimental way, the group decided to try one of SPT's main exercises. In the first phase, we identified core concepts that we wanted to explore through this embodied, relational exercise. These were: plants, care practices, patients, infrastructure, and Future Ayahuasca Care Spaces (FACS). Each person in the group then "embodied" one of the concept-roles and was first guided to briefly ground and connect to the chosen concept, before beginning to move with/as it, in intuitive interaction with the other people-concepts in the room. After some minutes of intuitive movement, the conductor invited everyone to freeze into a first position - or statue - that symbolized the stuck aspects of the concept or situation. After each person-concept had verbalized their experience as the concept, the conductor invited the people-concepts back into movement in view of shifting the dynamic before coming to a second moment of stillness and sharing. Although this is an apparently simple exercise, it generated much emotion and a novel form of embodied and dynamic understanding that surprised all the participants. The ensuing discussion enabled the group to identify many points about the process of organizing a Future Ayahuasca Care Space that prior discussions had not allowed us to see.

During the debrief the person embodying patients shared that they were looking for something, for hope, and had felt that the coziness and welcoming that other members of the experiment displayed was vital to their feeling of trust in this experience of vulnerability. This opened an important discussion around the centrality of the patient's perspective in the future ayahuasca care spaces project, of holding space for differences, and the challenges that ensuring this entails. The person embodying plants had remained at the periphery of the group, expressing that they found it hard to come into the space. At one point the person embodying patients approached the person embodying plants, making contact. Plants then expressed that they had felt that this invitation was transformative for their capacity to come into relation. In the debrief they shared: "You needed hope, and you came. I felt despair in you, and I felt I could enter this human space to give you help. Your contact and situated me, otherwise the margins of the space felt better."

The person embodying care practices shared that at the beginning of the exercise they were very in their head and that it was hard to let go. This led to a discussion about the tension many ayahuasca healers and practitioners mention between having mental knowledge and - simultaneously, if contradictorily - being intuitive and embodied in the moment of providing care. "Care practices need to be embodied," nodded another participant. "Yes, for sure your feelings of being too much in your head are reflecting something that is in the field, which is being expressed through this practice."

During the second movement, the person embodying infrastructure began to move objects around the room, creating a cozy spot with pillows. The person embodying patients

layed down on the big pillows and was joined by the person embodying care practices. “Infrastructure” continued their intense activities, bringing a vase of flowers from the garden outside to provide “company” to the person embodying “plants”, who remained at the margin, but started to come closer to the rest of the group in the second phase. Later, the person embodying infrastructure shared their hectic urgency to do something, perceiving as very human their efforts to bring pillows to the space. During the exercise, they wondered: what are the equivalents of pillows for plants? What can make plants feel fully welcome in this space, in the way pillows clearly helped the patients to? This enabled them to feel very clearly how narrowly human much thinking about ayahuasca care spaces is and to ponder how room could be made for more ecological renderings of inter-relation in which gardens, the earth, compost, the flow of water and a living, breathing forest infrastructure could be an integral part of the container. Even as they dashed to bring flowers to the altar in view of inviting the person embodying plants in closer, they realized what a jarring gesture this actually was raising all sorts of insights about extraction and the right relationship from the perspective of plants, which in this exercise, were embodied by a human, making their “experience” easier to connect to. This exercise moved our perspectives on the future ayahuasca project in powerful ways because it created the conditions to use embodied intuition to clarify assumptions and see aspects of the question that we were not accessing prior. We suggest that employing this kind of tool also points out the “border zone” character of this process, present in our attempt to go beyond cognitive and rational biases, activating other important dimensions in the process of producing knowledge, such as the body, intuition, and creativity.

