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THE SPIRITUALITY OF PSYCHONAUTICS: HOW *ALICE IN WONDERLAND*, *THE MATRIX* AND OTHER MODERN MYTHS SERVE AS MODELS FOR NEW AGE SEEKERSHIP AND IDENTITY FORMATION

Introduction: Alice and Entheogens

The purpose of this paper is to analyze spiritual phenomena using contemporary mythological and pop-cultural referents, such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871), and *The Matrix*. Using these texts as interpretive mediums, I hope to deepen the reader's insights about various aspects and meanings of the phenomena under question. Using narrative structures as analytical aides is useful insofar as they permit in situ examinations of New Ager beliefs and reveals how they work discursively. In other words, the stories provide a dynamic narrative context, analogous to the kinds of terrain in which spirituality beliefs are formed and operate. This analysis is phenomenological in nature to the degree that it necessitates an examination of narrative structures which animate and disclose types of subjectivity and meaning structures among my study participants. At basis it involves deconstructing themes taken from their texts, ones related to my study participant's beliefs, practices, and experiences. It involves moreover identifying points of contact that exist between these sets of discourses, noting where they overlap and disagree.

Because they appeared spontaneously during the course of my interviews, I chose to utilize the *Alice in Wonderland* stories created by Lewis Carroll as a medium for understanding the phenomenological and subjective nature of new spirituality seekership. The *Alice* texts serve as devices for examining and interpreting the popular discourses that permeate these subcultures. My study includes an analysis of spirituality concepts and beliefs, as well as bona fide mythological forms that, while having some relation to religious myths, exist in a class by themselves. Meaning-making among my study participants is explored, which involves how beliefs are created and maintained, and how plausibility structures operate. Of particular significance to the *Alice* stories is something my informants refer to as 'psychonautics', a term that derives from 'astronaut'. However, instead of exploring outer space, the psychonaut journeys into the recesses of their own psyche, via entheogenic substances such as peyote, ayahuasca, psilocybin mushrooms or lsd. These are specially sought-after forms of subjectivity that individuals seek out, usually within the context of shamanistic ceremonial rituals, that are based in part on hallucinogenic experiences.

Contemporary studies of Lewis Carroll's *Alices* involve everything from mathematical treatises on logic and game theory to specialized analyses of its poetry, folklore, and relations to quest literature. The works have been reviewed so thoroughly that H el ene Cixous claims we have reached the point where, "to be honest, the territory [Carroll's texts] is so well studied, its stratifications uncovered in every direction, that it seems

bold or even impossible "to add" anything".¹ Perhaps it is true that Carroll's critics have run the full gamut of interpretive possibilities. However, aside from being the theme of a psychedelic song "White Rabbit" written by Jefferson Airplane in the mid-1960s, I am unaware of any reference that seeks to connect the *Alice* narratives specifically with those of modern experimental religions.

Books such as *Alice in Acidland*² have attempted to relate 1960s psychedelic culture to its story elements. But they do not explore either religious or spiritual themes in connection with them, and so remain superficial analyses of altered psychological states. The present study also references some of the common subjective states individuals experience while using psychedelics. Let it be clear from the outset, however, that my analysis will not include a comprehensive history or review of hallucinogens and their effects. Those books have already been written (e.g. Gordon Wasson's *The Road to Eleusis*, 1978; Terrance McKenna's *Food of the Gods*, 1992; Koral's *White Rabbit*, 1995; and Schlain & Lee's *Acid Dreams*, 1992). But I will during the course of the analysis provide readers with some background information on the subject, in addition to participant's personal accounts where needed. But before launching into mythological interpretations of my subject's psychedelic experiences, it is necessary to have a brief discussion about new spiritualities to ground readers in this subculture.

Introduction to New Spiritualities

Anyone setting out to study new spirituality immediately becomes aware of the difficulties involved with defining it. Enigmatic, elusive, diffuse, variegated, indeterminate, and pluralistic represent just some of the terms that researchers have used to refer to this phenomenon (Kemp, 2004; Sutcliffe, 2003; Shimazono, 1999; Raschke, 1996). Not only do groupings like 'New Age' defy classification, it is also often difficult to determine exactly what is being studied due to its chameleon-like nature. It changes frequently, it is always morphing into new forms, it is faddish, and yet it contains traditional religious elements that have remained unchanged for thousands of years. Are new spiritualities social movements, or are they bona fide religion? Is it postmodern or atavistic, secular or post-secular, countercultural, or a commodification of the traditional? For William Bloom, New Age spirituality is something which "gives us maps, insights, friends, techniques, inspiration and strength in our exploration of the inner world."³ In her book *Aquarian Conspiracy*, social historian Marilyn Ferguson asserts that it is nothing less than the zeitgeist of the times: The spirit of our age is fraught with paradox. It is at the same time pragmatic and transcendental. It values both enlightenment and mystery, power and humility, interdependence and individuality. It is simultaneously political and apolitical. Within recent history it has infected medicine, education, social science, hard science, even government with its implications. It is characterized by fluid organizations reluctant to create hierarchical structures, averse to dogma. It operates on the principle that change can only be facilitated, not decreed. It is short on manifestos. It

¹ Hélène Cixous, "Introduction to Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass and The Hunting of the Snark*: *New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation*," *New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation* 13.2 (1982): 231.

² Thomas Fensch, *Alice in Acidland*, (Texas: New Century Books, 1970).

³ William Bloom, *The New Age: An Anthology of Essential Writings*, (London: Rider, 1991), p. xviii.

seems to speak to something very old. And perhaps, by integrating magic and science, art and technology, it will succeed where all the king's horses and all the king's men failed.⁴

It would be difficult to classify New Age spirituality as a social movement in the usual sense, i.e. as being politically contentious, or concerned with goals involving member recruitment, or of rationally exploiting economic opportunities. Nevertheless, countercultural spirituality meets the conditions of a “fluid social movement” through acts of dissension, and flight away from mainstream social controls.⁵ It is involved with challenging cultural codes and their members are often identifiable as New Agers. Also, by engaging in antidogmatic discourse and practices, New Ageism is opposing what is perceived to be a hyper-rationalized and materialistic mainstream society. Wini Breines defines this aspect of New Left politics as a “refusal of the rules,” or to compromise in conventional political ways which prescribes that social change must occur within a formal rationality, as instrumental politics.⁶ For some New Agers it amounts to a rejection of Enlightenment rationalism in exchange for a trans-rational understanding of nature and social relations.⁷ As a result, New Age idealism is often criticized for being politically ineffective, or withdrawn (Steyn, 1994) by not being overtly political or class based. However, due to these structural factors, this form of social movement is not as easily co-opted by mainstream power holders, and according to Jon Bloch makes it “a stronger collective voice of repudiation against rational society”.⁸

Alberto Melucci argues that social and political conflicts no longer have winners, but may produce innovation, modernization, and reform.⁹ Rather than defeating their opposition, such as environmentalist groups vs. transnational corporations, new social movements (NSMs) like elements of the New Age, may initiate institutional changes by innovating new forms of culture. One of the ways this occurs is through the creation of collective identities in movement groups. Identity formation fosters an awareness among social actors of the ability to work on motivational and biological structures, as opposed to the world which was the focus of activist objectives within previous cycles of social movements.¹⁰

In this way, NSMs are self-reflexive through being engaged in identity work, that is not instrumental to a further end, such as securing particular economic or political rights, as in the ERA (equal rights amendment), but is meaningful in itself, and relates to new spiritualities insofar as both are concerned with personal and social transformation. This offers the possibility for symbolic challenges to be made against mainstream opponents, which may work to ultimately overturn dominant cultural codes.¹¹

⁴ Marilyn Ferguson, *Aquarian Conspiracy*, (London: Paladin, 1980), 18.

