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A Phenomenology of Challenging Psychedelic Experiences: From Relational Trauma to Relational Healing

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A PHENOMENOLOGY OF CHALLENGING PSYCHEDELIC EXPERIENCES: FROM RELATIONAL TRAUMA TO RELATIONAL HEALING

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ABSTRACT

A PHENOMENOLOGY OF CHALLENGING PSYCHEDELIC EXPERIENCES:

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Dissertation supervised by Will W. Adams, PhD

Psychedelic medicine is a re-emerging therapeutic paradigm with potentially significant clinical applications. This study contributes to an understanding of the aspects of challenging psychedelic experiences that may contribute to therapeutic outcomes. Interview and written data from five participants about their challenging Ayahuasca experiences was analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The results of this analysis revealed a phenomenological structure of challenging psychedelic experiences consisting of a change process that moved the participants from a sense of disconnection to a sense of connection with themselves, others, nature and the cosmos. Findings from the study suggest that challenging psychedelic experiences may be therapeutic when they involve emotional and somatic processing and release of past traumas in the context of a multi-layered relational network.

These factors are combined to form a Relational Healing Model that may be used as a guide for clinicians supporting clients as they prepare for and integrate psychedelic experiences.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to the other-than-human people that were both its inspiration and its muse.

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First and foremost, I would like to cover my wife in a warm blanket of appreciation, for supporting our family with such grace and resilience as we navigated this graduate school adventure. I'm grateful to my children, for providing infinite excuses for procrastination, silliness, and snuggles, and to Jade Bird for teaching us not to take life for granted, to surrender into grief and to love fiercely. I'm grateful to my parents for always supporting me and believing in me through all my wild endeavors, the least of which was grad school. And to my stepfather for handing me the map and helping me navigate the terrain.

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Deep admiration and big thanks to my research participants, who each welcomed me into their hearts and homes and generously shared their stories. I hope this work honors those stories. And finally, a bow and a wink to "Sage," without whom this project would never have been conceived, much less achieved.

DISCLAIMER

At the time of conducting this research and writing this dissertation, Ayahuasca and all other psychedelic substances are Schedule I drugs. This means that according to the federal government they are not considered to have any therapeutic value, and it is illegal to consume or to be in possession of them. Nothing that I report in this document is intended to encourage the possession or consumption of psychedelic substances.

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"Experiments are not about discovery, but about listening and translating the knowledge of other beings" (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 158).

This research explores the phenomenology of the way people make meaning from challenging psychedelic experiences. Difficult or "challenging" psychedelic experiences are moments during a psychedelic session in which the participant may experience psychological, emotional and somatic struggles including, but not limited to: fear, grief, physical distress, temporary feelings of insanity, isolation, death, paranoia, despair, anger, regret, guilt and shame**.** Scholars have found that when such struggles are processed through and resolved during psychedelic experiences, they are correlated with participant attributions of profound meaning and significance (Barrett et al., 2016; Belser et al., 2017; Carbonaro et al., 2016; Davis et al. 2020; Griffiths et al., 2019; Swift et al., 2017). Questions remain unanswered about why participants attribute profound meaning to challenging experiences. Findings from the current study suggest that challenging psychedelic experiences may be therapeutic when they involve emotional and somatic processing and release of past traumas in the context of a multi-layered relational network.

For the past two decades there has been a revival of academic research into the therapeutic potential of psychedelic substances at prestigious universities such as Johns Hopkins, New York University, and Imperial College London. This research has led to an organized campaign, conducted under the oversight of the FDA, to legalize psychedelics for therapeutic use. Psychedelic treatment sessions require specially trained psychotherapists who help prepare the client before the administration of the drug, offer therapeutic support throughout their

psychedelic experience, and work with the client following the experience to integrate it into their life. If psychedelic treatments are legalized it would mean that a whole new specialization, psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy, would emerge in the field of psychology. It will be important for therapists to understand the beneficial elements of psychedelic experiences so that they can tailor their interventions to support therapeutic outcomes. Unfortunately, these mediating factors are not well understood. According to Belser et al. (2017), "Current theoretical conceptualizations regarding the psychological mechanisms of action involved in psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy remain underdeveloped" (p. 357).

This study attempts to contribute to the understanding of the psychological mechanisms of action that mediate therapeutic outcomes within psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy by specifically examining challenging Ayahuasca experiences. I will begin by reviewing the general history of psychedelic use and the use of Ayahuasca, as well as what current psychedelic research suggests about the potential mediating factors that support positive long-term therapeutic outcomes. I will then present the stories of five individuals, their challenging Ayahuasca experiences, and how they describe the meanings of those experiences. The following discussion will explore how this study expands our understanding of the mediating factors that are most significant to long-term therapeutic outcomes of psychedelic-assisted therapy. The discussion concludes with an explanation of the phenomenological structure of challenging Ayahuasca experiences that emerged from the data analysis along with the presentation of a conceptual model grounded in that structure. Finally, I consider the model in light of its implications for therapists who would like to help clients to prepare for or integrate psychedelic experiences.

History of Psychedelic Use

Indigenous cultures around the world have used psychedelic plants and fungi in tribal ceremonies for thousands of years (Shultes et al., 2001). In these ceremonies, the plants and mushrooms were consumed to achieve altered states of consciousness purported to give participants access to unique realms of experience. Based in part on these experiences, the ceremonial participants' existential and ontological horizons evolved to include a different understanding of the position and role of human beings within the natural world and the cosmos (Shultes et al., 2001).

Ayahuasca (a word that translates as "vine of the soul") is the psychedelic brew that is the particular focus of this research study. It is consumed, to this day, during the ceremonies of many tribal peoples of the Amazon rain forests of Central and South America. Shultes et al. (2001), said that Ayahuasca was considered a divine gift which "enters into almost all aspects of the life of the people who use it . . . Partakers, shamans or not, see all the gods, the first human beings, and animals, and come to understand the establishment of their social order" (pp. 126-127). "Above all, ayahuasca is considered a medicine: the great medicine," (Grob, 2014, p. x). Early in the 17th century, as a part of the Inquisition, Spanish and Portuguese conquistadors attempted to violently suppress the use of Ayahuasca and other psychedelic plants, which were a vital part of native religious rituals, through threat of torture and death (Grob, 2014, p. vii). During this time, early European chroniclers wrote about the "diabolical potions" made from jungle vines used to "communicate with the devil" (Grob, 2014, p. viii). This drove the use of Ayahuasca deep into the jungle, but it did not manage to eliminate it.

The historical use of psychedelic plants or fungi has not been confined to indigenous tribal traditions. Wasson et al. (2008) brought convincing evidence to bear on the theory that the

famous Eleusinian Mysteries of the ancient Greeks were formed around the consumption of a sacred psychedelic brew known as the *kykeon*. This psychedelic ceremony, which was performed every fall for at least 2,000 consecutive years, sits at the heart and dawn of Western civilization (Wasson et al., 2008). Wasson et al. (2008), said, "let it be clear that some of the formative minds of Western civilization, the ones that helped bring Democracy, Reason, Mathematics, Science, Philosophy and Theater into the world, thought these entheogen [an alternative term for psychedelic] inspired Eleusinian Mysteries were the greatest experience of their lives" (p. 6). This rich history is the foundation of our discussion of the re-emergence of psychedelics in Western culture in the 20th and 21st centuries.

The re-emergence of psychedelics can be traced to the accidental discovery of the psychedelic properties of lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) by the Swiss chemist Albert Hoffman in 1943. While Hoffman first synthesized LSD in 1938 as part of his efforts to discover novel bioactive pharmaceutical compounds, he was unaware of its psychoactive properties at that time. It wasn't until he had an intuition to take a second look at the chemical five years later that he accidentally absorbed some of the LSD and found himself in a profoundly altered state of consciousness. According to Pollan (2018), Hoffman's experience with LSD led him to believe that it could be "of great value to medicine and especially psychiatry, possibly by offering researchers a model of schizophrenia" (p. 25). After subsequent intentional experiences with LSD, Hoffman became "something of a mystic, preaching a gospel of spiritual renewal and reconnection with nature" (Pollan, 2018, p. 25).

Once Sandoz, the Swiss lab where Hoffman worked, learned of the powerful psychoactive effects of mere micrograms of LSD, it made the compound available free of charge to any researcher or therapist who was willing to send them a report of their findings and

observations. This free LSD was on offer from 1949 to 1966 when Sandoz became worried about the growing controversy surrounding the drug and withdrew it from the market. But, throughout the initial seventeen-year period, psychologists around the world conducted research trials (of variable quality) giving LSD to volunteers struggling with mental illness (Pollan, 2018).

Around this time, there was a lively debate about what these substances should be called. The word psychedelic, which means "psyche-manifesting" was coined by Humphrey Osmond during an exchange of ideas with Aldous Huxley in 1956 (Pollan, 2018, p. 162). Huxley and Osmond were trying to come up with a suitable name for this newly rediscovered class of drugs. Huxley's idea was "phanerothyme" which was Greek for "spirit manifesting." In the end Osmond's term, psychedelic won the day.

In 1979 a Boston University professor named Carl Ruck coined the term "entheogen," which is a combination of two ancient Greek words which translates to "becoming divine within" (Richards, 2016, p. 20). It is closer to Huxley's original suggestion of "phanerothyme" in that it highlights the spiritual and mystical potential of psychedelic experiences. Writers who want to focus on the value of the spiritual potential in psychedelic experience often prefer this term.

Stan Grof, an early pioneer of psychedelic psychotherapy research, personally guided more than 3,000 LSD sessions and studied more than 2,000 sessions conducted by colleagues in the 1950's and 60's (Grof, 1985, p. 30). People in Grof's LSD sessions described gaining access to experiences outside of their usual realm of cultural discourse, transcending spatial and even temporal boundaries. They described experiences of access to spiritual and religious knowledge of cultures to which they had no previous exposure. They also described experiencing the consciousness of other people, plants, animals, the entire human race, the planet and even the

cosmos (Grof, 1985, p. 42). Grof (1985), concluded "These experiences clearly suggest that, in a yet unexplained way, each of us contains the information about the entire universe or all of existence, has potential experiential access to all its parts, and in a sense *is* the whole cosmic network, as much as he or she is just an infinitesimal part of it, a separate and insignificant biological entity" (pp. 44-45). R. Gordon Wasson added to the scientific and popular knowledge of psychedelics in 1958 when he came across indigenous healers of the Mazatec tribe in southern Mexico using psychedelic mushrooms during healing rituals (Grob, 2014, p. viii). Previously unknown in the West, the publication of Wasson's "discovery" in the ubiquitous Life magazine in 1958, catapulted these psychedelic mushrooms into the popular imagination of the day.

Even as positive outcomes from psychedelic research continued to accumulate, the association of psychedelics with the revolutionary counter-cultural movement of the sixties became problematic for the future of legally sanctioned research. Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert (who later became known as Ram Dass) went from being psychology professors at Harvard University studying the psychological effects of psychedelic drugs such as LSD and psilocybin, to charismatic leaders in a countercultural revolution. Leary's iconic countercultural message to the youth of the 1960's to "tune in, turn on, and drop out," epitomized his general disregard for the status quo and his belief in the revelatory and transformative qualities of psychedelic experience. By the late 1960's, the countercultural revolution was in full swing, fueled at least in part by these psychedelic experiences. In addition to Leary and Alpert on the East Coast, Ken Kesey and his band of Merry Pranksters advocated for the psycho-socially liberating effects of psychedelics on the West Coast (Wolfe, 1969).