2. FUTURE AYAHUASCA CARE SPACES ENCOUNTERS

The next step for our collective involved building, designing, and imagining the Future Ayahuasca Care Spaces encounters.⁸ At this stage of the process, our objective was to bring together perspectives from academia (acknowledging and holding space for the different epistemologies and methods of social and natural scientists) and from the varied worlds of neotraditional urban ceremonial practice. This framing, which corresponded more to the concerns arising in the academy and amidst certain of our urban interlocutors already engaged in conversations with the academy, was perhaps less relevant to our Indigenous collaborators who politely declined our invitation. We acknowledge here the fact that these conversations are limited in scope given the lack of Indigenous participation. However, several participants, and we as a group holding space, did conscientiously bring questions concerning the impact of future developments for Indigenous practices to the discussions. We are currently working on analyses of this aspect of the discussion which - for reasons of length - we have chosen not

⁸ Due to COVID-19, we began these encounters with a series of online conversations aiming to test this ongoing and open-ended speculative framework.

to address head-on here. Our first steps in this experiment involved finding a balance between building the parameters and the framework for this conversation to be even possible; imagining, organizing, and preparing the online meetings, crafting the invitation, defining a list of guests, designing the format for the events themselves and then hosting them and collecting feedback. We learned that it is difficult to differentiate between these aspects of the exercise because imagining and designing this space of encounter is already a speculative process.

During the whole process, we oriented toward building spaces that are safe and welcoming for all participants, how to take care of the experiences and emotions that emerge from these exercises, how to remain ethical and respect and welcome the multiplicity of perspectives we invited in. In the early phases of our process, we spent a lot of time discussing what we were then calling the parameters for the conversation. These parameters were imagined as a way to create a more open-ended and symmetric framework, which would allow us to shift our discussions from what is “right” or “wrong”.

The first parameters we set included building a non-hierarchical group; finding ways to underwrite common forms of expertise claiming (such as by medical professionals), trying to create an exercise without winners or losers; and imagining abolitionist futures, without prisons or armies. Another important parameter involved displacing narratives centered on a “magic bullet”, in a unique solution, and heroic figures. Our preparation included imagining ways to deal with this respectfully but firmly in the space and debriefing in the process the situations where these patterns show up in our ethnographic work.

A core parameter for us, as a team, was foregrounding a transformative justice framework (Dixon and Piepzna-Samarasinha 2020), by which we meant to commit to modes of transforming past mistakes and violence. The transformative justice approach helped us tackle a central issue present in the heterogeneous ayahuasca field (as well as in broader: read Global North psychedelic settings): abuse. Abuse points to power, and more specifically to sexual abuse, a discussion that has considerably increased and gained visibility in the ayahuasca field over the last few years (Echazú and Benedito, 2020). Debates regarding abuse and ayahuasca span different settings, including the ayahuasca religions, contemporary shamanic networks, and clinical trials (Peluso 2020).

We defined a series of questions that we offered up for discussion and reflection to the participants of our online speculative encounters. These included: In the future, what cannot be missing from ayahuasca care spaces? What cannot enter these spaces? What are the necessary steps for us to get there? How is the world around this space? Are there States? Is there capitalism? What is happening in this world? What is the architecture of this care space? Is it located in a city or a rural area? Does it have plantations and/or gardens? Where do the plants come from? What is the place and role of plants? To which point is this care space centered only on humans? Is it a community, a place where people live in? Is it a clinic, a place where people go when they are ill? Or is it something else? Who is responsible for

care? Who are the practitioners? Who is being taken care of? Which are the care practices? Who has access to this space? Which kind of knowledge is recognized in it? How are the costs distributed? How does money flow? Is there money? How are decisions made? Is there a hierarchy? How is daily labor organized? Who cooks and who does the cleaning?

For our first trial, we hosted two online encounters of around three hours each with mainly the same participants.⁹ These encounters were divided into three main moments: an opening that presented the speculative process, and our initial questions, followed by a brief circle during which participants introduced themselves. In the second phase, we divided the participants into breakout rooms, where smaller groups undertook the process of imagining a future ayahuasca care space. Finally, we all came back to the main room, and participants shared the main points from their speculative processes and experiences before we closed. Our second encounter aimed to deepen the speculative process since we had already introduced our proposal to the group and had begun this imaginative exercise. We also organized a closure meeting in which we presented this paper and invited comments and feedback on the process and our preliminary analysis from the FACS participants.

WHAT WE LEARNED:

1. DECOLONIZING IMAGINARIES

Speaking to the emergence of diverse Afrofuturist imaginaries, Eshun (2003: 289) argues that power functions through the

envisioning, management, and delivery of reliable futures. In the colonial era of the early to middle twentieth century, avantgardists from Walter Benjamin to Frantz Fanon revolted in the name of the future against a power structure that relied on control and representation of the historical archive. Today, the situation is reversed. The powerful employ futurists and draw power from the futures they endorse, thereby condemning the disempowered to live in the past.