⁵ Jon P. Bloch, *New Spirituality, Self, and Belonging: How New Agers and Neo-Pagans Talk About Themselves*, (Westport & London: Praeger, 1998), 23.

⁶ Wini Breines, *Community and Organization in the New Left: 1962-1968 The Great Refusal*, (Praeger Publishers, 1982), 5.

⁷ Ken Wilber, *A Sociable God: Toward a New Understanding of Religion*, (Boulder: Shambala, 1983).

⁸ Bloch, 23.

⁹ Alberto Melucci, *Nomads of the Present: Social Movements and Individual Needs in Contemporary Society*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 78.

¹⁰ Daren Kemp, *New Age: A Guide: Alternative Spiritualities from Aquarian Conspiracy to Next Age*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004) 94.

¹¹ Kemp, 94.

For Stephen Sutcliffe, the New Age is not so much a social movement as it is an overlapping of various social milieu, that he describes as a “bricolage of more or less interchangeable practices and values given focus by an ambiguous eschatological emblem”.¹² Karel Dobbelaere agrees, characterizing New Age spirituality as an idiosyncratic and heterogeneous phenomenon in which individuals are free to fabricate their own religiosities as a patchwork of beliefs and practices, bricolages and compositions oriented by subjective interests rather than communal blueprints.¹³ Kemp uses the term “implicit religion” to characterize the New Age milieu, which he equates with “self-spirituality”.¹⁴

As collective expressions of spirituality are increasingly being dissolved, new spiritualities have arisen as alternatives to traditional religious forms.¹⁵ Driven by privatization and pluralism, a subjectivization of religion has occurred¹⁶ in which individuals are not only responsible for their personal religious existence, but are actively involved in shaping unique expressions of spirituality that conform to the necessities and structures of modern life. Societalization, defined as the post-renaissance shift in the West from community to society^{17 18}, has also caused disruptions of standardized life courses, placing individuals into situations of social isolation and disenchantment. In response to time-space compression effects, New Agers and neopagans have sought to re-enchant their life worlds through the creation of post-material and de-temporalized communities, as a way to escape from what is perceived to be an unmagical, and even dehumanized existence. In what may be termed the sacralization of subjectivity (Luckmann, 1990, p. 135), new ceremonial groups endeavor to create cultural spaces in which an intersubjective sharing of one’s spirituality can occur. These alternative spaces allow for communal forms of socializing that are perhaps not available to individuals within their mainstream lives, and who may otherwise be isolated in their personal spiritual quests.

Psychonautics is a particular type of religious seekership, in which individuals explore the boundaries of their identities via transcendental states, evoked through the use of entheogenic plants and other

¹² Steven J. Sutcliffe, *Children of the New Age: A History of Spiritual Practices*, (London & New York: Routledge, 2003), 4.

¹³ K. Dobbelaere, “China Challenges Secularization Theory,” *Social Compass*, 56: 367.

¹⁴ Kemp, 99.

The term “New Paradigm” will at times also be used interchangeably with that of New Age, as a general reference to individuals practicing this sort of religiosity. The reason for the introduction of the new term is that New Paradigmers are specifically involved with using psychedelics as a core aspect of their spirituality. But also the label “New Age” now carries with it a stigma, and has fallen into disfavor among some members of Peaceburgh. The older label is kept because it has been, and is still used as a typological term among new/alternative spirituality researchers. This is somewhat analogous to using the terms Christian and Catholic interchangeably, e.g. a Catholic can be called a Christian, even though the two terms are not identical referents. But in some cases to call a Christian a Catholic is correct. I.e. all New Paradigmers belong to the broader category of New Age, but not all New Agers are New Paradigmers. New spiritualities is a much broader category that encompasses both types.

¹⁵ Andrew Dawson, *Sociology of Religion*, (London: SCM Press, 2011).

¹⁶ P. L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1967).

¹⁷ K. Dobbelaere, “Bryan Wilson’s Contributions to the Study of Secularization,” *Social Compass*, 53: 141-46.

¹⁸ B. Wilson, “Aspects of Secularization in the West,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 3 (1976): 259-76.

psychedelics. The dreams and visions described by my informants moreover lend themselves to mythologizing. Through connecting themselves to collective stories such as *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Matrix*, individuals who imagine themselves to be knights on solitary spiritual quests are able to find common meeting places in which to share their otherwise unarticulated subjective experiences.

Ceremonial plant entheogens, analogous to the mushrooms eaten by Alice in Wonderland, and the slippers worn by Dorothy in Oz, represent magical keys that can unlock the hidden potentials sleeping within these hero characters. Such narrative mechanisms, involving social and psychological processes, symbolize individual growth and liminal transformation. Falling down a rabbit hole, or entering the matrix, the hero is transported to alternate realities in which they undergo bizarre adventures that induce identity transformation. But these journeys are also undertaken for therapeutic purposes. Prevalent new spirituality themes include a seeking for community and magical fellowship, and to commune with nature. There is often expressed a desire for wanting to re-enchant the world and by extension one's life.

Modern spiritual seekership is also about looking for answers to questions that are largely ignored by mainstream science or capitalist life. For many participants this shows the need to have something larger to believe in, beyond economic success or positivist explanations for one's existence. There is a deep desire among members of wanting to see the world as being magical, and of wanting there to be something, anything, behind the ordinary facade of a logical and calculable reality. This manifests as a dreamy preoccupation with the possibilities for a transcendent experience, and a belief in the mind-altering potentials and healing benefits of plant entheogens.

But it is also coming to terms with the uncompromising meaning structures of modernity, and secular definitions of reality. This is symbolized by the iconic scene in the Wizard of Oz when Toto pulls back the curtain to reveal the man behind it. The Wizard is exposed as a sham, that there is in fact no wizard, only a con man who's lost and trying to get home. In the same way, traditional religion has been for many in the modern period something rendered equally as fraudulent.

Methods

This paper is derived from a [doctoral study](http://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/33547)¹⁹ conducted in the Sociology Department at the University of Pittsburgh. My dissertation, titled *Re-Enchanting the Social: Identity Transformation, Embodiment, and Prefigurative Religious Practices in New Spirituality Culture* is a study of alternative or earth spiritualities. The ethnography is focused on a quasi-religious subculture active in the Pittsburgh area, known to members collectively as Peaceburgh: A Peaceful Gathering of Hands. The community is composed of dozens of groups of varying size, in which individuals tend to hold multiple and overlapping memberships, with inner and outer levels of belonging, commitment, and involvement. Approaching this milieu ethnographically required gaining access to somewhat unconventional social situations, some of them secluded micro-societies that practice forms of spirituality involving the use of psychedelics and/or group sexual experiences. All participants in my study are adults, and agreed to being observed, and in some cases interviewed. Although I did attend ceremonies in which entheogens such as Peyote and Ayahuasca are used as a sacrament, e.g.