While people found psychedelic experiences to be liberating, they also learned they can be terrifying. With so much uncontrolled and capricious use of powerful psychedelic substances

such as LSD, psychologically destabilizing events occurred and were often hyperbolized in the news. The social stigma from association with the counterculture and potential psychological dangers discouraged academics from further research. Extremely promising and widespread research all but ground to a halt. Only Spring Grove State Hospital near Baltimore Maryland (partly funded by the National Institute of Mental Health) continued, quietly outside of the spotlight, until 1977. At Spring Grove, research with people suffering from severe mental illness, addictions, and terminal illnesses showed psychedelic therapy offered symptom relief and these results were published in psychiatric journals (Pollan, 2018, p. 56). Spring Grove State Hospital was the last stronghold of psychedelic research in the United States. Their last psychedelic session, in 1977, marked the end of an era of psychedelic research.

In the early seventies, interest in religion and spirituality continued to grow in a generation of psychological professionals that were also interested in psychedelic experiences. During this time, Stanislav Grof, along with Abraham Maslow and Anthony Sutich came together and founded the field of transpersonal psychology. Transpersonal psychology, which is also known as the "fourth force" in psychology, specifically focused on the spiritual realms of human experience. Transpersonal psychology was interested in the comparative study of the world's religions, with an early emphasis on eastern spiritual systems and altered states of consciousness. By the time the Association of Transpersonal Psychology was founded in 1972, legal psychedelic research had all but collapsed and association with the maligned field of inquiry was professional suicide. Nonetheless, Grof maintained strong convictions about the efficacy of psychedelic psychotherapy and he continued to bring experiences of altered states of consciousness (without the aid of psychedelic compounds) to many people in the form of controlled breathing practices he called Holotropic Breathwork.

Outside of a few countercultural references from beat poets William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg in the 1950s, Ayahuasca was virtually unknown in mainstream Western culture until the early 1990's (Grob, 2014). In addition to uninterrupted indigenous use of Ayahuasca, a strong tradition of use by mestizos (people of mixed race), as an alternative to mainstream healthcare, has existed for at least a century. In Brazil, the use of Ayahuasca escaped the Amazon and entered urban centers where, in 1987, it became a legal psychedelic sacrament in Christian syncretic churches such as the UDV, the Santo Daime, and Barquinha. In 2006, Ayahuasca was even authorized for legal use by the US Supreme Court, when taken within the religious structure of the UDV church (Grob, 2014).

For better or worse, over the course of the past twenty-five years, as the popularity of Ayahuasca has grown exponentially in North America and Europe, waves of westerners have descended upon small South American communities and their indigenous healers, seeking physical, mental and spiritual healing from Ayahuasca (Grob, 2014). Westerners with no ability to discern a trained *Ayahuasquero* (traditional healers trained in the use of Ayahuasca) from a charlatan have fallen prey to local entrepreneurs who don't have adequate training to safely facilitate Ayahuasca ceremonies. This has led to cases of "psychological decompensation" and a "handful" of mysterious deaths (Grob, 2014, p. xi). Some of these westerners stayed and trained with the indigenous or mestizo Ayahuasqueros and achieved various levels of proficiency in facilitating Ayahuasca ceremonies themselves. These trainees frequently returned to their home countries and began facilitating Ayahuasca ceremonies of their own. These ceremonies are sometimes called *neo-shamanic* Ayahuasca ceremonies because while they usually have roots in traditional Ayahuasca rituals, they may incorporate elements from other shamanic or wisdom traditions.

The terms "shamanism" and "neo-shamanism" are complicated and contested. The term "shaman" originated from the Tungus people of Siberia (Wallis, 1999). Their traditional healers, who employed altered states of consciousness in their practices, were called *saman*. Early German, Russian and Polish explorers brought word of the Tungus healers and their unique practices. By the end of the 18th century the word "shamanism" had become a generic term for similar forms of "ecstatic religion" that were practiced around the world (Wallis, 1999). The term was broadly popularized by Mircea Eliade's (1964) seminal anthropological tome, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. The main critique of the word shaman is that it creates a universal category for what is, in reality, an extremely diverse set of beliefs and practices found in different cultures around the globe (Atkinson, 1992; Wallis, 1999). Atkinson (1992) explained,

> There is widespread distrust of general theories about shamanism, which run aground in their efforts to generalize. The category simply does not exist in a unitary and homogeneous form, even within Siberia and Central Asia—the putative homeland of "classical shamanism." (p. 308)

In spite of this contested history, the term is now commonly used to refer to leaders of neo-shamanic ceremonies in the West. The participants in this study sometimes referred to the facilitator of their Ayahuasca ceremonies as a shaman.

The term "neo-shamanism" describes "various attempts to revive or recreate shamanic traditions in the lives of contemporary Westerners," (DuBois, 2011, p. 114). Wallis (1999) highlighted important critiques of neo-shamanic movements including interpretations of them as modern colonial endeavors. Individuals or groups attempt to appropriate, dissect and then reconstruct the spiritual traditions of other cultures into novel assemblages which anthropologist

Claude Levi Strauss called "bricolage" (as cited in Townsend, 2005, p. 7). In more sympathetic interpretations, scholars have suggested that neo-shamanic movements offer an alternative to entrenched religious, political and social systems (Atkinson, 1992; Gearin, 2016; Wallis, 1999). Atkinson (1992) explained,

> "Neo-shamanism" or "urban shamanism" offers a form of spiritual endeavor that aligns its adherents at once with Nature and the primordial Other, in opposition to institutionalized Western religions and indeed Western political and economic orders. It presents . . . a spiritual alternative for Westerners estranged from major Western religious traditions. Particularly appealing for its "democratic" qualities that bypass institutionalized religious hierarchies. (p. 322)

The type of Ayahuasca ceremonies that participants in this study were involved in are part of a grassroots decentralized neo-shamanic movement that has been steadily growing since the beginning of the 21st century. It consists of underground ceremonies, centered around the consumption of the Ayahuasca plant medicine, and facilitated by people with variable levels of training and experience. Some facilitators are traditionally trained indigenous or mestizo Ayahuasqueros who are hosted by Westerners. Other facilitators are Westerners who have undergone extensive apprenticeships with traditional Ayahuasqueros and have received their approval to conduct ceremonies. The final group consists of self-appointed "shamans" with access to the Ayahuasca brew, but little to no formal training. In the past decade, these neo-shamanic Ayahuasca ceremonies or "circles" have exploded in popularity, especially in the cities on the East and West coasts of the United States (Levy, 2016). Townsend (2005) asserted that perhaps the most important consideration when assessing such neo-shamanic groups is whether or not they address "practical problems" and "produce desired transformations" in the lives of

the people involved (p. 7). The results of this study offer clues to how the participants might answer this question.

Contemporary Research

A little more than twenty years after the last psychedelic therapy session at Spring Grove State Hospital, psychedelic research began a slow revival. The bureaucratic barriers were gradually chipped away by diligent proponents who dedicated their lives to working *within* the academic, governmental and legal establishments to turn the tide of opinion back towards positive consideration of psychedelic research. In the past two decades, rigorous research trials have shown the efficacy of psychedelics for treating existential anxiety and depression (Carhart-Harris et al., 2016; Grob et al., 2011) as well as occasioning profound mystical experiences (Griffiths et al., 2008). Ayahuasca has been shown to be effective in the treatment of depression and suicidality (Palhano-Fontes et al., 2019; Zeifman et al., 2019; Zeifman et al., 2021). Psychedelic treatments in controlled experimental settings have even been shown to facilitate enduring changes in psychological *traits* such as prosocial attitudes and behaviors as well as in the personality domain of openness (Griffiths et al. 2018; Maclean et al. 2011). Shifts in psychological "states" after regular psychotherapy or psychotropic drug regimens is common, but psychological "traits" were previously considered by psychologists to remain immutable after childhood.

All of the underlying mechanisms of these unique research outcomes are not yet fully understood, yet it is clear is that psychedelic compounds do not work like other pharmaceuticals. The effects of psychedelics stem not just from the modulation of neurochemicals in the brain, but from the evocative subjective experiences that those neurochemical modulations elicit. In carefully controlled settings, psychedelics can provide *existentially meaningful* experiences

(Swift et al., 2017). Swift et al. (2017), explained it this way, "Unlike conventional pharmacotherapies, the efficacy of psychedelic therapy may be fundamentally rooted within an experiential and meaning-laden process, which may be responsible for the long-term, durable changes frequently seen after a single, therapeutically supported experience with a psychedelic" (pp. 490-491). In other words, what happens to someone *experientially* and the subsequent meaning someone makes out of the experience is thought to be the most important mediating factor in subsequent therapeutic change.

The Search for Mediating Factors

What exactly is happening experientially when someone has a psychedelic experience? Taking a psychedelic medication is not synonymous with popping an anti-depressant pill each morning and going about one's daily activities. Psychedelic drugs elicit an altered state of consciousness that can last for hours. Scientists and researchers are trying to understand exactly what aspects of the psychedelic experience lead to positive outcomes. This would make it possible to configure psychedelic treatments in a way that maximizes therapeutic change. Zeifman et al. (2020) put it this way:

> It remains unclear *how* (i.e., via what fundamental psychological and neurobiological mechanisms) psychedelic therapy brings about lasting therapeutic changes. Identifying such underlying mechanisms is important for a number of reasons, including that it might improve our overall understanding of psychopathology . . . optimize therapeutic outcomes, and choice of treatment for clients, as well as guide treatment development, refinement and delivery. (p. 2)

Mystical Experience. Some of the earliest research of the 21st century proposed that it is the "mystical" aspects of the psychedelic experience that lead to the positive outcomes. Considering the spiritual undertones of the early findings in psychedelic research from the mid-20th century, it is not surprising that 21st century psychedelic studies conducted at Johns Hopkins University have shown that there is a spiritual component to psychedelic experiences that may be central to their therapeutic action (Griffiths et al., 2006; Griffiths et al., 2008).

Griffiths et al. (2006), published a landmark study that showed "when administered to volunteers under supportive conditions, psilocybin occasioned experiences similar to spontaneously occurring mystical experiences and which were evaluated by volunteers as having substantial and sustained personal meaning and spiritual significance" (p. 282). Results from this study highlighted that 67% of volunteers rated their experience with psilocybin to be either the single most meaningful experience of their life or at least among the top five most meaningful experiences in their life (Griffiths et al., 2006, p. 276).

Although one may question the validity of mystical experiences induced by psychedelics, Yaden et al. (2017) compared RSME's (religious, spiritual, or mystical experiences) induced through psychopharmacological (psychedelic) and non-psychopharmacological means and found that "psychedelic experiences can equal or *even surpass* the intensity and impact of experiences derived through nonpsychedelic means" (Yaden et al., 2017, p. 350; emphasis added). Mystical experience was recognized as a possible mediating factor in several different research studies which concluded that psilocybin treatment was effective for depression and existential anxiety (associated with terminal cancer diagnosis), as well as alcohol and tobacco addiction (Bogenschutz et al., 2015; Garcia-Romeu et al., 2014; Ross et al., 2016; Watts et al., 2017).

The level of mystical experience one may undergo after ingestion of psychedelic substances might at first seem to be a subjective matter which would be very difficult to quantify. However, researchers created a quantitative scale which measures the level of 'mystical experience' a participant experiences and can reliably predict therapeutic outcomes. This scale is called the MEQ30 (Mystical Experience Questionnaire) and is the latest iteration of the questionnaire that has passed through various permutations. It has 30 questions which are broken down into four factors: mystical (including internal unity, external unity, noetic quality, and sacredness), positive mood, transcendence of time and space, and ineffability (Barrett et al., 2015, p. 1182). The four factors used to develop the MEQ30 were based on a list of the potential aspects of mystical experiences compiled by W.T. Stace (1960) in the mid-20th century. They include: "the experience of profound unity with all that exists, a felt sense of sacredness, a sense of the experience of truth and reality at a fundamental level (noetic quality), deeply felt positive mood, transcendence of time and space, and difficulty explaining the experience in words" (as cited in Barrett et al., 2015, p. 1182).