Science Fiction, he argues, is “a means through which to preprogram the present” (Eshun 2003) by “engineering feedback between its preferred future and its becoming present.” Mainstream Hollywood-sanctioned versions of the future can be read as “product-placed visions.” It thus becomes evident why it is so important to hack these visions. “Whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction. All organizing is science fiction” writes Walmidah Imarisha in the “Introduction” to the feminist, women of color science fiction anthology *Octavia’s Brood* (Walidah and brown 2015) which honors the legacy of black science fiction writer Octavia

⁹ Aside from the Healing Encounters team, a total of 11 people took part in the meetings. Of these, four were academics (two from the social sciences, one from psychopharmacology and one from bioethics) and six were ayahuasca practitioners, including regulars and facilitators of rituals in Santo Daime churches or other ayahuasca centers.

Butler. Noting that the authors gathered in the anthology all come from communities marked by deep collective trauma, she invites them to think of themselves as “science fiction walking around on two legs: Our ancestors dreamed us up and then bent reality to create us.” (Walidah and brown 2015:5) *Octavia’s Brood* offers up the term “Visionary fiction” to refer to speculations that are concerned with displacing dominant narratives of power in view of building freer, fairer worlds, ones orientated toward justice. As Walidah notes in the introduction:

(...) the decolonization of the imagination is the most dangerous and subversive form there is: for it is where all other forms of decolonization are born. Once the imagination is unshackled, liberation is limitless. (Walidah 2015: 4)

In an article that examines why it is so difficult to think of new possible worlds, future theorists Maarten Hajer and Wytse Versteeg note that the problem is not awareness, but breaking out of existing patterns. They conclude that current imaginaries “are almost all corporate and focused technological innovation” (Hajer & Versteeg 2019:131). This resonates with trends we observe in global psychedelic forums where the future of psychedelic care spaces is being assiduously defined – through intensive investment and marketing – by corporate interests in the pharmaceutical, and silicon technology sectors. An example of this was the Wonderland Miami conference, dubbed by its organizers “Microdose” (“your guide to the business of psychedelics”) as the “biggest” psychedelic event in history. One commentator humorously spoke of this event as psychedelics entering their “corporate trade show phase”.¹⁰ The event included sessions such as “Psychedelic Capital Live” in which entrepreneurs were given “an opportunity to pitch six venture capitalists in front of a live audience.” As well as panels such as “Patent Wars: Is the corporate domination of the industry a significant threat or an opportunity to decrease the stigma and take psychedelic medicine into mainstream healthcare?” or “Finance and Psychedelics: Can consciousness and capitalism coexist?”

In a context in which it is estimated that over 90% of the costs of psychedelic interventions will be “therapists’ compensation” (Marseille *et al.* 2020), there is a rush to develop Apps or AIs to replace costly human presence. Integration Bots or VR programs are being developed to support future patients in their “integration” (see Noorani 2021 and Sanabria & Tofoli, 2024). Showcased at Wonderland (according to Microdose news reporting) was AnchoringVR, by Enosis Therapeutics¹¹ which “allows for open and interactive integration of psychedelic trips and experiences”... Right now, AnchoringVR offers the service via a subscription model to clinics and therapists. Will they ever go direct to the consumer, for private trip tracking? While possible, it’s unlikely – the high cost of the VR hardware itself slims the potential market down significantly, keeping Enosis Therapeutics firmly rooted in the B2B side of the business.

10 More about it here: <https://www.lucid.news/wonderlands-psychedelic-corporate-rabbit-hole/>

11 More about it here: <https://www.enosistherapeutics.com>

2. CRITIQUE IS EASIER THAN IMAGINATION

One of the things that we have learned in this process is that it is far easier - or at least more available to us, and those we have been in conversation with - to analyze and critique than to imagine otherwise. What we collectively learned was how deeply our imaginaries are constrained by the current conditions, by narratives of modernity and teleological timeframes of futurity (Andreotti 2021).