¹⁹ <http://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/33547>

Native American Church medicine ceremonies, the discussions and references made to these substances are based on my informant's personal experiences, which in part fuel their spiritual convictions.

The study is composed of ethnography, participant observation, and literary discourse analysis. My fieldwork occurred within small groups that operate primarily in the Pittsburgh area, but expanded to include some larger intentional communities that are connected through member's contact. As mentioned above, alternative or new spiritualities have been described as a diffuse and variegated, making them difficult to study. However, using a grounded theory approach to local and specific examples of this multicultural phenomenon, I have gained an understanding of a dynamic system of inter-subjective social processes. Participating alongside my subjects, sharing in their spiritual experiences, and applying to them a rigorous empirical observation and analysis, has enabled me to render intelligible the otherwise opaque and shifting structures of meaning embedded within individually synthesized collections of beliefs, practices, stories and discourses.

Grounded Theory Reflections

One of the most enjoyable aspects of doing qualitative research is the almost magical emergence of unintended consequences. For example, I did not originally set out to create a chapter based upon *Alice in Wonderland*. It just emerged spontaneously out of my data and analysis. The themes contained in the *Alice* stories appeared in my interview transcripts as things my informants cared about. That is the remarkable thing about doing grounded theory research. The significance of this discourse, and how it connects to the life worlds communicated by my informant's, was revealed only via the research process itself. I did not assign any special importance to Lewis Carroll's books prior to undertaking this study. Nor could I have predicted how much they mean to my subjects as adults, in terms of their spiritual cosmologies. While I could say that the *Alice* stories work remarkably well as metaphors for describing spiritual seekership, the truth is that it surfaced so frequently throughout my interviews, to not use it seemed an oversight. The themes present in Carroll's writings are eerily aligned with aspects related to my informant's brand of spirituality, which is probably why they are so predisposed towards the *Alice* texts as a meaning-making mythology.

Often described as "A timeless adventure of fantasy and nonsense," Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* continually violates the rules of conventional literary narratives. Carroll's "disruption of the continuity and causality on which many fictional representations and philosophical conceptions of identity and reality have tended to rely," distinguishes his text from others in its literary category.²⁰ Carroll's books represent a marked departure from other children's stories of the time, that were intended to educate and impart a moral message: "moral tales for Christian propaganda and social control".²¹ The latter were almost uniformly pedagogical devices, concerned with teaching a causality system, i.e. that misbehavior would result in immediate and severe punishments. Carroll's texts, far from supporting, actively sought to ridicule such moral narratives. Similar to other types of underground movements and publications, Carroll's use of illogic is a partly disguised subversion of the above-ground world's sense of meaning and order. It is also an attack on the

²⁰ Frida Beckman, "Becoming Pawn: Alice, Arendt and the New Narrative, *Journal of Narrative Theory*," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 44.1 (Winter): 1.

²¹ Beckman, 9.

logical, orderly, and coherent approach to life stressed by post-Enlightenment Europeans. Through an examination of their themes, and how they resonate with spiritual ideals, the following analysis will account for why these stories hold such a fascination for my study participants.

Going Down The Rabbit Hole

Sitting on the grass with her sister who is reading a book, Alice is bored because it has no interesting pictures or dialogue. But upon seeing the white rabbit she is “transformed, and burning with curiosity she races after it,” initiating her adventures in Wonderland. In an act that has since entered the language as a synonym for plunging into another world, Alice goes “down the rabbit hole”.²² When Alice falls down the rabbit hole, she begins her adventures in non-ordinary reality. This opening between worlds represents a conduit through which one is able to exit the land of the everyday. One travels via a sort of psychic wormhole, or phenomenal bridge that connects disparate realms.

Entering such umbilical passageways also symbolizes the separation event that delivers an initiate into a condition of liminality, such as when a child is taken from his or her family in order to undergo a rite of passage within a traditional society.^{23 24} The break from normality creates a space of identity confusion and uncertainty separating the phases of one's life, childhood from adulthood, which in the *Alice* stories equates to disparate places within the narratives. Liminal partitions permit encounters with unorthodox reality, and can involve bizarre and experimental behavior, which in turn affects shifts in identity. In such a state a person is socially and/or psychologically malleable, wherein identities become stretched in much the same ways as Alice's body, as she shrinks and grows while experimenting with ways for entering the magic garden. In this heightened state the individual becomes aware of existential alternatives. They may see a place they would like to be, a new role, social position or career opportunity along their life course. By playing with their sense of self they try to fit themselves into one of these newly perceived alternate destinies. Or possibly they do not know where they are going, only that they must go somewhere else. But through being transported to an unfamiliar place one undergoes a change, perhaps the result of one's being forced to navigate through possibly frightening, or at least unusual territory.

A bottle marked “Drink Me” makes Alice shrink in size, while eating a cake labelled “Eat Me” causes her to grow. This story device involves the warping of physical dimensions, an aspect of the hallucinogenic experience that symbolizes a change in the individual's perspective, e.g. seeing distortions in ordinary space-time due to having one's position altered. It also suggests an extension of one's powers of perception, such as being able to see more facets of a given situation. It represents an expansion, of moving beyond one's usual ways of seeing and understanding the world. By going on journeys of this sort, initiates (my study participants) understand that they have embarked upon a process of personal growth. We cannot know if Carroll himself intended the reality warping effects depicted in his books to represent hallucinogen usage, or even altered states of consciousness. We do

²² Richard Miller and Ann Jurecic, *Habits of the Creative Mind*, (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2016), 3.

²³ Victor Turner, *On the Edge of the Bush: Anthropology as Experience. Collected essays of Victor Turner*, (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1985).

²⁴ Bailey and Peoples, 2015.

know that the books were intended as children's stories, and as such contain goals concerned with achieving maturity and individual development.^{25 26 27} But beyond the pedagogical uses of such narratives, there are elements of nonsense, magic, and illogic that are also associated with a child's perspective. These themes resonate with my subject's goals involving re-enchantment, that for many includes a return to child-like ways of thinking and acting, to be discussed in more detail below.

Entering the Matrix

The notion of venturing down a rabbit hole to discover previously unseen realities appears in other media, however. For example, in the film *The Matrix* (Directors Andy Wachowski and Larry Wachowski, Warner Bros. Pictures, 1999) the main character Neo (sun child/quester archetype), is a computer hacker who discovers strange anomalies concerning his world. As he continues to uncover unsettling clues, a series of bizarre developments ensue that include encounters with shadowy forces, the agents (evil/shadow archetype), and culminates when he sees a woman with a white rabbit tattoo. This person eventually leads him to a mysterious figure who holds the answers to the riddles that he seeks. Morpheus is the teacher-sage archetype of the story who exposes Neo to the mysteries and hidden meanings of the matrix, by offering him a choice between two pills. Taking the blue pill would make him forget about the disturbing information he has up to that point learned of the matrix, allowing him to return to a comfortable, yet illusory life. Taking the red pill, however, would take him on a journey beyond the fringes of the known world, and would reveal to him the full scope of his predicament. He of course chooses the second pill, and upon swallowing the magical drug (entheogen) he falls down a wormhole, which in this case is a computer-generated virus-doorway that permits him to exit the matrix, i.e. the holographic virtual reality program which he formerly took for reality. This event begins Neo's transcendental journey, as he is propelled beyond the confines of his previously pale and fabricated existence, into a nightmarish actual world in which humans are being farmed as energy sources for a civilization of intelligent machines. In this wasteland Neo comes to realize his full powers, as he explores and develops his unrealized potentials. He experiences a process of expansion and growth, for which the film uses religious iconography. Neo is cast as a sort of superhuman messiah sent to liberate his fellow humans from the oppressive forces of malevolent machines that appear in the matrix program narratively as agents of the state.