Identifying whether or not mystical experiences have occurred during a therapeutic psilocybin session has been shown to predict positive outcomes and as such the MEQ30 is a valuable instrument (Barrett, et al., 2015). On the other hand, from a qualitative perspective, this instrument may fail to capture important aspects of the psychedelic experience. Belser et al. (2017) recognized the potentially limiting nature of the mystical experience construct when they said:

> Current theoretical conceptualizations regarding the psychological mechanisms of action involved in psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy remain underdeveloped. Some have proposed that a psychedelic-occasioned mystical or peak experience is a mediating factor

> fostering highly salient spiritual/mystical states of consciousness associated with enduring positive effects in cognition, affect, behavior, and spirituality . . . While there is empirical support for this conceptualization . . . *alternative hypotheses regarding other possible mediating factors and psychological mechanisms of action have not yet been evaluated.* (p. 357, emphasis added)

Belser et al. (2017), recognized that there were valuable aspects of their participants' experiences which did not fall within the parameters of the standard 'mystical experience' as it was being delineated by the MEQ30. Other psychedelic researchers also recognized that important aspects of psychedelic experiences were not being accounted for with the mystical experience construct. They offered suggestions for new constructs which could capture other potentially mediating factors including, "challenging experiences," "emotional breakthrough," "connectedness," and "psychological flexibility" (Carhart-Harris et al. 2017; Rosen et al., 2019; Watts et al., 2017).

Challenging Experiences. "Challenging" psychedelic experiences have defied easy categorization. For example, one large internet survey produced confounding results (Carbonaro et al., 2016). Carbonaro et al. (2016) conducted an internet survey of 1,993 individuals, soliciting information on their "single most psychologically difficult or challenging experience" that occurred after ingesting psilocybin mushrooms (p. 1). Thirty-nine percent of respondents rated their experience as one of the "top five most challenging experiences of his/her lifetime" (p. 1271). Researchers found that challenging psychedelic experiences can include "acute psychological distress, dangerous behavior, and enduring psychological problems" when taken without attention to physical comfort and social support (p. 1277).

However, researchers also noted that some results contradicted the idea of challenging experiences being completely negative. Survey data revealed "that the degree of difficulty of the

experience was positively and significantly related to the attribution of enduring personal meaning, spiritual significance, and increased life satisfaction" (Carbonaro et al., 2016, p. 1276). In other words, even though many of the respondents said that this experience was one of the most difficult of their lives, three-quarters of respondents also reported that the same experience led to "increases in current well-being and life satisfaction" (Carbonaro et al. 2016, p. 1271). In addition, one-third of respondents rated the session to be among the top five most personally meaningful and spiritually significant, while slightly less than one-third of respondents rated the session as the single most personally meaningful and spiritually significant experiences of their lives (Carbonaro et al. 2016, p. 1271). The researchers admitted that the results seemed counterintuitive but noted that such a finding is consistent with the clinical observations of psychedelic therapists who have shared that when clients move through challenging experiences and find resolution increase in existential and spiritual meaning may result (Carbonaro et al., 2016, p. 1276).

In a similar vein of thought, Belser et al. (2017) suggested that the challenging aspects of the psilocybin experience were in dynamic tension with the more cathartic or healing qualities. There was a flow between them wherein the challenging experiences seemed to be important for the emergence of the more positive experiences. Belser et al. (2017), explained it this way:

> The sequential progression of these experiences suggests an arc of experience or a necessary sequence; a participant's capacity to surrender in the face of a struggle or frightening encounter may facilitate an unfolding therapeutic process. In this way, the "incredible struggle" that is a hallmark of the psilocybin experience may not be an undesirable side effect, but rather a central and necessary feature of participants' healing narratives. (p. 369)

This process was not just a speculation by the researchers; it was experienced by the participants themselves. A participant in the Belser, et al. (2017) study said:

> It is not fun, that is the thing. It is a hard experience; it is a very rich experience. You have a lot of things to learn from it, but how much fun is learning, you know? It is not that fun especially when you have to face some hard things . . . you start putting everything together, and at the end you are a better person because you know more. (p. 377)

Here the psilocybin experience offered self-knowledge, but it only came at the price of an "incredible struggle" (Belser, et. al., 2017, p. 369). In the midst of these challenging experiences, participants described how surrendering and letting go was necessary to move from a position of emotional or psychological resistance to one of acceptance which was, "characterized by feelings of relief, wholeness, freedom, and affirmation" (Belser, et. al., 2017, p. 379). Just when participants thought that they couldn't tolerate any more, things would shift and the intensity would resolve (Swift et. al., 2017, p. 498).

Emotional Breakthrough. Overcoming psychological resistance and experiencing emotional catharsis as a pathway to psychological healing is one of the oldest ideas in the field of psychology (Freud & Breuer, 1895/2004). Freud and Breuer elaborated a theory of the healing effects of abreaction and catharsis in the late 19th century. Abreaction is the expression and release of a repressed emotion or trauma through a facilitated reexperiencing of the event that caused it. Catharsis is the *relief* that one feels when strong or previously repressed emotions are released. Freud eventually distanced himself from Breuer by dismissing the utility of abreaction and catharsis in favor of a theory of psychological healing based primarily on uncovering

traumatic memories and verbally processing them (Nichols & Efran, 1985). At the time, most psychoanalysts joined Freud in his rejection of catharsis (Scheff, 2007).

Other critiques of catharsis as a therapeutic technique are important to consider. According to Nichols and Efran (1985), emotive therapies that emerged in the 1960's revived the therapeutic use of catharsis but were later "widely perceived as part of a misguided shift from rationalism to emotionalism," (p.46). They added that these emotive therapies, such as primal therapy, psychodrama, and Gestalt therapy sometimes led to "emotional-high 'junkies'" and concluded that "no therapy can succeed without addressing the whole human personality," including feelings, thoughts, and actions (p.50). Scheff (2007) examined studies in the field of experimental social psychology that attempted to discredit the notion of catharsis. They concluded that aggressive behavior or viewing aggressive images does not have a cathartic effect. Scheff critiqued the experimental designs of the studies and argued that their conclusions were ultimately erroneous. Studies examining the presence of cathartic processes in other cultures found that some indigenous cultures encouraged intense expression of emotions in certain prescribed social contexts such as grief rituals, but considered it taboo at other times (Wellenkamp, 1988). These cultural differences in the appropriate social contexts for cathartic emotional release has led at times to the detrimental application of Western therapeutic theories and techniques in non-Western countries (Christopher et al., 2014; Wickramage, 2006).

According to Grof (1985), psychedelic therapy has "rehabilitated to a great extent the principles of abreaction and catharsis as important aspects of psychotherapy" (p. 381). Grof felt that psychedelic substances were one of the "most effective ways" of encouraging abreaction and catharsis (p. 380). Nichols and Efran (1985) also recognized the potential of psychedelics to encourage catharsis by enhancing emotional arousal and weakening "ordinary social restraint"

(p.47). Grof was writing in the 1980's, long before the current 21st century renaissance of psychedelic research. However, modern psychedelic researchers are just beginning to accept that depth psychology and methods of abreaction and catharsis might have some important contributions to make to the understanding of the mechanisms of action of therapeutic psychedelic experiences. Roseman et al. (2018), suggested that this is a useful collaboration:

> Critically, it is our view that it is possible to work toward a secular, biologically-informed account of the mystical-type experience that does not resort to "explaining away" or "reducing down" the core phenomenology and depth psychology may be a useful bedfellow in this regard. (p. 7)

Gasser et al. (2015), in their research on LSD-assisted psychotherapy for anxiety associated with a life-threatening illness, listed a number of mechanisms they believe are involved in psychedelic therapy that are also involved in "conventional psychotherapy," including "facilitated access to emotions, relieving of traumatic memories, *abreaction and catharsis*, facilitation of emotional and intellectual insights" (p. 64, emphasis added).

Other qualitative researchers pointed to the importance of experiences similar to abreaction and catharsis for their participants (Belser et al., 2017; Swift et al., 2017; Watts et al., 2017). Belser et al. (2017) described how participants "came to surrender or 'let go,' leading from a defensive posture of emotional or psychological resistance to an accepting posture characterized by feelings of relief, wholeness, freedom, and affirmation" (p. 379). They suggested that future psychedelic research "evaluate cathartic release and the depth and breadth of affect states occasioned by psilocybin-assisted psychotherapy" (p. 379). Watts et al. (2017) identified a recurring theme in their research with psilocybin and treatment resistant depression that they called a "change process" of "Avoidance of emotion to Acceptance" (p. 525). Gasser et

al. (2015), noted similar intense emotional experiences followed by a resolution and shift towards more positive emotions. Gasser et al. (2015) found:

> Virtually all of the patients reported their most moving subjective events were intense emotional experiences. These were characterized at first by a tense and anxiety-laden confrontation with emotions and aspects of their actual life situation, sometimes accompanied by appropriate memories . . . The basic emotional experience then changed to a much more positive emotional tone. (p. 65)

Taking this research into account, Roseman et al. (2019), suggested that "emotional breakthrough" would be a valuable construct for understanding the therapeutic value of psychedelic experiences. They also admitted that the phenomenon of emotional breakthrough "overlaps to some extent with the psychoanalytic notion of catharsis" (Roseman et al., 2019, p. 1077).

Roseman et al. (2018) pointed to outcomes from the Carbonaro et al. (2016) study on challenging psychedelic experiences that showed that while the intensity of challenging psychedelic experiences was predictive of positive long-term outcomes, the duration was predicative of negative outcomes (p. 7). The authors speculated that "This is presumably because the successful resolution of conflict brings with it, insight and relief, whereas the failure to breakthrough perpetuates suffering" (Roseman et al., 2018, p. 7). Roseman et al. (2018), argued that because the Challenging Experience Questionnaire developed by (Barrett et al., 2016) is not sensitive to whether the challenging experiences find successful resolution, the development of new scales based on the construct of "emotional breakthrough" would have something valuable to offer (p. 7).

Roseman et al. (2019) then developed the Emotional Breakthrough Inventory (EBI) as a

remedy to the narrow focus of the Mystical Experience construct as well as the lack of sensitivity of the Challenging Experience construct. Roseman et al. (2019) pointed out that the content of emotional breakthroughs (EBs) is often related to personal or interpersonal insights and so do not always have the same transpersonal content of the mystical experiences measured by Griffiths et al. (2006, 2008). Initial analyses of the construct, based upon internet surveys of three hundred and seventy-nine people taken both before and after a planned psychedelic experience, showed that the Emotional Breakthrough Inventory "significantly predicts post-psychedelic changes in well-being," meaning the greater the emotional breakthrough, the greater the increases in well-being (Roseman et al., 2019, p. 1083). But, importantly, they also found that the *combination* of the MEQ, CEQ, and the EBI performed better in predicting therapeutic outcomes than any alternative that left one of them out (Roseman et al., 2019, p. 1083). The authors emphasized that in addition to studying the factors that influence the quality of the psychedelic experience itself, there are other broader contextual factors that they feel are important to not lose sight of including therapeutic intention, setting and alliance as well as integration post session (Roseman et al., 2019, p. 1084). They went on to say that accommodating the need for attention to these broader contextual factors will be challenging within traditional psychiatric institutions and settings, but that failing to do so is "bad practice if not unethical" (Roseman et al., 2019, p. 1084). Roseman et al. (2019), concluded by saying that there is still room for additional quantitative measures to be developed, insinuating that they don't believe the combination of the MEQ, CEQ, and EBI accounts for all of the mediating factors affecting positive outcomes in psychedelic therapy (p. 1085).