We suggest that this propensity to critique and analyze is itself a symptom of the colonization of our imaginations. It indicates just how strongly schooling and academic training constrains the imagination. The practices that we facilitated are all experimental, emergent, and open-ended, yet they took place - or were held - in a space that was, at least partially, recognized or identified as academic. No matter how much we attempted to create parameters and framings that broke with these constraints, the event was still associated by our participants with an academic space, a function of the different profiles gathered (some practitioners, some scientists, some social scientists, all participants), perhaps the University Zoom link or simply the invitation that emanated from a research project.

Further, we invited the participants in our online encounters to open up and share their fears, hopes and emotions. This invitation brought up ambiguous feelings and responses: while some people felt uneasy, most felt safe, reassured, and gave us very positive feedback regarding their experiences. The reluctance and reservation expressed by a few participants suggested that the speculative premise of co-laboration and co-re-definition requires trust and openness, which are often sorely missing in academic settings.

In these complex times of digital social mediation - where platforms such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram intensify, speed up and shape content deeply - different visions of ayahuasca practice are actively promoted, normalized, called out and publicly taken down. Sharing one's position - even offline - is fraught, as the echoes of social media storms resonate in everyone's field of awareness, storms that no simple, black-and-white response or stance could possibly quell. We found that this intensifies an environment that makes people feel that they should always say the right things, and give the right answers, cutting off the important process of building, making mistakes and taking path turns.

The academy is often a competitive, violent, and excluding (white, masculine, cisgender, heterosexual, normative) space. This point brings us back to the border zone and emergent features of our speculative movement. As we have seen, on the one hand, this movement is inserted in the academic framework, since it is part of a recognized (and publicly funded) research project. On the other hand, this whole speculative process is also part of a broader attempt to shift and change the academic settings from their borders (Flores 2020). Thus, we suggest that building a multiple and diverse space of dialogue can help us to displace our own "academic" perspectives. We acknowledge the violence and the hegemony of academic

knowledge and at the same time, we attempt to expand the fissures and cracks present in these spaces. Further, we intend to center care also in our academic and research practices, cultivating values such as trust, cooperation, and co-laboration. We suggest that this speculative gesture does not fit exactly in the existing academic frameworks, inviting us to shift and expand them. It enables a creative space of emergence and undefinition from where we may contribute to building otherwise paths for research and knowledge production.

3. FACILITATING A MULTIPLE NARRATIVE IS CHALLENGING

One of the main tensions that emerged from these speculative experiences was between telling a story of a possible future and holding the multiplicity of visions and perspectives present in the group. Several participants shared their understandings of homogeneity as violent and oppressive, an important perspective that fed our proposal of not attempting to produce a consensus. As one participant shared in the feedback session: “I find it interesting that ayahuasca is multiple, subjective, non-linear and asks for this to be the way she is seen.... You bring this vision of ayahuasca within academia, and this is a very interesting dissonance.” Another participant felt that the event had marked them by the way it explicitly “questioned the monocultures” of ayahuasca.

In this sense, a key learning that we take away from this experience has to do with the challenge of holding multiple voices and crafting a narrative that is neither a singular narrative nor the sum of all the perspectives.¹² Although we were clear to state that the objective was not the creation of a singular Future Ayahuasca Care Space, but rather an exploration of multiple possible future care spaces grounded in joy, pleasure, and transformative social justice, a lot of the discussions in the online collective speculative exercise circled around the violence of a single narrative. In the parameters that we had drafted, we had tried to make it explicit that the objective was to collectively build and imagine otherwise possible futures, without entering into discussions about what is “right” or “wrong”, or aiming to tell a unique story. Nevertheless, something about the structure of the event or the list of questions led to a process that ended up being more in the style of consensus-building.