Symbolically, the idea of going beyond the edge of the ordinary world to encounter other levels of reality is a recurring theme in religion and mythology. For example, Hindu mystical texts promise, via practices such as yoga and meditation, glimpses of the actual world which exists behind the facade of our commonly experienced reality (e.g. *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*). Ordinary reality is dismissed by this tradition as a delusory "veil of maya," a sensory illusion which hides the true ground of

²⁵ Donald Rackin, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass: Nonsense, Sense, and Meaning*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1991).

²⁶ Robert Elwood, *Key Concepts in Religion: Myth*, (London: Continuum Publishing Group, 2005).

²⁷ Stephanie L. Schatz, "Lewis Carroll's Dream-Child and Victorian Child Psychopathology," *Journal of the History of Ideas* Volume 76, no. 1 (January 2015), 93-114.

our existence,²⁸ similar to Plato's parable of the Cave in his *Republic*.²⁹ The primary function of spirituality, according to Campbell, is to assist a person in making such a transcendental leap.³⁰ In other words, it provides a means for breaking with conventional values that ordinarily serve as the structuring pillars of one's lifeworld.

Going on a spiritual journey is often equated to entering a strange landscape, a liminal zone within which a person can experiment with their 'powers', i.e. their agency, identity, or life's purpose. Moving oneself outside of an ordinary, and possibly disenchanting experience of life, even one that is materially or psychologically soothing, is what is being presented with this theme. And even if only temporarily, to move oneself beyond the comforts and stability of a conventional existence would, by Carroll's definition, force a person to draw upon strengths they did not know they had. These experiences allow one to develop and increase their range of possible actions, which prepares them for the challenges of the wasteland, a motif widely represented in mythologies.³¹ For example, in the *Star Wars* saga (Lucas Films Ltd., 1977) Luke Skywalker, due to a disruption of his safe yet constrained life, travels beyond the limits of the familiar world, in order to begin his training as a Jedi knight. Under the direction of a wise mentor Skywalker furthers his understanding of the force, which allows him to both face and defeat his powerful enemies.

It is usually an accident, or traumatic break with one's former lifeworld that compels the sun child to undertake their adventures. In Luke's case, he encounters a strange wizard-knight in the desert who knows of the father he never knew. Soon after this encounter his only remaining family members are killed, leaving him with no ties to the ordinary world, and so he is propelled into a new and extraordinary phase of life. Similarly, Alice follows the White Rabbit down the rabbit hole, "never once considering how *in the world* she was to get out again," and where she is promptly presented with a series of "out of the world" experiences, where "so many out-of-the-way things" happen.³²

Random events that set a hero's journey in motion can also be interpreted as unforeseen glitches. Technically a glitch is a failure of protocol, i.e. a malfunction. For video game users, this is defined literally as a mistake in the computer code that allows for an unintended, but interesting event to occur. For example, the glitch Neo detects in the matrix's code provides him with a way to see through the intended structures which define the boundaries of the normal world. It is an awakening to a problem that may signal a traumatic break with reality. But it also allows for a passageway out of what might be an undesirable paradigm. In other words the glitch, or anomaly, provides an opportunity for an escape via transcendental actions. Taking a hallucinogen has much the same effect, in both the *Alice* stories, and according to my informants. The mind-altering effects of a psychedelic experience produces a break with ordinary reality, one that cannot be reversed or undone, but must be seen through. Because the person has phenomenologically stepped outside of their ordinary world of references, and having seen the "other side," they are necessarily changed. Users thus return with an altered perspective, and

²⁸ Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology*, (New York: Penguin, 1968), 79.

²⁹ Plato, *Republic*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992), BK VII, p. 186.

³⁰ "The Message of the Myth," *Power of Myth* (Pittsburgh: PBS, June 1988).

³¹ Campbell 1968, 388.

³² Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), (London: Puffin Classics, 1994), 2.

because these experiences are connected with notions of personal growth, presumably an expanded understanding of their world.

As in quest type video games there are keys that allow players to move to the next level. Keys are specifically designed to unlock doors, doors of the mind presumably as theorized by Aldous Huxley.³³ Psychedelics are conceived to be chemical keys, structurally configured to fit specific locks. This type of key, it is believed by participants, unlocks a chemical possibility in the brain which yields an altered state, taking the user to a higher, or different level of consciousness. Hallucinogens do not, by most definitions, contain supernatural properties, however. This differentiates them from the artifacts or rites of a satanic ritual for example. In that case there *is* magic involved, e.g. speaking a sequence of words (wherein the linguistic formula contains magical properties) releases a physical force that opens up doorways. From a normal scientific perspective there is nothing supernatural about the entheogen, only its chemical properties that allow it to have particular physiological effects. But for my subjects these can also be magical, insofar as nature, which includes the plant derived hallucinogens, as well as video games, are all part of a divine program or paradigm. For lack of a better term it is 'magic', or 'spirituality' that cosmically connects hallucinogens with human consciousness and occurrences in the world, all of which have metaphysical, as well as physical properties.

Out of the Way Places: Where am I?

By placing Alice in a series of nonsensical situations, Carroll also highlights the contrast between a rational and reserved posture, embodied by a tight-laced English schoolmaster on the one hand, and the manic unreasonableness of a “Mad Hatter” on the other. This play of opposites is exhibited in other popular media. For example, in the science fiction series *Star Trek* (created by Gene Roddenberry, Paramount Pictures, 1966-69), the rational and unemotional extraterrestrial Mr. Spock, is contrasted with the emotional and compassionate humanitarian Dr. McCoy, and the spontaneously intuitive commander Captain Kirk. In the *Star Trek* Universe Vulcans are highly logical, having learned to suppress their emotions. They also possess superior intelligence, as well as superhuman strength. Aliens such as these are often depicted in fictional narratives as being more advanced than humans, presumably due to the aforementioned qualities. This is precisely what Carroll rebels against: Enlightenment notions of progress that have encoded within them Darwinian ideals that equate 'logical' with 'superior'. This western scientific trope projects onto the world a unilineal pattern of development, in which cruder forms of life evolve into more sophisticated ones.

For example, indigenous cultures were viewed, in Carroll's time, as less developed than European ones. Primitive peoples were also seen as less intelligent and more emotional, even child-like in comparison with Europeans,³⁴ and these ideals found their way into 20th century science fiction. Being more advanced roughly equates to being more logical, having a higher intelligence, and being less emotional. In other words, rationalist atheism is valued over adherence to either religion or superstition. James Frazier's cognitive theory of religion suggests that they evolve from simpler forms to more complex ones, with the implication that atheism is “after”

³³ Aldous Huxley, *Doors of Perception*, (New York: Harper-Collins, 1954).