Connectedness. "Connectedness" is another important construct that has emerged from current qualitative research as a therapeutic factor in psychedelic experiences (Belser et al.,

2017; Carhart-Harris et al., 2017; Watts et al., 2017). Carhart-Harris et al. (2017) suggested that connectedness may be a "core factor underlying mental health" (p. 547) in general, and the fact that psychedelic therapy targets connectedness could be the reason why it has been proven to alleviate a wide variety of psychological ills. They also drew a parallel between the construct of "mystical experience" and connectedness (Carhart-Harris et al., 2017, p. 549). The researchers pointed out that the philosopher Walter Stace, upon whose work Barrett et al. (2015) based their mystical experience questionnaire (MEQ), considered "unitive experience" to be the core of the mystical experience (Carhart-Harris et al., 2017, p. 549). Carhart-Harris et al. (2017), went on to explain that they consider Stace's "unitive experience" to be closely related to their construct of connectedness (p. 549). They related connectedness to their research into the neural correlates of psychedelically induced "ego-dissolution," explaining that unitive experiences have been correlated with "ego-dissolution" and suggesting that the ego may be considered as a "counter-force to *connectedness*" (p. 549). If an entrenched and ossified ego is anti-connectedness, then taking the ego offline in a psychedelic experience may lead to a unitive experience, which is "*connectedness* in its acute form" (Carhart-Harris et al., 2017, p. 549). The "ego" that is referred to here is the part of us that cultivates and maintains a reflexive sense of "I" as a supposedly separate, skin-bound and autonomous subject. A felt sense of differentiation from others is necessary to productively engage with others and the world around us, but it can get out of balance. An impenetrable and inflexible ego can become trapped in negative stories about one's past, present and future which can lead to depression, anxiety and a felt sense of separation and disconnection. On the other hand, overly permeable self-boundaries may lead to experiences similar to mania or psychosis. Carhart-Harris et al. (2017) suggested that psychedelic experiences may help to return a rigid ego into state of balance.

Based on the results of their qualitative analysis of interviews with people suffering from treatment resistant depression who were given psilocybin as part of a clinical trial, Watts et al. (2017) found that a change process from disconnection to connection was one of three main themes shared by participants. The change process, facilitated by psilocybin, began as disconnection from self, others, and the world, and transformed into connection to self, others, the world and a "spiritual principle" (Watts et al., 2017, p. 535). Carhart-Harris et al. (2017), whose research team built upon the findings from Watts et al. (2017), suggested that the development of a *connectedness* scale should include three sub-factors: *connection-to-self*, connection to *others*, and connection to the *world* in a broad sense (p. 548).

Belser et al. (2017) interviewed cancer patients suffering from existential anxiety who had taken psilocybin as part of a clinical trial. One of the main themes that all of the interviews had in common was "relational embeddedness" (p. 355). The authors wrote:

> Relationships were woven throughout participant narratives, with themes of forgiveness of others, loved ones as spirit guides, the importance of narrating one's experience with loved ones, and improved relationships posttreatment. In this way, the psilocybin experience may be conceived as relationally embedded. (Belser et al., 2017, p. 378)

Another typical theme (found in the majority of transcripts) from the same study was "From Separateness to Interconnectedness" (Belser et al., 2017, p. 369). This included feelings of "interconnection with other people, the entire planet, and the universe at large" (Belser et al., 2017, p. 369).

Elements from each of these potential mediating factors (mystical experience, challenging experiences, emotional breakthrough, and connectedness) surfaced as important elements in the present study on the phenomenology of challenging Ayahuasca experiences. I

will explore how all of these factors merged and wove together in participants' experiences, and what the potential ramifications of these findings are for the future of psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy therapy and research.

Method

Methodology

Examining psychedelic experiences through a qualitative research lens reveals fresh insights into the underlying processes that facilitate positive outcomes. Belser et al. (2017), recognized the complementary value that qualitative research can offer to the field of psychedelic science when he said, "qualitative inquiry can complement existing quantitative research regarding psychedelic-assisted treatments as it is well suited to address questions of meaning, inner experience, and behavioral change within complex multidimensional contexts . . . and may help elucidate underlying mechanisms of action" (p. 357). Qualitative research is important to the nascent field of psychedelic-assisted therapy because of its ability to dive deep into subjective experience and emerge with intimate details of the lived experienced of psychedelic healing.

I chose Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to investigate my research question. This method was created and elaborated by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). Swift et al. (2017), described IPA well, "This qualitative research approach draws from phenomenological, heuristic, and narrative theoretical frames . . . to systematically analyze participants' experiences as well as their understandings of those experiences" (p. 494). IPA has been effectively used by qualitative researchers in two recent analyses of the effects of psychedelic experiences on anxiety and depression (Belser et al., 2017; Swift et al., 2017). Both were qualitative analyses of semi-structured interviews from a subsample of participants in the

Ross et al. (2016) research trial which gave psilocybin to cancer patients experiencing existential anxiety and depression. The Swift et al. (2017) study focused on participant experiences specifically related to cancer, death and spirituality, while the Belser et al. (2017) study considered other subjective experiences of the participants. Their use of IPA method uncovered important themes that were influential to my study.

Many phenomenological methods rely directly on the participants' words for their interpretations. IPA honors the open-ended process of meaning making by allowing the researcher to consider and interpret meanings that the participants are still in the process of formulating. An unexpected outcome of my IPA process was the organic emergence of a phenomenological structure of participants' challenging Ayahuasca experiences. This underlying structure was revealed by the relationships between the core elements of the lived experiences of the participants.

One of these core elements was the way the participants spontaneously connected their challenging Ayahuasca experiences to the larger temporal context of their lives. What came before and after participants' Ayahuasca experiences were just as important to them as the psychedelic experience itself. The IPA method allowed me to take this larger temporal context into account. Another core element of participants' experiences was their connection to themselves, others and the world. The phenomenological structure includes both of these elements. According to Fischer (1984), phenomenological structures are "intended to retain the temporal flow and flux of the subject's attunements to self, to others, and to the environment" (p.163). Although discovering phenomenological structures is not an explicit part of the IPA method, the recognition of a common underlying structure among participants' lived experiences was a valuable outcome of the interpretative process.

Recruitment

I recruited participants who had experienced "challenging" moments during past Ayahuasca ceremonies. The term "challenging" refers to experiences of fear, grief, physical distress, temporary feelings of insanity, isolation, death, paranoia, despair, anger, regret, guilt and shame**.** In the recruitment letter I wrote that I was hoping to conduct research about the ways that Ayahuasca may sponsor growth, transformation and healing (see Appendix A). As such, the participants shared stories of Ayahuasca experiences involving significant challenges that ultimately led to positive outcomes.

My access to potential research participants came through Sage (name altered for confidentiality), a guide of neo-shamanic therapeutic Ayahuasca ceremonies. Sage is a middle-aged woman from the United States who trained with indigenous and mestizo traditional healers in South America and has been leading Ayahuasca ceremonies for many years. The participants described Sage as an exceedingly competent and trustworthy ceremonial facilitator. She guides participants through the Ayahuasca experience with her music, singing songs and playing an array of instruments. She also utilizes various shamanic healing techniques when individuals need special treatment. Each participant felt that they had special relationship with Sage, which is a testament to the time she took getting to know them personally. They also said that the people in the different locations she visits around the country return again and again to her ceremonies. In this way, Sage facilitates the formation of communities that get together and support one another even outside of the Ayahuasca ceremonies. The effect of Sage's cultivation of personal relationships with each participant along with the ongoing relationships among ceremony participants should not be underestimated and likely contributed to positive outcomes.

I recruited all of my participants through Sage because I wanted to increase the homogeneity of the participant sample. This way I knew that all of my participants had experienced the same kind of Ayahuasca ceremony with the same facilitator. My reasoning was that the more homogeneous the sample population the less likely that differences in the data could be due to external factors such as the quality of the Ayahuasca brew or the quality of the facilitator. Only one participant, Alicia, shared an experience happened in an Ayahuasca ceremony with a different facilitator.

Sage crafted and sent out a recruitment email to all of her ceremony participants which outlined the parameters of the research and offered personal endorsement of my credentials. In the email, Sage included my description of the purpose of the study and the nature of the phenomenon that I was trying to understand. To help assure potential participants that we were taking extra precautions to protect their confidentiality and reduce any legal exposure, the word Ayahuasca was substituted with "Mamacita." To read the recruitment letter see Appendix A. Sage asked recipients to let her know if they were interested in being a part of the study. She then emailed the list of possible recruits to me. I aimed to recruit between four and six participants. I ended up with five. Smith et al. (2009), suggested that between 4 and 10 participants is an appropriate number considering that for IPA studies the emphasis is on the depth and detail of the data and not the number of participants (p. 52).

Collecting the Data

I contacted the selected participants by email and included the official consent form (see Appendix D for a copy of the form). Included in the consent form was an overview of the research study, the intended purpose of the research study, the conditions of their participation along with an analysis of the potential risks and benefits of participating in the study. This was

followed by a description of how confidentiality would be maintained throughout the study, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. According to the dispensations of the IRB, I let potential participants know that the written description of their experience, sent to me via email, would stand as their tacit agreement to participate in the research study. In the body of the email, I asked them to write up a vivid and detailed description of an Ayahuasca experience that occurred within the past year with particular attention being paid to those moments which they found "challenging" and what happened both during and after those periods. The question was worded as follows:

> If you do choose to continue, the next step would be to email me a very detailed written description of ***just one*** entire ceremony experience, ideally from *within the past year,* that included challenging moments (including but not limited to any of the following: fear, grief, despair, insanity, isolation, death, darkness, paranoia, suffering, confusion, anger, shame and physical distress**).** The richness of detail here is particularly important. I would like to hear as much of the ceremony experience as you can remember. Not just the challenging moments, but everything that led up to those moments and everything that came after them.

All of the participants with the exception of Sam emailed me written descriptions of their experiences. I printed them out and spent time carefully reading them, noting places I was interested in learning more about or getting more clarity. After this I wrote in my reflexivity journal, considering why I was drawn to some parts of the descriptions over others.

Participants were widely separated geographically, with three of them on the West Coast of the United States and two on the East Coast. The interviews were scheduled to take place in the participant's homes, with the exception of Hawk whom I met in a public park. Each semi-

structured interview lasted approximately an hour and a half. I had some open-ended questions prepared in case they were needed to direct the flow of the interview or inquire about missing details. However, the interviews flowed so well that I only referred to the prewritten questions at the end to make sure all of the major topics had been covered. My list of interview questions can be found in Appendix B.

I met with each participant in person and took some time at the beginning of each interview to become acquainted with them and establish some rapport. This included sharing about my knowledge of Ayahuasca experiences so that they knew I had more than a basic understanding of the topic. In homage to one of the rituals common in Ayahuasca ceremonies, I offered to burn some *Palo Santo* (a sacred incense wood from South America). Because participants were familiar with this ritual, it helped to create a sense of solidarity between us. I then let them know that although we would be orienting our interview around the challenging Ayahuasca experiences that they had written for me, that I trusted that whatever they felt compelled to share would be valuable for me to know. Heeding this invitation, participants' narratives ranged broadly, including things that happened before, during, and after their challenging Ayahuasca experiences.