The nuance that this ambiguity helped to clarify was between drawing on the diversity of perspectives brought together to produce one unified narrative of the future (a plurality perspective) and drawing on the diversity of perspectives brought together as a resource to help elucidate all the implications and facets of a given narrative of the future (which we will call a multiplicity perspective). The nuance we are trying to highlight here is that the objective we were pursuing was not to achieve a common view of the desirable future of ayahuasca care spaces. Perhaps it was our emphasis on “building desirable futures” that led to this equivocation. Maybe it was the list of questions we presented to the participants - shared in section 3.2. What we take away from this is that in future events, it will be important to emphasize that

12 On the difference between the multiple and the plural in the context of the “world” ayahuasca conferences, see Sanabria (2021).

the objective is not to have all perspectives represented in a vision (a plurality perspective, in which the different perspectives make up a whole) but rather for the diversity of perspectives to help all the aspects of a vision become more clearly articulated, including the blind spots and otherwise unthought aspects that bringing different perspectives together help shed light on.

Our intent in bringing together a multiplicity of perspectives was to draw on the range of expertise and experience gathered to help make explicit the world being imagined: so that those focused on therapeutic mechanisms might be invited by others to consider how money flows and ownership works, or those with a focus on access and intersectionality might be pushed further to think about the architecture of the space or its location. In this sense, the objective was not for the differences in the space to cancel each other out, but rather for them to become starting points. We also wanted to trouble the obvious differences in order to get beyond a situation in which people are speaking on behalf of their identities (for example as the spokesperson for blackness, for women, for trans and nonbinary identities, for this or that religion, for a disciplinary perspective or a specific form of therapeutic expertise).

Creating space for these changes of perspectives to take root in such a diverse group of participants requires a tremendous amount of care and time. The logic of academia, with its focus on outputs and finished products, can make it challenging to recognize these slow, iterative processes, and the labor required to undo certain patterns before new patterns can settle in.

4. HOLDING SPACE IS A FORM OF CARE

During our exercise, we experienced the fact that holding space is a form of care and that caring demands listening, openness to accept the unexpected, to change, and the ability to hold a wide array of emotions. Welcoming people from different backgrounds, such as from the ayahuasca religions, Afro-Brazilian religions, spiritual healers, and biomedical or social science researchers, challenged us to hold space for different truths, and different positions regarding what is right or wrong. We strove to address these concerns in a caring and respectful way, without erasing the feelings generated in the participants and in us, as facilitators of the process.

One of our team members used his experience studying gender within Santo Daime (Benedito, 2019) to point out how emotions such as anger are often silenced by communities in search of homogeneity, erasing dissonant bodies and experiences. It is a religious way of creating the spell of truth and maintaining hierarchical power relations that subject non-white, non-heterosexual, and gender-nonconforming people. Bueno and Benedito (2024) propose that Christian ayahuasca religions, such as the Santo Daime and União do Vegetal, and universalistic new age ayahuasca centers, often draw sacralized readings of homosexual and transgender people's bodies and experiences to marginalize them as spiritually degenerate, subjecting those people to homophobic and transphobic notions of their existence.¹³

13 This scenario was also analyzed by Silva's (2020) work on the (im)possibilities of the transmasculine experience in Santo Daime.

To address these issues in our collective framework, the project has drawn on critical gender studies (Leite Jr. 2011; Favero 2020; Preciado 2020), and specifically invited members of the LGBTQIA+ community to share their expertise in nonheteropatriarchal forms of care.

One participant shared her dream that ayahuasca care spaces (and society more generally) overcome the imposition of gender binaries, welcoming a multiplicity of bodily and gender experiences and nurturing a space where LGBTQIA+ persons can feel safe.¹⁴ Another participant emphasized the importance of diversity in healing spaces, pointing out the need for the future to encompass a range of ayahuasca care spaces. However, according to her, people will need to be able to meet and respect this diversity of knowledge and perspectives. This speaks directly to Preciado's call that we become "capable of accepting gendered and sexual subjectivities as open processes, not as closed identities" (2022: 199). The conversation which unfolded in this break-out room touched on the coloniality of the heteronormative and cis-gender ideal, often upheld tacitly or explicitly in existing ayahuasca circles, and pointed to a horizon of hope where the reality of diversity beyond closed identities can be met.

