

"One bright May morning" in 1953' (p.3), Aldous Huxley took a dose of the psychoactive substance mescaline, and at some point in his subsequent trip, stared down at his trousers. Describing the experience in one of the most memorable passages in his countercultural classic, *The Doors of Perception*, published the next year, Huxley noted the alluring fabric of his grey flannel trousers. "Those folds ... what a labyrinth of endlessly significant complexity! And the texture ... how rich, how deeply, mysteriously sumptuous!" (p.204)

Mike Jay's perceptive and illuminating history of mescaline starts with this 'origin myth of the psychedelic era' (p.189), and indeed it was a myth; Huxley had in fact worn blue jeans, but his wife Maria suggested he 'ought to be better dressed for [his] readers' (p.204). Jay judiciously interpolates his narrative with such intriguing asides that puncture assumptions about mescaline's 'transmission between worlds; from millennia of sacred tradition to the clinical gaze of western modernity' (p.75). For Jay, *The Doors of Perception* provides all the elements of his own account: 'the marvel of science, the native spirit medicine, the sublime stimulus to art, the miracle drug of psychiatry, the revealer of hidden dimensions of mind' (p.204).

This history begins in earnest with a discussion of the San Pedro and peyote cacti from which mescaline is derived, and its place in the ritual ceremonies of, amongst other indigenous American groups, the Nahua and Huichol peoples. The attempts of late nineteenth century ethnographer James Mooney to 'record and preserve centuries of Indian language, culture and tradition' (p.53) and his relationship with Comanche leader Quanah Parker served to introduce mescaline to white biomedical scientists and researchers. In the absence of any obvious clinical use (at least at this point), its hallucinatory properties – which, significantly, went largely unremarked upon by Native American users – resulted in its adoption by the bohemian fringes of society in Mexico, the US and Europe. Indeed, the book's claim to a 'global' history is perhaps overstated; while Jay quite literally covers a lot of ground in a relatively slim book, this is primarily a continental American story, with occasional hops over the Atlantic to relate the stories of prominent European intellectuals (Havelock Ellis, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Jünger, Jean-Paul Sartre) who had at various points experimented with mescaline.

One aspect in which an interesting intervention into histories of psychoactive substances could have been made is by interrogating more closely gender issues amongst these "psychonauts". It cannot escape the reader's attention that the vast majority cited are male – the early twentieth century socialite Mabel Dodge and her unfortunate cousin Genevieve are prominent exceptions – and indeed it has not escaped Jay's, either. Elsewhere he has written about the 'straight-white-male psychedelic hegemony' and it is a shame that more of this discussion has not found its way into the book.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the most interesting episode in the book is when recreational and clinical use briefly becomes intertwined in the work of psychiatrists in London, and later Saskatchewan, Canada. Humphrey Osmond and John Raymond Smythies noticed 'the similarity between

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<sup>1</sup> Mike Jay (2019) "Why is psychedelic culture dominated by privileged white men?" *Aeon* <https://aeon.co/ideas/why-is-psychedelic-culture-dominated-by-privileged-white-men> Last accessed 20 September 2019.

mescaline's effects and the symptoms of schizophrenia' (p.194), and subsequently hypothesised that therefore the former might hold the key to the causes of the latter. Within such a sweeping narrative, it is not possible for Jay to do these fascinating events justice, although Erika Dyck has addressed this in more detail.<sup>2</sup> Huxley was introduced to mescaline by the work of Osmond, and the psychedelic aesthetic entered the mainstream of Western pop culture. However, the synthesis of LSD by Albert Hofmann in the late 1930s resulted in a more concentrated psychoactive substance that produced far more consistent responses across subjects, and so eventually mescaline disappeared 'from both the laboratory and the street' (p.246).

It is in assessing the legacy of mescaline that Jay simultaneously makes his boldest claims but is also perhaps at his least convincing. Noting that a trip of 1960 was highly influential on Californian chemist Alexander Shulgin's interest in synthesising similar phenethylamines, most famously MDMA or ecstasy, Jay argues that mescaline consequently indirectly ushered in the modern era of synthetic "party" drugs. This seems an overly deterministic yet speculative conclusion, and one that is surprising from a cultural historian usually so attuned to the complex societal factors involved in any drug's rise to popularity and prominence.

Nonetheless, such omissions and untaken paths do not overly detract from what is a highly readable and erudite history, which is also amply and elegantly illustrated. Alongside its obvious appeal to drug historians, it also should offer a valuable primer for any general readership interested in Native American rituals and ceremonies, radical psychiatry, or the counterculture of the 1960s.

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<sup>2</sup> Erika Dyck, *Psychedelic Psychiatry: LSD From Clinic to Campus*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008.