Analyzing the data

I transcribed all of the recorded interviews in Microsoft Word. Then I began the analysis with an initial pass of both the written and transcribed data, engaging it in an open and freely associative way. I wrote in the margins of the printed transcripts and written accounts any thoughts and ideas that came to mind about significant topic areas that I noticed in the data. This is a process that IPA calls free coding (Smith et al., 2009). Codes are significant and meaningful themes pertaining to the research topic that emerge from the data. The next step was the

phenomenological coding. This included a close line-by-line analysis of the transcribed interviews and written accounts, one participant at a time. Emerging codes were organized using the qualitative research software NVivo. NVivo allowed me to link all of the quotes from the data with their associated codes which made it possible to easily rearrange codes. With each successive participant's data added and coded in NVivo, the list of codes grew.

Once all of the interviews had been coded, I began to look for connections among the codes and organize them into thematic groupings using NVivo. This wasn't a linear process, but rather a hermeneutic and iterative process of zooming out and looking for associations among participant codes, interpreting the thematic implications of these connections, and then zooming back into the quotes to see if the interpretations made sense at the individual level. As I cycled through this process, I began to develop more psychologically guided and informed interpretations which built off of the themes and began to deepen and broaden the understanding of the meanings that participants were conveying through their stories. Finally, the relationships between the interpretative themes were considered, and a phenomenological structure emerged which illuminated the relationships between the interpretative themes. For a list of these steps in my research process see Appendix C.

I have chosen not to append the complete transcripts to this document out of an abundance of caution. This is a unique research situation where the substances my participants described using are illegal. Even after changing identifying names and locations, I realized that I could not be one hundred percent sure that they could not be identified.

Reflexivity

To maintain an active process of researcher reflexivity, I kept a self-reflective journal and made entries around major procedural steps. The journal was a place where I recorded the

evolution of my biases and presuppositions and the way I checked and revised my expectations in terms of the empirical data. I maintain that, like all researchers, I approached this study with assumptions and prejudices that affected the questions I asked my research participants and the meaning I imagined I would discover in their stories. I did not attempt to eliminate these biases but by reflecting on them throughout the process I came to a greater awareness of what they are, and how they needed to be revised. This allowed me to open up space to be surprised and receptive to the emergent revelations of the data. What follows is my attempt to consolidate the major themes from the self-reflective journal entries into a fluid narrative.

The biases and expectations that I brought into the research process stem from a long history of studying the indigenous uses of psychedelic plants. This journey began as a teenager, when I developed an interest in the poets and writers of the "Beat" generation. After reading Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder I went on to discover Tom Wolf's *Electric Kool-aid Acid Test*, which opened up the door to the fascinating history of the countercultural movement of the 1960's and 70's. It was Alan Watts's essays on psychedelics combined with Joseph Campbell's comparative mythological writings that fed my interest in the religious and spiritual uses of psychedelic compounds by indigenous cultures around the world. In the late 1990's, while surfing the World Wide Web, I discovered references to the use of the powerful psychedelic brew Ayahuasca by indigenous tribes of the Amazon basin in South America. After that, I devoured all of the information I could find about Ayahuasca. In college, as a religious studies major, I continued to explore the indigenous use of psychedelics with a focus on the Ayahuasca traditions of the Amazon basin. Hoping to do a field study of Ayahuasca use, I left college and traveled to a remote corner of Northeastern Ecuador where I learned about the indigenous life ways and ritual Ayahuasca traditions of the Secoya people.

My interest in Ayahuasca did not wane over the years. While living in Northern California, and later New Mexico I had close friends and colleagues that were involved in neo-shamanic Ayahuasca communities. These groups gathered regularly for Ayahuasca ceremonies which were led by indigenous healers as well as Western practitioners who had apprenticed with indigenous and mestizo healers in Peru and Ecuador. During this time, I heard countless stories from people who experienced profound transformation and healing after participating in Ayahuasca ceremonies. The stories they told were sometimes harrowing stories of returning from the edge of death with insights into unhealthy psychological patterns along with a renewed vitality and sense of purpose.

When I decided to return to graduate studies in the field of psychology, I found academic support for my interest in psychedelic research at Duquesne University's existential-phenomenological psychology department. This unique department has a rich psychedelic history centered around one of the departments founding members, Rolf Von Eckartsberg, who served as an assistant to the psychedelic activist Timothy Leary at Harvard University (Churchill, 1993).

When I began the preliminary investigations into my dissertation topic, I discovered that psychedelic researchers were interested in a phenomenon they called "challenging" psychedelic experiences. Specifically, they were confounded by some of their research findings that revealed that "challenging" psychedelic experiences were often profoundly meaningful (Barrett et al., 2016; Carbonaro et al., 2016). I decided to attempt to make a small contribution to the field's understanding of this phenomenon.

Therefore, as with all researchers, I came into this project with my own biases and expectations. They could have blinded me to new revelations within my data. However, I found

myself surprised at the unexpected places my data analysis lead me. The first thing that I asked my participants to do was write a very detailed description of one challenging Ayahuasca experience that preferably occurred within the past year. The descriptions I received were initially disappointing. They included multiple challenging Ayahuasca experiences instead of just one, and some that had happened many years ago. They recounted how the experiences had changed their lives in non-linear ways, both the past and the future. I realized that the phenomenon I was attempting to understand was already overflowing the narrow confines of my research parameters. Instead of forcing my participants to comply with my parameters, I needed to adjust to their stories so that I could really hear what they wanted me to understand.

When it came time for the in-person semi-structured interviews, I had a set of questions ready to go, but I decided that I would really try to let the participants lead with the information and stories that felt most important to them. Later, as I transcribed the interviews and began to search the data for themes, I imagined that I would find stories of spiritual ordeals and cycles of death and rebirth. While some of those themes did emerge, they were not the most important to my participants. What the participants were emphasizing was the way that their challenging Ayahuasca experiences helped them to heal wounds in their relationships with themselves, others and the larger world. I was definitely not expecting that relationships would turn out to be the central theme of my dissertation. But this pleasant surprise served as proof that I had managed to allow some of my biases and expectations to relax just enough so that I could be present to the revelations in the data.

Results

In the following sections I introduce each of the participants' stories, woven together from the interviews and written accounts. In the midst of the stories, I highlight some of the

important themes. After the narratives, I present a table of all of the important themes that emerged from the in-depth phenomenological analysis. Following the table, I go through each theme one by one and show how it emerged from the data by offering direct quotes and explanations.

At the beginning of each interview, I told the participants that they should feel free to share whatever they felt was important for me to know about how they understood their challenging Ayahuasca experiences. Their narratives ranged broadly, including things that happened before, during, and after their challenging Ayahuasca experiences. Giving participants broad license to share the significance of their challenging Ayahuasca experiences within the broader context of their lives, revealed important phenomena. The stories they offered made it clear that these experiences affected the way they made sense of their past and also led to transformations in their ensuing lives. Like a pebble dropped into a pond, the ripples of the challenging Ayahuasca experiences moved outward affecting the past and the future in ways that wove them more deeply and harmoniously into a meaningful web of relationships.

Maria: Story and themes

After missing several train connections on my trek across town, I knocked on Maria's door over an hour late and a bit flustered. Even though I live in a medium-sized city, I felt like a country mouse in this metropolis. A small chihuahua barked at me from the window. The door soon opened, and I was greeted by Maria's warm smile. She had long dark hair and wore a colorful floral dress. She appeared to be in her 40's. She showed no signs of impatience or frustration at my tardy arrival. Instead, I felt instantly at ease, like I had just returned to the home of a close friend. Her house was clean and, like Maria's attire, had a festive feel. Brightly colored folk art adorned the walls, hinting at Maria's Latin American heritage.

Maria led me into the kitchen where she offered me tea. A small kitchen table was arranged with what appeared to be a small altar, a vase of flowers, and a single candle. I accepted the offer, sat down at the table and unpacked the recording equipment. As we chatted, Maria's wife popped in briefly to say hello and then disappeared back down into the basement. Maria handed me a cup of tea and sat down across from me at the kitchen table. Our conversation flowed easily.

Maria shared that she had long been interested in mind altering substances. Although she was born in South America, she grew up in a big city near the Mexican border. Her family was in the marijuana industry and did not have a problem with her smoking a joint after she finished her homework in the evening. As a young adult, she also experimented with psychedelic compounds such as MDMA, LSD, and psilocybin mushrooms. Maria emphasized that her psychedelic experiences were for "spiritual" and "existential" exploration. They helped her feel "aligned with the universe."

Years later, Maria's best friend told her about Ayahuasca. She really thought Maria should try it as well. Maria did a lot of research on Ayahuasca. She learned that her indigenous South American ancestors had used Ayahuasca as a medicine for healing. There it was not illegal but considered a rite of passage. Maria felt like she was destined to drink Ayahuasca.

Maria explained that when she arrived at her first Ayahuasca ceremony, the scariest part for her was imagining being vulnerable and vomiting in front of people she did not know. But she said that once she had gotten over that fear, she felt a "really strong connection" to Ayahuasca. It seemed like a perfect fit because Maria was already interested in Native American spirituality and psychedelic plants. Maria felt like she "had been preparing for [Ayahuasca] her whole life."

Dying and being reborn

By the time Maria drank Ayahuasca for the first time, she was already working as a social worker supporting teenagers who were in risky situations. This evolved into working with survivors of human trafficking, which is the work that Maria was still engaged in at the time of our interview. Due in part to the extremely traumatic experiences she was processing with her clients, Maria began to experience anxiety and occasionally suffered panic attacks. She also had a history of painful migraines. One of Maria's biggest fears was getting a migraine or having a panic attack during an Ayahuasca ceremony. At the beginning of her ceremonies, she would often ask "Mama" (one of her names for Ayahuasca) to be gentle on her and protect her from headaches and anxiety.

However, during one Ayahuasca ceremony that took place in a rural mountainous area outside of the United States, her worst fears came true. She began to get a headache. She speculated that perhaps it was because she hadn't drunk enough water, or that she was feeling overwhelmed. The headache triggered an anxiety response in Maria that evolved into a panic attack. She felt strong palpitations in her heart. She eventually managed to ask the facilitator (Sage) for help. Sage blew "sacred tobacco smoke" on her, applied some oils, and suggested that she breathe into her heart and send her heart love. Maria imagined the hosts of the ceremony calling an ambulance, but because they were in such a remote location her thoughts jumped to "what if I pass away here?"

These fearful thoughts reminded Maria of the death of her aunt who had died of an aneurysm. Her aunt had been like a mother to Maria. When Maria was young, her biological mother was deported, and her aunt stepped in to help raise her. During the Ayahuasca ceremony, Maria began to feel that she was "tapping into" her aunt's death. She described going into a

"whole journey of feeling her [aunt's] death." She became convinced that she was also dying in a similar way.

At this point, a friend and a song came to her rescue. She had made a pact with a close friend who was also in the ceremony, that whenever one of them began to sing, the other would always join in. While Maria was panicking and wrestling with death, she heard her friend begin to sing a song they both knew and loved called "Abrete Corazon" (Open Your Heart). The sound of the song, and the memory of her shared pact, helped to cut through Maria's fear. With the help of some of her fellow participants, Maria managed to stumble her way over to her friend and join her in singing their song. As they sang, her fears gradually faded. When the song ended, she cried and drank some water. Maria described feeling physically exhausted afterwards, as though she had "worked out for hours," but grateful and thankful that her body had remained strong. She said she was "relieved to be alive and also almost as if reborn.''