CONCLUSIONS

The Declaration of the fourth Indigenous Ayahuasca Conference opens thus: "We affirm that Ayahuasca is the connecting thread of life, an ancestral knowledge that has resisted colonization and remains alive in the culture of various Indigenous peoples, its guardians since time immemorial. We emphasize that the Indigenous teachings are an inspiration for the changes needed to protect life on the planet and to revise the very idea of humanity." In this sense, the care that Indigenous communities have devoted to maintaining this source of more-than-human knowledge is the tangible manifestation of collective forms of speculation against all odds. In a similar vein, UMIYAC, the Colombian Union of Yagé (as ayahuasca is known in Colombia) Indigenous Practitioners offers an extraordinary example of manifesting a collective speculative vision within a war-torn country marked by violent extractivism, narco-traffic and intense discrimination against Indigenous communities. Building on decades of community engagement and dialogue, UMIYAC envisioned a response to the humanitarian tragedy of armed conflict in which yagé ceremonies are adopted to support communities to heal from the scars of war. UMIYAC organizes "Spiritual Health Brigades" to promote peacebuilding within communities and address "the tragic legacies of killings, disappearances, confinement, displacement and dispossession" (Evanjuanoy & Vitale, 2020). These cursory examples reveal the speculative potency of Indigenous thought and existence, something that echoes what Indigenous scholar, activist and artist Daiara Tukano (2023) names *cosmopotência* or *cosmopotency*, to refer to the way that (Indigenous) actions and

14 To fully appreciate this point, it is important to note that many religious ayahuasca settings clearly demarcate spaces or activities for men and women in their rituals.

thoughts “create the universe.” These cosmopotent speculative lessons are essential teachings for envisioning the future of non-Indigenous ayahwasca care practices.

Ethnographic field situations are always inherently complex, traversed by power, tensions, and ruptures in scales and ontological registers. Holding the multiple dimensions of any ethnographic situation requires a lot of care and intuition (Olson & Peterson, 2024). Our use of the speculative research practices described here seeks to address some of the challenges of holding complex encounters. It is an attempt to stay in respectful relationship with our interlocutors who are oftentimes friends, sometimes mentors and teachers, people we are learning from in each site. It is also remaining accountable to a practice of “science” while reclaiming it from its corporate, reductionist, colonized forms. Doing so, we found that grounding our approach in Afro-American and transfeminist genealogies requires an attention to power that is more than skin deep, that is attentive and responsive to affective registers, to legacies of trauma and erasure, to questions of safety (physical and emotional), particularly in a context that seeks to dream the futures of care into being.

In the spaces we collectively held for and with each other, supported by the principles of deep listening, honoring and the transformative ethos of being moved by each other (rather than speaking over each other with opinions in a more or less consensual argumentative process) we became aware in new, more embodied and responsive ways, of the different experiences and visions of the world we carry. There was discomfort and joy in this. A sense of something transformative tightly coupled with a sense of disorientation. The feedback we got and the feeling we carried away from these practices as a team was of lightness and possibility. What mattered, in the end, was less the version of the world we made, and more the process of co-listening and co-creating that could get us to any possible world. In many ways, the greatest obstacle to building the worlds we dream of - in place of extractivist, neo-fascist, heteropatriarchal racial capitalism, is the lack of opportunities we give each other to settle into the tender, vulnerable, slow labor of co-constructing and co-consenting. As a team one of the most transformative aspects of this work was deepening - in experiential and embodied, rather than a cognitive way - our self-awareness - that is a greater awareness of our positionalities, assumptions, biases, shadows, roles in interpersonal dynamics, and learning to meet these, collectively, with compassion and rigor, as we oriented towards making a safe space for all to show up and share their vision.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Most of the data supporting this reflection are based on various collective experiments involving the use of speculation as a method in anthropology. Therefore, due to the ethically sensitive nature of the data, and in accordance with the procedures of informed consent adopted in the grant, the data are not made open access. Some of the information presented in the text are based on sources available online, with links provided in footno-

tes throughout the article. Among these sources, we highlight in particular the following websites: Indigenous researcher and activist Daiara Tukano (<https://www.daiaratukano.com/>), Indigenous Ayahuasca Conferences (<https://ayahuascaconferenciaindigena.org/>), and Afro-futurist speculative project Wakanda Dream Lab (<https://www.wakandadreamlab.com>).

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors of the text participated equally in the research, the speculative experiments involved, and the writing process. We emphasize the shared nature of this reflection and writing process, as well as the fundamental collaboration of the participants in our collective encounters to imagine future care spaces with ayahuasca.

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