³⁴ Bailey and Peoples, 93-94.

and “beyond” religion, thus being a superior belief system.³⁵ This logocentric bias is partly what Carroll seeks to romantically undo, in part by praising emotive pre-logical thought, and child-like forms of consciousness, while parodying overly logical or rational temperaments. Robert Ellwood interprets mythological meanings from such a romantic perspective. He suggests that, “myths relate truth not just in a literary or proto-scientific way, but go behind all that to embody the primal, almost pre-verbal consciousness of the human race – or of a particular race– in its sunset years when our ancestors were trailing clouds of glory, and the shadows of the prison house had not yet closed around. Myth comes first; abstract language is only faded mythology”.³⁶

Wonderland: Nightmare or Sanctuary?

The Caterpillar

The Caterpillar asks Alice “who are you?” to which she responds, “I don't know quite who I am, or how I am supposed to be,” a condition that highlights her identity confusion. She continues “Am I the same as I was yesterday? How queer everything is today, I wonder if I've been changed in the night. Let me think, was I the same as when I got up this morning? If I'm not the same, the next question is, who in the world am I?”.³⁷

A pivotal moment occurs in the narrative when Alice exclaims, in response to the Caterpillar's disturbing provocations, “I can't explain myself I'm afraid, Sir, because I'm not myself you see”.³⁸ Being in a strange place, where her old self ceases to work, Alice is unsure about who she is. Finding herself in an alternate reality, with different rules and expectations, she becomes estranged from her former self, which was part of the above-ground world. At this point she begins to acknowledge, with an increasing awareness, that her identity is contingent upon the discursive world in which she finds herself.³⁹ Individuals in my study sample often see this moment as revelatory, the point in their journey which marks the separation between their inherited culture, and their desired one. In a perhaps yet to be determined place, individuals seek to establish a new sense of self. This is a self apart from the one shaped by the discourses and identities received from one's family group or society, such as daughter, son, Christian, Muslim, American, consumer, etc.

Part of the motivation for using entheogens is to get to this place of identity independence. The alternative spaces in which this type of identity work occurs, such as spiritually oriented cosplay festivals, are analogous to the underground worlds of Wonderland, which likely accounts for the latter's psychonautic appeal. Psychedelics open up alternative worlds, and the resulting visions, according to my informants, often become the inspiration for intentional communities themselves, which are places designed to be socially and psychologically transformational. In a way, these spaces can be conceived of as cultural cocoons, in which individuals undergo personal metamorphoses. These communities are also protected spaces, insofar as they are usually isolated and off the beaten track, places in which individuals feel safe experimenting with themselves existentially,

³⁵ James Frazier, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, (London: Oxford, 1890).

³⁶ Ellwood, 37.

³⁷ Carroll 1994, 14.

³⁸ Carroll 1994, 44.

³⁹ Rackin, 46.

phenomenologically, expressing themselves in ways that are typically unavailable in mainstream life. This can involve alternative dress, practicing nudity, gender fluidity, or engaging in rituals that involve a sexual dimension. So behaving strangely, and in conjunction with the use of hallucinogens, have the effect of opening up "avenues of experience previously unavailable to the individual".⁴⁰ Engaging in these liminal practices may serve to shift one's center of awareness, pushing the individual into new social and psychological territory, and priming them for shifts in consciousness and identity transformation.

Alice then tries to assess whether or not she has changed by attempting to recite her multiplication tables. However, as she tries to do this, everything comes out all wrong, "Four times five is twelve, four times six is thirteen" and "London is the capital of Paris".⁴¹ Things that were previously relied upon to provide corporeal stability no longer work, "and with so many familiar, comforting concepts already lost, Alice naturally begins to sense her frightening isolation, and alienation from the self-defining constructs of above-ground culture".⁴²

Perhaps, more than anything else in the story, individuals in my study sample most identify with Alice as she cries aloud, "I am so very tired of being all alone here!".⁴³ Being on an individual spiritual journey has its advantages: not being bound by prepackaged religious systems that are ill-fitting, being free to map out one's own direction and goals based on personal interests and inspirations, not to mention the solitude this brings one. But from talking with my informants, I get the sense that many of them feel as alone as Alice does, although probably for different reasons. Both are trapped in a strange and hostile environment, bewildered and unsure about who they are or what they should do. However, for Alice it is the above-ground world that provides solace and stability, and an eventual escape from an unpleasant and maddening underworld. For my study participants it is the ordinariness of the normative, or "muggle" world in which they feel the most alienated, and so attempt to create alternative worlds to flee into. Rather than seeing Alice's plight as a cautionary tale, as something to be anxiously avoided, informants are envious of her ability to peek behind the veil as it were, to see what exists on the other side. This is a notion emphasized perhaps more so in Alice's adventures *Through the Looking Glass*, wherein she returns to the magical possibilities fellowship of Wonderland.

Who am I? Identity Confusion, Transformation, and Incorporation

The Caterpillar asks her again, "Who are you?" Alice answers, "I'm afraid I don't know at the moment, I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I've changed several times since then".⁴⁴ This dialogue is a favorite among psychonauts, and so I include from it the following excerpt, as it probes more deeply into identity change and its relation to narrative structures. Especially pertinent themes include the disorienting effects of change, and the warping of 'the real':

Caterpillar: 'So you're thinking of changing again are you?'

Alice: 'I'm afraid I am, you see I can't remember the things I used to?'

Caterpillar: 'What size do you want to be?'

Alice: 'I'm not particular to size, it's just that one doesn't like changing so

⁴⁰ Huxley 1954.

⁴¹ Carroll 1994, 15.

⁴² Rackin, 41.

⁴³ Carroll 1994, 16.

⁴⁴ Carroll 1994, 44.

often you know.'
 Caterpillar: 'No I don't know, are you happy now?'
 Alice: 'Well I'd like to be a little larger.'
 Caterpillar: 'Hmm seems a very nice size to me.'
 Alice: 'I'm not used to it.'
 Caterpillar: 'You'll get used to it.'
 Alice: 'And being so many different sizes in a day is very confusing.'
 'It isn't,' said the Caterpillar.
 'Well, perhaps you haven't found it so yet,' said Alice; 'but when you have to turn into a chrysalis – you will someday, you know – and then after that into a butterfly, I should think you'll feel it a little queer, won't you?'
 'Not a bit,' said the Caterpillar.
 'Well, perhaps your feelings may be different,' said Alice; 'all I know is, it would feel very queer to me.'