Maria said that she was used to being the one that was solid and able to "hold space" for other people going through difficulties. She wasn't used to being the one that needed help. Her growing fear fed the progression of the headache into a full-blown panic attack. Maria could feel her heart beating hard in her chest. This strong and uncomfortable physical sensation created a feedback loop that further convinced her that something was wrong. This combined with the memory of her Aunt's death, and Maria became convinced that she was dying in a similar manner. She got caught in what she called a "dark spiral" of negative thoughts and associations.

Maria recognized a parallel in her day-to-day life. Normally when she would begin to feel a headache or was having a panic attack, she would "pop a pill" to make the pain go away. But, in this instance she could not medicate the pain or fear away. Instead, she had to "just sit with that pain." Maria had done just that in her ceremony. She had confronted her greatest

fears, she had reached out for help and found support from the facilitator and the group to persevere. In the end she felt a sense of rebirth, of renewal.

Purging trauma

By the time Maria began working with survivors of human trafficking, she was participating in two to three Ayahuasca ceremonies a year. During these ceremonies, Maria shared that her work with trauma survivors emerged as a common theme. In fact, she said these Ayahuasca ceremonies were crucial to her ability to be able to persevere with such challenging therapeutic work without getting bogged down in all of the pain and suffering she had to process with her clients.

Maria feels her therapy work is a "calling" that evolved naturally for her. Early on in her career, she worked with LGBTQI adolescents, some of whom were living on the streets and engaging in commercial sex work. This led to treating survivors of human trafficking, including people that had been exploited by huge syndicates such as MS-13, an extremely violent gang based in Central America.

Maria could see parallels between the violent history of colonialism in the Americas and the horrible injustices that gangs like MS-13 were inflicting on her clients. The way she saw it, the indigenous people of the Americas had been exploited by the European colonial empires, and now the gangs were perpetuating that same pattern of exploitation upon their own women and children. These were the people that ended up in Maria's office. Due to processing extensive pain and suffering with her clients, Maria felt like she was carrying the "weight of the world." The effects of both the current and historical abuses that Maria was encountering so intimately with her clients was taking a heavy psychological and emotional toll.

Maria explained that her Ayahuasca experiences brought her relief from these heavy burdens. The relief came from being able move towards and deeply feel intense thoughts and emotions, and then to let them go. In Maria's words, she described how Ayahuasca allowed her to experience the "ugly," aspects of her work, and then to "release" it through the vomiting or purging process she calls "getting well."

Maria shared that embodying and expressing anger towards her clients' violent perpetrators in ways that traditional talk therapy hasn't afforded her, has prevented vicarious trauma. Maria said the purging process has given her a way to let go of the pain that she carries from her clients. She feels that fully expressing her emotions, vomiting out and releasing the pain and suffering has helped her continue being a supportive and present therapist for her severely traumatized clients. On an even broader level, Maria experienced the suffering of her clients as connected with the suffering of the earth. She saw parallels between the ways the earth is being dishonored and "raped" for its resources and the way that her clients were being sexually trafficked.

Although the purging process for Maria centers around the physical act of vomiting, it is clear that the process is much more than a physical event. The physical aspects of the purge bring embodiment and tangibility to otherwise diffuse psychological and emotional material in a way that helped Maria feel that she could move that difficult material out of her body and "release" it. Maria said she sometimes has the feeling that she is not just releasing the burdens that she has accumulated from prolonged contact with her clients. She also has the sense that she is releasing her clients' burdens *for them*. And she also feels that she is *purging for her clients' perpetrators* as well.

When the purging process is over, Maria said she can go back to work with her clients feeling "grounded" and "renewed." She brings this renewed vitality and the insights from the Ayahuasca ceremonies to her work in ways that she believes improves their therapeutic work. She said she tries to pass on the value of moving towards challenging emotions, allowing them to move through the body and find release. She encourages her clients to cry if they need to cry. If they feel nauseous, she encourages them to move towards the sensation by helping them to understand that vomiting is their body's way of releasing the trauma. In other words, for Maria, the lessons of the purging process extend beyond the Ayahuasca ceremony and back into the world. The experiences that she has had with Ayahuasca give her the clarity and energy to continue processing her own challenging emotions and experiences as well as those of her clients.

Purging grief and anger

Connecting with emotions and then moving them through the body by crying, groaning or yelling, is also a form of purging, whether or not the culmination includes vomiting. Processing grief is an important yet challenging aspect of Maria's Ayahuasca experiences that she calls "grief work." Grief is a complicated conglomeration of emotions that may include sadness, anger, guilt, remorse, fear, and helplessness.

In Ayahuasca ceremonies, Maria processed both grief and anger associated with her relationship to her mother. She described her mother as a homophobic, born again Christian who was abusive to her as a child. Maria described a time in an Ayahuasca ceremony when she wept thinking about how sad it was that she did not have a good mother. For a long time, she had made excuses for her mother's abusive behavior because her mother had lost her husband (Maria's father was murdered when Maria was three years old). Maria's Ayahuasca experiences

allowed her to reconnect with authentic feelings of anger towards her mother for abusing her as a child. These feelings of anger, which are often important emotional components of grief, can be harder to get in touch with than sadness. Connecting with and allowing expression of her anger towards her mother was another important form of purging, a movement and release of repressed emotion.

Interestingly, in one of these ceremonies, Maria described how "Mama" Ayahuasca helped her to see her mother as a little girl. "Mama" Ayahuasca told her that even though her mother had not been very kind to Maria in the past, that she was still her mother and that she still needed to take care of her. Maria took this message to heart. Although she emphasized that she is aware of maintaining healthy boundaries with her mother, she said that she will send her money if her mother can't afford to buy food. She also visits her in South America. Being able to connect with the full range of feelings she had towards her mother, from sadness to rage, made it possible for Maria to find compassion for the "little girl" parts of her mother that still needed to nurturing and love.

In one Ayahuasca ceremony when Maria was doing "grief work" around her troubled relationship with her mother as well as her father's untimely death, Sage (who Maria called "the shaman" during our interview), lit a little candle for Maria's birthday and everyone in the group sang to her. Maria said that her sadness turned into happiness because she felt that all parts of her were seen and loved. The acceptance that Maria felt from her Ayahuasca community was a balm to her feelings of loss and estrangement from her biological parents.

In addition to feeling grief about her biological family, Maria also described feeling grief and shedding tears about the struggles in her relationship with her partner of eleven years. They had gone through significant struggles and were close to divorce a couple of times. Maria said

that in Ayahuasca ceremony, "Mama" will give her a "laundry list" of things to do to support her marriage. Although Maria admitted that she doesn't manage to follow through with everything on the list, her wife is happy when she comes home with a renewed commitment to spending more time together. Maria described these Ayahuasca experiences as a combination of couple therapy and individual therapy.

For Maria, being able to feel and express formerly blunted or repressed emotions during the purging process is followed by a reconnection with her own vitality as well as a reconnection with family and friends, as well as the community of participants in the Ayahuasca ceremonies. The other participants also know what it is like to face their deepest fears and purge frozen emotions, as well as to reap the rewards of feeling renewed and reborn.

Sam: Story and themes

It was a sunny winter morning in the city when I met Sam. I couldn't reconcile the map on my phone with the reality on the street and was banging away on the wrong door. Sam had to come down from his third-floor apartment and let me in. He greeted me with a warm smile as I apologized and shook his hand. We climbed a few flights of stairs up to his apartment. Once inside, I followed Sam's lead, removed my shoes and set them alongside the others already lined up in a neat row. The apartment was a single bedroom studio, open, clean, and inviting. When I commented on how nice it looked, Sam apologized for the mess. He invited me over to some low, comfy chairs stacked with pillows and draped with blankets. As I looked around, I noticed an electric keyboard tucked against the wall and a hanging photograph taken inside a geodesic dome. Robust green plants and a statue of the Buddha on the table nearby lent the space a naturally contemplative atmosphere. Sam sat down on the chair next to me. His movements were smooth and deliberate. He crossed his legs and managed to sit up perfectly straight without

appearing rigid. With a handmade cotton scarf around his neck, a bald head and a wise smile, I had the impression I was interviewing the head monk of a Buddhist monastery.

Interrupting the air of peaceful sanctity, Sam's partner suddenly popped out of a door in front of us wrapped in a white bathrobe, his hair still wet. He immediately introduced himself and inquired about my project. He noticed my recorder and enthusiastically offered to upgrade my recording system with some microphones he was using for his own podcast. I was open to better sound, but the mood had palpably shifted. A look of annoyance peeked out through Sam's otherwise equanimous demeanor. After fiddling with the microphones for a few minutes his partner gave up and stepped into the kitchen to make himself some breakfast. Sam encouraged him to finish quickly; he did not want the sound of the coffee grinder and clinking dishes to interfere with the quality of the recording.

Before recording, in homage to a ritual common in Ayahuasca ceremonies, I asked permission to burn a small piece of incense wood called *Palo Santo* (holy wood). Sam approved, sharing that he and his husband often burn palo santo as well. I lit the wood, lifted it upward in a gesture of offering and then wafted the smoke around my body. I handed it to him, and he did the same. The simple and spontaneous ritual set a tone of humility and sacredness that accompanied us throughout the interview. As we began, Sam responded to my questions in a measured and thoughtful way. The flow between us was relaxed but spirited. His stories were engaging and at times profound.

Many years ago, as a child, Sam left his family behind and went through hell to try and get to America. His homeland had been ravaged by war. Separated from his family, he escaped on a small boat overflowing with ninety other refugees. Not long into the voyage, the boat lost its course and floated aimlessly on the ocean currents. During this time, the passengers around

him grew desperately hungry and thirsty. Gradually they began to get sick and die. The smell of diarrhea and vomit was inescapable. Sam felt his own death near but managed to stay alive. Nineteen days later, the boat miraculously beached on the shore of another country and Sam found safety and nourishment in a refugee camp. Nine months after that, he immigrated to the United States, where he eventually rejoined his family.

Sam is now a life coach that encourages his clients to "wake themselves up" by adopting rigorous paths of personal and spiritual growth. Sam said he sometimes recommends Ayahuasca to his clients, but strongly encourages them to complete a ten-day Vipassana meditation retreat first. Vipassana is a Buddhist meditation tradition that cultivates awareness of body sensations. Vipassana retreats are like spiritual boot camps. Participants commit to complete silence, a vegetarian diet, and a strict regimen of communal meditation for ten days in a row. Advanced retreats last a month or more.

Sam had been a committed Vipassana meditator for fifteen years before he finally allowed himself to participate in an Ayahuasca ceremony. He shared that he wanted his meditation practice to be "strong" and "steady" so he could properly integrate the lessons that he gained into his everyday life and avoid getting "lost." At the time of the interview, Sam said it had been five years since he first drank Ayahuasca, and in those five years, he said he had participated in about twenty Ayahuasca ceremonies.

Purging trauma

During Sam's second or third Ayahuasca ceremony, he was eager and ambitious. Although Sam thought he had worked through the trauma of his experience so many years before on the boat, he was aware that when he connected with memories of the experience, they still felt very "cerebral." Sam had learned from his meditation experience in the Vipassana tradition that

trauma from past experience is held in the body. So, with the intuition that there still might be more work to be done around healing this trauma, he enthusiastically requested that "Mama" (one of his names for Ayahuasca) help him to purge his past trauma.

However, the cavalier tone that Sam carried into the ceremony changed drastically once he moved deeper into the Ayahuasca experience. When he began to vividly reexperience the trauma of his suffering on the refugee boat he began begging for mercy. The rest of that night, and for *four consecutive days after the ceremony*, Sam was convinced he was going to die. He lay alone in his bed at home with an intense fever. He was vomiting a lot and barely able to breathe.

Sam described two parts of his brain that were both trying to make sense of what was going on for him. One part knew that this was the medicine working on him, bringing him into contact with really difficult sensations in his body and gut that he had been avoiding for years. The other part of his brain was very afraid, thinking maybe he was poisoned, maybe he was really sick and actually dying. Eventually Sam said after four days "the medicine just cooled down" and the sickness ended. He shared that the experience now feels like it happened in another life and that he no longer carries that "trauma" in his body. He said he feels "very grateful" for that.

Sam organizes his understanding of this challenging experience around the concept of purging. The purge, which included both fever and vomiting, was a visceral embodiment of his emotional and psychological trauma. Sam believed his trauma was stored in his "gut," with sensations, smells, and memories all bound together. He said Ayahuasca helped him to access it and move it out of his body. As we saw above, this belief was grounded in Vipassana meditation philosophy. However, with this Ayahuasca experience, philosophy became lived experience.

During his purge, Sam felt the trauma emerge on a physical level and work its way through his body until it finally "cooled down" and was gone.

Divine paradox

The embodied nature of Sam's challenging Ayahuasca experience was repeated during a subsequent ceremony. At the beginning of this ceremony, Sam asked "Mama" Ayahuasca for an experience of the "divine feminine." The "divine feminine" as Sam uses the term, is similar to an archetype, or non-corporeal force and presence that is a composite of the most quintessential female attributes and experiences. Sam asked for this because he was curious what the feminine experience would feel like in his body. He naively imagined that it would be beautiful.

Instead, Sam shared that the Ayahuasca ceremony became a "horrible, hellish experience" of his own birth from his mother's womb. He described being suffocated and completely blinded as he moved down the birth canal. While in the middle of this intense suffering, Sage (the leader of the ceremony) came over to him and asked him to sing a song for the group. Although he had no idea whose voice it was or where it was coming from, he heard himself agree. There was a quiet anticipation in the room, but when he finally managed to open his mouth to sing, instead of the calming lullaby that he intended, what emerged was a blood curdling scream. Sam said the whole room shook in surprise and fright. Even while Sam was screaming at the top of his lungs, in his altered state, he still believed that he was singing a lullaby. It wasn't until Sage came over and alerted him that he was not singing, but screaming, that his conscious mind was finally able to grasp what was going on.

This overwhelming bodily experience of being squeezed through the birth canal was not only "horrible and hellish." Side by side with what Sam described as the terror of being born, was a quality of both divinity and liberation. He described how the "visceral" experience of

death *and* life were happening concurrently in a way that he was both "terrifying and liberating." Normally opposing poles of feeling and experience were paradoxically comingling.

What came next for Sam in this Ayahuasca ceremony contained a similar paradox. The roles reversed, and now Sam became the "divine feminine" having the experience of giving birth to the child. In this role, Sam felt completely out of control. His body began shaking, vibrating and jerking uncontrollably. At the time he did not understand what was happening and felt terrified. In retrospect, he feels that the shaking was part of a "Kundalini experience" that was freeing blocked energies in his body.

Resistance vs. surrender

In the midst of the terrifying and uncontrollable shaking that Sam experienced while giving birth, he managed to find the courage to release his desire for control and surrender into the intensity of the experience. This release of resistance led to a critical shift in the tone of his experience from terror to beauty and joy. Although Sam continued to feel the intense vibrations and shaking in his body, his relationship to them changed. He now understood them differently as the "pure energy" of the "divine feminine," "vibrating through everything," and creating all life. This shift allowed the intense bodily experience to be welcomed and allowed rather than rejected. And after this surrender, what had been terrifying became pleasurable and joyful. This shift from resistance to surrender, also released a purge of tears and snot which flowed from Sam's body "like a river or stream of water coming out." In reflecting back on that experience, Sam described it with the same paradoxical conjunction of opposing emotions, "pure grief, sorrow, or fear . . . and then also just pure joy of being alive." Surrendering to the experience of the divine vibrations, doesn't seem to have eliminated all challenging emotions, but rather allowed the full spectrum of emotions to emerge concurrently. The boundaries between terror

and joy, grief and pleasure began to dissolve. Sam declared that he believed all Ayahuasca experiences are challenging, but that the greatest source of suffering comes from resisting the experience.

Sam's challenging experience of the "divine feminine" included themes of paradox as well as resistance versus surrender. These themes are intimately related and weave in and out of one another. The visceral intensity of the Ayahuasca experience evoked fear and resistance in Sam. Ultimately Sam said he understood his resistance as a fear of death, a fear of the unknown. Beauty, pleasure and joy emerged from the terror when Sam stopped resisting the intense bodily convulsions that he was experiencing. When he surrendered to the experience, beauty and joy could emerge from within the intensity. In the territory where Sam felt closest to death, he was paradoxically closer to a deeper and more profoundly meaningful experience of life.

Improved relationships

Towards the end of my interview with Sam, I asked him a general question about how his Ayahuasca experiences had affected his life. Sam responded that the two most salient changes in his life were improvements in his relationship with his mother and father. He tied the improvement in his relationship with his mother directly to the experience of the "divine feminine." He said that after he had experienced what his mother had gone through to give birth to him, he no longer had any judgements about the way she was living her life. He explained that he had judged his mother for not working or doing something with her life. She would constantly play cards with her friends. His Ayahuasca experiences helped him to realize that what she had been through and accomplished in her life was already more than most people. What she had accomplished in her life, he couldn't do in several lifetimes.

Sam also described improvements in his relationship with his father. Sam shared that during another Ayahuasca ceremony he asked Ayahuasca for an experience of the "divine masculine." Although this experience does not fall into the category of a "challenging" Ayahuasca experience, it remains pertinent to the discussion as a part of the way Sam made meaning of his challenging Ayahuasca experiences. At one point during that ceremony, Sam saw his father as a little boy. For thirty years Sam said that he kept as far away as he could from his father and was unable to really feel love or compassion for him. But experiencing his father as a little boy during that Ayahuasca ceremony, Sam said he was able to feel love and compassion for the little boy and the "pain and devastation" that he had experienced. It's not as though everything got better overnight. Sam admitted that he still gets triggered by his father at times, but now he doesn't run away and does not judge him the way he used to.

Crossing the ocean of the unknown

Sam holds the belief that everyone has to face suffering, fear and the specter of death at some point in their lives. He believes these difficult experiences have the potential to offer meaning and a sense of expansive possibility. He equated this belief to the teachings of the Buddha and Jesus, who both offered the wisdom that life's suffering has the potential to facilitate growth and transformation. Sam said he's grateful that he crossed the "ocean of the unknown" early. For him it was a literal ocean crossing on a boat crammed full of refugees. And as horrific as that experience was for him, he said that it prepared him for his life. Sam suggested that challenging Ayahuasca experiences offer individuals the opportunity to "cross the terrifying territory of our psyche" in such a way that the experience can be held in a safe container and meaning making can be facilitated.

Alicia: Story and themes

After driving an hour and a half out to the coast from the airport, I pulled into the driveway of what seemed like a vacation home just a few blocks from the ocean. Alicia came out onto the deck and waved as I gathered my things and got out of the car. It was a cool and sunny spring morning. The coastal air was fresh and invigorating. It felt good to see Alicia again after almost a decade. Years before, we had attended the same school, but hadn't kept in touch since then. I was surprised to see her name on the contact list provided to me by Sage. Although we had never conversed about Ayahuasca before, we were excited to engage around a topic that was now of deep interest to us both.

Alicia and her husband had graciously invited me to stay the night, so I was expecting to see them all, but her husband and daughter had vacated the house to give us some space and privacy for the interview. As we reacquainted ourselves, she gave me a tour of the warm, sunlit house. The main room had vaulted ceilings, with a wall of windows looking out towards the ocean sparkling in the distance. In one corner of the living room an array of microphones and speakers seemed arranged for a house concert. Alicia explained that her husband was an amateur musician, and often practiced and performed for the family. She expressed how lucky she felt to have found an affordable place so close to the ocean. Proximity to the ocean had become imperative for Alicia, since she had discovered that the coastal environment was the only place she could walk without the support of her crutches.

For years, Alicia had been practically bedbound, with a rare combination of genetic, immune, and neurological conditions whose symptoms mimicked multiple sclerosis. The severity of her condition fluctuated. Back then, a single trip outside could cause a flare up that would send her back to bed for days. She said the pain she experienced during that time period

was like an incessant physical assault. Her skin could be so sensitive that even a calm breeze or a light loving touch would cause her to recoil. In the early years of her sickness, she needed help getting her own clothes on or getting out of the bed and into the bathroom. At one point her thinking was so clouded that she couldn't even remember her mother's name. On good days she could get around on forearm crutches. The rest of the time she was in a wheelchair or lying in bed. However, all that changed when she came to the ocean for the first time since getting sick.

This all came as a great surprise to me. When I had last seen Alicia, she was much the same as she was now, bubbling with energy and showing no signs of difficulty moving around. As we sank down into a couple of brown leather couches with the coastal sun streaming through the windows, Alicia shared challenging experiences from three unique Ayahuasca ceremonies, as well as the stories of how those experiences transformed her in unexpected ways.

Ocean healing

The Ayahuasca experience that set Alicia's healing in motion came after attending many Ayahuasca ceremonies with Sage, in the same place, with a similar group of people each time. She felt comfortable and safe with them. Before this particular ceremony, she set the intention to gain insights about how to be a good parent to her daughter. Alicia explained that she had spent her daughter's whole life trying to figure out how to do things better than her own parents. She wanted her daughter to have confidence, a strong voice, and healthy boundaries. These were things that Alicia felt she did not have when she was sexually assaulted by a family friend at age eleven. Now her daughter was that same age and Alicia was full of concern and apprehension for her daughter's safety. She did not trust her daughter's father (her ex-husband) who had sexually assaulted and physically abused her during their marriage. The "Me Too" movement was also in full swing at that time and tales of sexual abuse were all over the media. On top of

that, Alicia couldn't leave the house because of her mysterious illness. Although at that point she was doing okay inside of her house, if she stepped outside, even for five minutes, it could be enough environmental exposure to make her sick and bed bound again. Alicia's daughter had a whole life beyond the door of their house, that Alicia felt she could not be a part of and therefore could not protect her daughter from.

Alicia carried all of this history and anxiety into the Ayahuasca ceremony. She said she made prayers to "Mama" (Alicia's name for Ayahuasca) asking for guidance about raising her daughter and keeping her safe from harm. Halfway through the ceremony the facilitator, Sage, sang a song that was very special to Alicia and her family. It was one that her current husband often played on his guitar and sang to her daughter as a lullaby. The song was about a flowering medicinal plant called Bobinsana, which is sacred to the indigenous people of the Amazon basin. While Sage was singing the song in the ceremony, Alicia had an experience of what she referred to as the "deity/spirit" of Bobinsana. She said this big spirit was hovering over her and then moved into her body and blessed her. She said she wept at the beauty and love of the experience. Bobinsana communicated the message to Alicia that she loves both her *and* her daughter, and that the healing that Alicia was receiving was also for her daughter. Bobinsana communicated that she loves and is supporting Alicia's daughter and promised to look after her as she grows up into a woman. The vision seemed such a perfect answer to Alicia's prayers that she began to doubt it. She asked Bobinsana if the experience was real or just her imagination. She immediately felt a swelling in her heart and heard the words "NEVER question or doubt the reality of this" over and over. Bobinsana assured Alicia that she has *always* loved her and that she would show her exactly what she meant by this.