The Caterpillar is, of course, familiar with change. His ability to metamorphose represents both transformation and maturation. Also, because a butterfly is a radically different form of life compared to a caterpillar, a total alteration of one's self. Alice worries about changing however, and wonders how much does one have to change before having a new identity? In *Through the Looking Glass* for example, when Alice is about to enter the forest of no names, she is worried about losing her name. Moreover, due to Carroll's linguistic topsy-turvydom, Alice experiences a type of ontological insecurity. She is plunged into a semiotic chaos where "things slip away from words".⁴⁵ Words become separated from their referents, and effects are severed from their causes. For example, because her name and identity have always been connected and interdependent, she considers them inseparable. Therefore, the loss of one signifies losing the other, which justifies her fears. However, when Alice encounters Tweedledum and Tweedledee, the loss of her name becomes less about losing her identity, and more a concern about receiving an ugly name: "I shouldn't like to lose it at all—because they'd have to give me another, and it is almost certain to be an ugly one".⁴⁶

Beckman argues that the lack of character continuity is linked to the lack of narrative continuity. By disrupting continuity, the text forces Alice "to let go of the continuity of her own and the world's identity".⁴⁷ Eventually Alice stops trying to predict or explain events, using her above-ground knowledge and logic, and learns rather to act upon them in the moment. In the same way individuals may seek to disrupt the normative narrative structures, i.e. the cultural texts, in which they find themselves. Beckman asks, "how is our freedom and capacity to act curtailed or encouraged through narrative structures?".⁴⁸

Non-Linearity and Metamorphosis

Something unusual in the *Alice* stories, and no doubt an attractive feature for many of my informants, is that they jump from scene to scene without a logical progression of events. There are disconcerting breaks in causality, wherein characters appear and disappear suddenly and mysteriously. This contrasts with typical narratives, in which "acting becomes a matter of

⁴⁵ Beckman, 9, 141.

⁴⁶ Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There (1871)*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 209.

⁴⁷ Beckman, 2.

⁴⁸ Beckman, 8.

creating a linear and causal chain through which identity is secured".⁴⁹ Carroll deliberately upsets standard forms of narrative structure by introducing elements of "nonsense," such as abrupt jumps or breaks in the storyline. Things often seem to run backwards, as when the Hatter accuses Alice of not being the same as she was before, with statements such as "you were much muchier," and "you've lost your muchness".⁵⁰ As the story proceeds, Alice becomes "muchier" as she overcomes the successive challenges posed by Wonderland. In this case identity is the vehicle that connects past states with future ones.

The idea of an expanding and contracting self is implicit in the New Age notion of the "capital S self," i.e. the future, larger, more evolved and more complete self which is contained, in a nascent form, within the current and less developed self. It is believed that the individual, via their spiritual practices, will gradually ascend a karmic ladder into higher states of selfhood. An important aspect of my subject's brand of religiosity is defined by this developmental process, i.e. acquiring what they consider to be higher levels of spiritual status. It is connected with Hindu notions of reincarnation as well. On the one hand a person becomes more than what they were, due to having transcended their previous set of cultural, moral, or behavioral limitations. But they also become more of what they already are: through actualizing inner potentials an individual achieves their (until this moment) unrealized totality, i.e. their god-self.

In one sense Alice is not herself *anymore*, but in another she is not herself *yet*. She continually defines who she is by the ways in which she responds to the trials that have been set for her. Having been stretched and shrunk multiple times, and having her moral and causal universe turned upside down and inside out, she is no longer her once naïve self. The changes in size are symbolic of her liminal transformations, from which she emerges primed for the discovery of just who she is. Through immersing themselves in ritual practices such as entheogen use, and liminoid space activities such as New Age and neopagan cosplay ritual events, my study participants similarly affect a dissolution of their previous selves, or ego identities. Donning costumes, embodying new roles within an orchestrated social event, wherein one has a designated ritual function that serves a meaningful purpose and is important to other members, e.g. a Druid priest or Fairy guide, provides opportunities for individuals to work out a new sense of who they are.

The final stage, which completes identity transformation within a traditional culture, is called *incorporation*. This occurs when a person reaches full adult status. Having survived the numerous trials and challenges put to them, and with the successful completion of their rites of passage, an initiate moves from liminality to incorporation. They receive a new name and rank within their societies, along with new responsibilities.⁵¹ Among my study participants, achieving a new identity is often equated with undergoing a kind of rebirth. Ironically it is their old identity, the one given to them by their parent culture, which they seek to transcend. Because one's old identity is perceived as being produced by mainstream societal norms, it is as if the person, through developing their new self, sheds the skin of an earlier stage of life, one associated with the muggle world, to become more fully realized as their magical self. By taking the psychonautic journey, the individual experiences a shift in perspective, a shift in how they perceive and understand the world, and how they see themselves in relation to it.

⁴⁹ Beckman, 16.

⁵⁰ Carroll 1982.

⁵¹ Bailey and Peoples 2015.

It Was Only a Dream

The idea of reaching another layer of reality via hallucinogens is often associated with the dream experience. Dreaming is believed by many New Agers and New Paradigmers to be a therapeutic phenomenon. But it also constitutes a parallel world, in which personal growth and spirit work are cultivated. At the end of Carroll's story Alice wakes up in the arms of her sister, who is gently caressing her hair. The reader is thus left with a somewhat unambiguous explanation: Alice's adventures in Wonderland were all part of an elaborate dream fantasy. This same concept is evident in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (L. Frank Baum, 1900), where at the end of that story Dorothy wakes from out of a trauma induced sleep, lovingly surrounded by her friends and family. The land of Oz, and all of its characters, were merely dreamt up by Dorothy during her period of feverish unconsciousness. Many modern stories seem to share this format, in which the extraordinary or magical elements of a story are accounted for rationally in the end, by giving them logical explanations. The dream is thus accepted as an illogical space where the impossible is permitted to exist. Anything strange or supernatural is quarantined within the confines of the dream. However, ancient and medieval stories allowed magical phenomena to exist in the real world as well. For example, in Grimm's fairy tales cannibal witches, evil spells, and super-intelligent wolves live in the same daylight world, side by side with mundane and everyday events.⁵² In Greek stories the gods play prominent roles, and all manner of divine phenomena are allowed to occur alongside the ordinary and materially explainable processes such as work, love, and warfare.

For New Paradigmers dreaming and psychonautics are explicitly related. Users of *Salvia Divinorum*, for example, explain their trips as "waking dreams." After ingesting or smoking a *Salvia D.* extract, individuals describe entering into dream-like scenarios or situations. Suddenly one finds oneself in another location, where they may encounter characters with whom they may become embroiled in a narrative quest. Individuals argue that these experiences are very similar to dreaming because during the brief period of the trip, which for *Salvia D.* is approximately twenty minutes, they are no longer awake in the usual sense. That is, they are no longer sitting in the room where they ingested the psychedelic, but are fully immersed in a dream state from which they gradually emerge, as they re-enter a conscious state of awareness.

Another common experience is one of regression. In these examples, individuals report returning to an earlier phase of their lives, usually a particular event that they relive or watch as a participant observer. In both cases, however, the person is no longer within the normal waking world, but occupies a position outside of the space-time continuum, they argue. In other words, one has entered an altered state of consciousness, a dream world. Inducing regression experiences via hypnosis, and doing dream analysis, are at the root of depth psychology and psychoanalytic practice.⁵³ Suffice it to say that doing this sort of dreamwork has therapeutic applications, which my subjects also emphasize.

Of course, dreams have a lore of their own outside of spirituality culture. I will not be reviewing this material comprehensively here. But because they are an important part of indigenous and animistic belief systems, many in the New Age and neopagan communities have

⁵² Ellwood 2005.

⁵³ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, (New York: Avon, 2006).

incorporated dreaming into their spiritual practice. According to this perspective, by acquiring mastery over one's dreams, one achieves mastery over their conscious lives. In these depictions, dream-time is a sphere of reality as important as waking reality. In fact, it is even more real than what we typically call real because it is argued to be more flexible. This is because while dreaming we are able to bend reality, allowing us to do things that we cannot ordinarily do. In dreams we seem to experience less restrictions or limitations in terms of how we actualize our intentions. We can do fantastic things, and literally make our dreams into reality, no matter how other-worldly or unrealistic they seem to us in normal waking modes. My informants explained that this is achieved through mastering the techniques of lucid dreaming. By gaining control over the events and elements of their dreams, individuals are able to consciously shape and direct them. By doing this, individuals learn to control their dream reality, which they then transfer over to "real" reality. In other words, the skills acquired through dreaming are retained and brought over into the space of waking life.^{54 55}

In the *Matrix* story Neo learns to bend the rules of normal reality while inside the computer-generated world. This virtual training endows him with almost god-like powers that he uses to defeat the equally powerful shadow agents. In myths dream abilities are often associated with supernatural powers, e.g. Dorothy and the magic slippers. But the entheogens also do this. Psychonauts contend that magical/supernatural powers are really only latent abilities that we all possess, but are unable to access due to the limiting restrictions of our logical and rational cognitive paradigm, i.e. our ego constructions. Early on children learn the rules of reality, in the form of laws of nature which cannot be violated. Psychologist Merleau-Ponty explains that people become conditioned to think and act according to these rules, which cuts them off from their own potentials.⁵⁶ Similarly entheogen usage for my subjects is partly about unlocking these hidden potentials, and living in an expanded reality that includes magical possibilities. Carroll seems to intuit this modern way of thinking about dreams as a practice space for real life. Notably he connects Alice's identity change with the warping of spatial and temporal dimensions, in an under (subconscious) world.

The Journey Through Wonderland: A Modern Rite of Passage?

Individuals involved with psychonautics have subjective experiences that are of course unique. Between them they are similar enough, however, that they can be discussed meaningfully among participants. Through comparing their separate yet related experiences individuals may attain an intersubjective, and to some degree mutual, understanding of each other's visions and insights. Members within this culture have their own stories that contain idiosyncratic structures, and personally significant referents, that can nevertheless be woven together into collectively held discourses. Combined with the *Alice* and *Matrix* texts, they provide common grounds of meaning, and serve as intersubjective meeting places.

But do these subjective processes reflect a universal human

⁵⁴ David J. Brown, *Dreaming Wide Awake: Lucid Dreaming, Shamanic Healing, and Psychedelics*, (Rochester: Park Street Press, 2016).

⁵⁵ J. Endredy, "Shamanic Dreaming: How to Expand Into Higher Consciousness While You Sleep," *Conscious Lifestyle Magazine*, 2018.

⁵⁶ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, (New York: Routledge & Paul, 1962).

condition? In this paper I have made analyses, and drawn conclusions derived from my informant's experiences and beliefs. However, such identity-making processes, that involve using reflexive texts to inspire alternative ways of thinking about one's life, are not limited to psychonautic New Agers and neopagans. People from all walks of life must also navigate the complexities of modern existence, and find meaning where they can. To some extent we all share the common experiences of worrying over personal relationships, questioning our life's decisions, and coping with fears provoked by political and economic forces beyond our control.

It may be that the concerns and issues involving order and meaning which appear in the *Alice* texts are culturally specific, and pertain largely to people of western European descent. In other words, lessons concerning the life course, like the ones illustrated in these stories, may be peculiar to westerners. All of my subjects share a cultural identity in common with these texts. If that can be accepted, I would ask the following questions: does every person who comes of age in contemporary forms of western society necessarily participate in these rites of passage? Rites that, because they are shaped in accordance with the political and economic structures endemic to state capitalism, that due to economic expediency they (the rites) are socially distorted, malformed (i.e. underfunded, unsupported, or eliminated), or even nonexistent, when compared with traditional communalist ones? And if so, are individuals living amidst such conditions as stated above, developmentally undermined? In other words, given the strongly individualistic, boot-strap economic paradigm, which during the latter half of the 20th century in America has been paired with socialization processes that are, for lack of a better term infantilizing, are most people necessarily socioeconomic delinquents in this society until reaching their mid-thirties?

Getting one's life together has become increasingly difficult for Generation X-ers and Millennials, and now possibly Gen-Zs. Attaining financial independence in over-saturated job markets for example, while harboring overwhelming levels of student loan debt, is becoming increasingly difficult. Neoliberal economic policies, combined with recent and increasing disparities in wealth and power among Americans, have resulted in whole generations that appear culturally disaffected, and possibly ill-equipped to support themselves materially late into adulthood. These conditions have social and psychological consequences that I will not explore in any great depth here, but most of my subjects belong to these cultural categories, i.e. people born in the late 20th century. The disenchanting forces that come with living under modern regimes is part of what provokes interest in pursuing new spiritualities, and the discourses and themes being discussed here.

For example, the *Alice* stories provide dreamy excursions into an amusing child-like world, one that escapes the central concerns of adult life, which includes being serious and responsible. *Wonderland* type fantasies serve as temporary forms of relief from the temporal and material demands placed upon individuals by the economic rationalism of capitalist existence. Moreover, Alice is a female heroine, and so she appeals to many members in my study population insofar as they revere "the goddess," and celebrate the rise of feminine power in the contemporary era. Alice fits this narrative well. Interestingly she also exhibits qualities which undermine conventional Victorian views of women. Casting males in the story as the irrational characters yields a clever reversal of the standard patriarchal trope, i.e. that women are the more emotional and illogical of the species. In the text Alice routinely dismisses the unreasonableness of the Hatter and Caterpillar with a ruthless logic, and when the Queen threatens to chop off her head, she

brushes her aside by saying “nonsense,” which immediately neutralizes the threat by placing the Queen into a narrative cul de sac.

One young woman I interviewed told me that, in fact, “I am Alice,” insofar as she had been for some time journaling about her adventures in a parallel reality, which involves her dreaming practice. Perhaps with nebulous goals of turning the existing social order on its head, my informants often see themselves in the role of such characters, mystical wanderers in a wonderland. They sometimes hold disparate views of the world which must be reconciled. On the one hand they see normative society as non-magical and lacking in imagination, whose everyday life processes are largely characterized by the dull and superficial routines of work and consumerism. But more than that, operating within the polite “have a nice day” society are violent and dystopian forms of power. In the *Alice* stories this is symbolized by the Red Queen and her court, a chaotic and monstrous arena, filled with corrupt legal proceedings and frequent beheadings.

Yet my informants also view the world as a magical landscape, rich with possibilities for actualizing oneself, at least potentially. So, there is the impulse to retreat from the world, and to abandon it as a lost cause. But there also exists a desire to reshape the world, to make it a wonderland. The world becomes both a test of one's readiness for action, and an opportunity to mold it via prefigurative practices, which includes practicing nonsense, or engaging in the unreasonableness of play. Due to space considerations, I will not provide very in-depth examples or analyses of these re-enchanting practices. However, within the Wisterian community, participants have created enchanted spaces, e.g. Fairy Shrines: wooded areas that are adorned with magical or ‘sacred’ objects, personal items holding spiritual significance for individuals, with various shrines and altars upon which both personal and group rituals are performed; also cosplay ritual events held in labyrinths made of light (StoneHenge-like ringed patterns of candles in the dark) through which individuals dance or walk in meditative states; Practicing innocence, releasing inhibitions, practicing nudity, being child-like, doing creative things (e.g. making art, music, or swords in a blacksmithing workshop), participating in drum circles that are understood to be a form of “medicine” or cleansing practice, similar to the sweat lodge or use of entheogens; Practicing ‘non-reason’, being deliberately illogical, e.g. drinking rum with pirates in the Pirate Cove (Wisterian subgroup). All of these having the goals of engendering new forms of relationships, new ways of relating interpersonally, intersectionally, sexually and communally (e.g. raising children in intentional ways, as part of a tribal village versus a nuclear family structure).

Re-enchantment: Rediscovering the Fountain

The subjective nature of the sun child's quest is evident within these stories, as it is in most mythologies. The hero's life trajectory is often based on a solitary and rarified path that involves self-improvement.^{57 58} This general formula is also present within the *Alice*, *Matrix* and *Oz* stories. But it is paired with transcendental themes involving heightened states of perception, and transportation through normally hidden passageways to outlying areas and difficult to reach places that lie behind or beneath our ordinary experience of reality. This in part defines the meaning of re-enchantment. Max Weber has argued that, in addition to producing new

⁵⁷ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, (New York: Penguin, 1949).

⁵⁸ Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1991).

conceptions of a sovereign self, the post-Enlightenment legacy of intellectualization and rationalization has in effect emptied the world of its divine character, dispelling all of the mysteries and magical forces, and spiritual and ethical meanings once provided for by religion.⁵⁹ The world has been (literally and metaphorically) covered over in concrete. To quote folk singer Joni Mitchell, “we paved paradise and put up a parking lot.” The earth is no longer conceived as a magical place infused with supernatural personalities, but is a harsh landscape composed of meaningless chemistry and random physical processes. For many, involvement in religion and/or spirituality is a form of coping with the social anomie that comes with living in a society that reduces subjective life experience to an objective mechanical process. To re-enchant one’s lifeworld is thus to reintroduce into it magical and/or whimsical elements.

For Alice and the psychonauts, this involves venturing into realms beyond the ordinary in order to return with special knowledge. For informants this can mean new ways of conceiving oneself, which translates into how to practice relationships more successfully, and how to live in harmonious conjunction with the natural world. In other words, to re-enchant one’s lifeworld necessitates an expanded awareness of life’s possibilities, beyond those outlined by capitalist economics, or the routinized programs of state institutions for example. To re-enchant one’s life is thus to gain a larger perspective that empowers one to modify their relationships, so that they can continue to discover and enjoy the sorts of experiences, feelings, states of consciousness, and material possibilities they have acquired via their spiritual questing. Many of my subjects have defined their spirituality as being journeys of this sort. The means through which they accomplish these life expansions are most commonly yoga, meditation, traveling by attending spiritual festivals, or living for extended stays within alternative/intentional communities, and participating in entheogenic ceremonies. In this way spirituality is a means to an end, a vehicle for widening the limits for how one thinks about and approaches their life’s situations. In other words, spirituality and psychonautics are the passageways that lead one to higher states of consciousness and alternate/hidden realities.

However, in terms of creating opportunities for acquiring practical sorts of self-knowledge, spiritual practices are also believed to intensify the depth of one’s personal insights. Informants mention the need to actively seek knowledge about what constructs their daily existence. Issues pertaining to personal health and well-being frequently surface. Members have expressed the interest in acquiring an awareness of what lurks behind their life problems. In other words, they wish to know what makes them sick, what causes them to feel bad, and what people, jobs, or situations drain their life energies. But also what makes them happy, and what provides comfort, solace and clarity in their lives. All of this work and attention, pursuing mystical quests and spiritual practices, seems to have for them this central organizing purpose. What I found to be most important, in terms of participant’s long-term goals, is the hope of discovering and identifying one’s problems, and then to figure out just what to do about them. It is a conscious search for ways of fixing oneself. An individual’s spirituality project, at long last, is thus an unceasing quest for bits of knowledge and experience, useful for implementing repairs on one’s being.

⁵⁹ Max Weber, *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism with other writings on the rise of the West*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Conclusion

Encoded within the *Alice* narratives are the “discontinuities, ruptures, and transformations” that “direct historical analysis away from the search for silent beginnings, and the never-ending tracing back to the original precursors, toward the search for a new type of rationality and its various effects”.⁶⁰ In this paper, we considered the *Alice* stories as narrative depictions of what this new type of rationality is, i.e. psychonautic awareness, and some of its effects. Doing this has demonstrated why these texts are so important for my subjects. We were also able to show how individuals have used story elements to interpret their experiences, and how these texts serve as models for how to tell their own stories.

Texts such as Lewis Carroll's *Alices*, and Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, tend to focus on the troubling aspects of modern life. Through examining the hierarchical societal structures and paradigmatic thought processes that inform western culture, such narrative depictions enable individuals to see how their lives are affected by, for instance, the hegemonic forces which shape their worlds. Textual exercises of this sort furnish readers with new ways of seeing the familiar, and offer new possibilities for how to cope with the unfamiliar. Through the use of exaggeration and parody, these texts act as therapeutic mediums that allow for reflexive distance. Using them individuals are able to separate themselves and laugh at the otherwise frightening and monstrous aspects of their existence, such as the ruthless and dehumanizing forms of power that modern states wield over their citizens. Many features in the *Alice* texts hold appeal for my subjects on these bases, but they also reflect their spiritual interests. Indeed, among the most remarkable of Carroll's achievements is that his books create the means through which individuals can experience Alice's dreams as if they were their own. Dramatizations such as *Waiting for Godot* and *On the Importance of Being Earnest* also do this, by giving modern readers places for encountering many of their deep-seated desires and anxieties, in ways moreover that are comical, which makes them therapeutic rather than destructive experiences.⁶¹ It is no wonder that a lively psychedelic fantasy emerged in a period of stultifying rigidity, and to counter the morbidity of a decaying culture. As Donald Rackin argues, the “religious and metaphysical assumptions that once answered the basic human need for orderly, complete, and permanent explanations and reasons beyond the reach of reason had thinned out and vanished for a great number of Victorian intellectuals during their lifetimes, destroyed by natural innocent childlike curiosity like Darwin's – and Alice's. The resulting God-less void was terrifying”.⁶² The texts thus serve as a therapeutic medium for some, to work out their culture-based fears, traumas, and depression. Rackin argues, however, that “Alice's literal quest serves vicariously as her readers' metaphorical search for meaning in the lawless, haphazard universe of their own deepest consciousness”.⁶³

Common mythological themes, such as the quest for knowledge or immortality, are materially symbolized by the fountain of youth and the holy grail. The reasons such themes resonate with so many people historically and cross-culturally, is that they are at the center of human

⁶⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge And The Discourse On Language*, (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 4-5.

⁶¹ Rackin, 116.

⁶² Rackin, 91.

⁶³ Rackin, 36.

existential concerns. The modern scientific goals to map the human genome for example, and to search for cures to the diseases which plague us and cause so much misery and suffering, are some of the most highly funded scientific pursuits in the world today. Similarly, the therapeutic aims of practicing psychonautic spirituality are likewise to heal oneself, to become whole again, and to seek knowledge about how to live a fulfilled life.

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