At that point the experience shifted, and Alicia saw herself as a little girl playing in the tidepools near her family's favorite beach in California. She realized that because of all of the time she had spent there as a child, singing to the ocean and pretending she was a mermaid or a dolphin, she had formed a connection to the ocean "deity." She went on to explain that she saw how that relationship subsequently protected her from the dysfunction in her family as well as the "perils of adolescence."

Again, the experience shifted. Instead of the beauty of the connection she had formed in her childhood, Alicia saw with horror and dread how her own daughter did not have a connection with the natural world to support her through hard times. She did not have wild places to play where she lived. Alicia said that she "panicked, and trembled, and sobbed and bawled" because she felt like a "failure" for not providing this connection for her daughter. She saw how in contrast to her own childhood, her daughter's childhood had been hard, largely lacking in joy and play. Alicia described feeling shame and regret for not having introduced her daughter to the ocean which she considered like a "mother" to her. She "wept and wept with grief and guilt."

Eventually, the emotional tone of the ceremony circled back around to Bobinsana's promise of love for both Alicia *and* her daughter. She wept with gratitude for the promise of love and tending for her daughter. And this gratitude spurred her into action. According to Alicia, seeing her own intimate relationship with the ocean as a child juxtaposed with the absence of any similar connection in her daughter's life, fueled her "motivation, passion, fire and drive" to overcome her serious physical limitations and bring her daughter to the ocean for the first time.

It took Alicia about four months to make the arrangements to get her and her daughter back to the same beach that she had visited so many times as a child. But when she finally made it there, she made a profound discovery. Mysteriously, being near the ocean had a miraculous healing effect on her body. When she was near the ocean her condition cleared and she could walk! Within the first day of being at the beach, Alicia no longer depended on her wheelchair. She was able to use her arm crutches to walk across the sand. By day four, she was only using one crutch to help her get down to the beach.

Soon after returning home from the trip, Alicia's ability to move on her own deteriorated and a month later she was bed bound again. She thought she must have done something wrong, but her husband encouraged her to return to the ocean, and when she did her condition again improved remarkably. Alicia began to make pilgrimages to the ocean every four to eight weeks. When she'd get sick enough, she'd return to the ocean for a reset. Eventually her husband changed jobs so he could work remotely. They moved the whole family and rented a house right by the ocean. That set Alicia on a positive healing trajectory that she was still riding when I came out for the interview. There were no wheelchairs or crutches in sight. She walked with ease and buoyancy. I would never have suspected she had been wheelchair bound not so long before.

Non-human relationships

This is a sweeping story, one that spans many years. But at the core of the story are the challenging moments during the Ayahuasca ceremony when Alicia confronted her daughter's *lack* of a deep connection with the ocean, or any other wild place. Alicia said she experienced how alone, isolated and frightened her daughter was. This realization devastated Alicia. She was reminded how the relationship that she formed with the ocean as a child was critical to her

ability to be able to make it through the most trying moments of her adolescence. When Alicia was much older and physically handicapped, her relationship with the ocean helped her find physical healing. Alicia's reconnection with the ocean would likely not have happened if it wasn't for the Ayahuasca ceremony, and the relationships that Alicia had cultivated with the ocean, with Ayahuasca, and with Bobinsana.

Similar to other participants, Alicia talks about her relationship with Ayahuasca using the same language she would use if she was talking about a relationship with another human. She refers to Ayahuasca alternatively as "Medicine" and "Mama." She also describes the ocean, Bobinsana, and Ayahuasca as personal "deities." Her relationship with the ocean was cultivated as a child, her relationship with "Mama" Ayahuasca was cultivated over the course of many ceremonies as an adult, and she described her relationship with Bobinsana as having been nurtured by her husband singing the song of Bobinsana in their house over and over again. Alicia and her family had been cultivating their relationship with Bobinsana in this way for many years, and the culmination of that relationship came during this Ayahuasca ceremony when Sage sang the song of Bobinsana and ushered in the experience of Bobinsana healing Alicia's reproductive organs.

Alicia describes the loving presence that she encountered during that ceremony as a "she," but explains that the presence she experienced was an intertwining and overlapping between Bobinsana and the ocean. She said they both belong to "a force" much bigger than the sum of its parts. Later on, in the interview, Alicia explained that she sees a connection between Bobinsana (which grows along riverbanks in the Amazon) and the ocean because all of the waters of the world are linked. For Alicia, the common link of water establishes a fundamental equivalence between Bobinsana and the ocean of her childhood.

Although the boundaries between these non-human beings are fluid, the effects of Alicia's relationship with them are profound. She came into the Ayahuasca ceremony asking for support in raising her daughter. She received "warmth, gentleness and love" along with having her reproductive organs "blessed" and "healed." After that, she was given a clear insight into her daughter's suffering and isolation. While the realization of her daughter's suffering was very hard for Alicia to endure, in the end it gave her the motivation to get her daughter to the ocean so her daughter could also get to know these non-human beings that already knew and loved her. Alicia admitted that she has "too much martyr" in her to have made the trek to the ocean for her own healing. She credits "Medicine" (Ayahuasca) with knowing how to get around her mental blocks. Looking back on the path which led her to being able to walk unassisted again, she attributed it to her special relationship with "Medicine."

Just like any intimate human relationship, Alicia's relationship with Ayahuasca is complicated. She admitted that her rapport with "Medicine" isn't always expressed in warmth and tenderness. There is often a tough love quality to the relationship as well. Like a warm but exacting therapist with clairvoyant capacities, Ayahuasca helped Alicia to see past her own defenses, and highlight the places in her life that need her attention.

Although Alicia's physical healing was quite striking, her daughter's growth was apparent as well. In the short time they had been living near the ocean, Alicia's daughter had also begun to form the kind of intimate relationships non-human beings that were so important to Alicia. In the evening after the interview, when her husband and daughter had returned home, we all took a walk down to the ocean. It was clear from watching her daughter that she had already begun to form a beautiful relationship with the ocean and the wild creatures of the coastal ecosystem. As we explored the tide pools, she educated random strangers about how to

avoid stepping on the fragile sea anemones hidden among the rocks. And on the way back, she showed me how she had made such good friends with the local rabbits that they would let her walk right up and pet them. When I attempted to do the same, I couldn't get within ten feet before they spooked and bounded away. Alicia was proud of her daughter and happy to be spending more quality time with her beyond the walls of their home.

Alicia's non-human relationships helped her to heal the physical and psychological traumas from past unhealthy human relationships (especially with men) and showed her that a web or network of these relationships has supported her in invisible ways since she was a child. These relationships also helped Alicia to clearly see her daughter's isolation and gave her a clear path to weaving her daughter back into this relational net in a way that may help cushion the pain of challenging adolescent relationships yet to come.

Surrender into death

Alicia's first Ayahuasca ceremony happened long before she became a mother and struggled through her mysterious illness. She recalled that her first ceremony made her so terrified that she only tried Ayahuasca once more and then took a break for ten years. Alicia's first ceremony was *not* facilitated by Sage (who presided over all of the other ceremonies described in this study). And according to Alicia, her first two ceremonies lacked the feeling of physical and psychological safety that she would later discover in Sage's ceremonies. The lack of adequate safety and support may have precipitated some of the more challenging aspects of Alicia's first Ayahuasca ceremony, but reflecting back on her experience, Alicia emphasized that in spite of the challenges, her first experience brought an enduring sense of strength and meaning into her life.

At the time of her first Ayahuasca ceremony, Alicia was in her 20's. She had read a book about psychedelic plant medicines but hadn't had any other exposure. While she was invited to the ceremony by a friend, her friend was also a novice and did not know much more than Alicia. When they arrived at the ceremony space, the room was packed with people. A thin woven rug was the only protection from the hard, concrete floor. No blankets or pillows were provided. The circle of participants was so tight that although they were told not to touch the person next to them, it was impossible to sit cross-legged without overlapping knees with the people on both sides.

Once the ceremony began, each participant came up to the facilitator and drank their dose of Ayahuasca individually. Alicia shared that it took so long to get around the circle that some people had already begun purging (vomiting) before she was even served. After she drank her cup, she returned to her seat and waited patiently for something to happen. Nothing happened. She thought she must be doing something wrong. So, when the facilitators offered a second dose, she went up to get more. The second dose was even bigger than the first. Before she even made it back to her seat, Alicia was flooded with a feeling of intoxication combined with an overwhelming sense of doom. Alicia realized that she was likely just starting to feel the first dose, which meant that when the second dose registered in her system she would be completely overwhelmed. She became certain she had overdosed and that she was going to die. She worked hard at resisting all of the overwhelming sensations. Although Alicia focused all of her attention on trying to stay present, sober, and sane, she got dizzier and was buffeted by wave after wave of nausea.

Alicia was convinced that she was dying, but it did not even occur to her to ask for help. She fantasized that the hosts of the ceremony would have to explain to her family how she had

died, and she worried that they and her friend would be in serious trouble. At some point she started to realize that both she and everyone else had signed up for this experience, and it wouldn't be her problem if they got in trouble with the law for killing her cause she'd be dead! In fact, she knew going into this experience that one of the names for Ayahuasca was the "death medicine." She asked herself, "Do you think you're going to keep yourself from dying if you took too much death medicine? Good luck with that!"

Eventually, through all of her discomfort, Alicia courageously surrendered to whatever was going to happen. In the exact moment she surrendered, Alicia said she felt a crack of thunder coming from both inside and outside her body. She perceived the cog of a huge clock like a bronze axe which came down and split her cranium wide open with a deafening CRACK! She felt as though she were spinning and tumbling like a pinwheel while at the same time sensing an eruption from her gashed open spine that spiraled up and down at the same time. Alicia realized that she was a seed that was both sprouting and rooting simultaneously. She felt herself shooting up through miles of dark soil until she broke out into a light which completely blinded her. It all took place in a single instant yet felt to Alicia like an eternity. Her body was gone, and the light was all there was. And then as quickly as it had appeared, the light was gone and there was just darkness and silence. Alicia thought she was on the "other side" of death. Alicia floated in the nothingness, without a body, without feeling or sensation, without fear, without thoughts. Just the observation of "sweet" nothingness. As Alicia was sharing this moment, her voice cracked with emotion and dropped to a whisper. She described how everything was beautiful and she knew that everything she had ever worried about was going to be okay. Then out of the nothingness, she smelled something she thought might be smoke. She saw a distant "warm glow, far away, blurry, like an ember of coals in the dark." As the vision

became clearer, she realized it wasn't a distant fire, but a "nursery of golden stars, or a galaxy shimmering." In this star nursery she felt "warmth, wonder, awe . . . and then this sense of love, rightness, no judgment." Alicia said she had no fear. She was sure that she had died, but that everything was going to be okay. She thought of her family and how she would miss them. She wanted to share this experience with them and she knew that someday she would. Then the galaxy faded, and Alicia returned to darkness. Gradually some stars returned moving like "pin pricks of light on dark fabric." Eventually the motions took form and she saw two "void-skinned, star covered people embrace one another." She marveled at their beauty as they kissed, caressed and held one another.

Then all of a sudden, Alicia was "rudely awakened" into a hot room full of people vomiting all around her. She said that everything stank, and her body hurt. She realized she hadn't died after all and she remembered everything that had just happened in the place beyond death. She longed for that space again, where she loved herself, loved the darkness, the stillness and the star couple. She realized that she was no longer afraid to die. Then the nausea took over and she vomited again and again, "weeping at the beauty of the memory, and for [her] own present discomfort."

Though she tried, she never found her way back to the stars or the void that night. Alicia shared that the powerful vision that followed her surrender to death gave her a strong sense of her own spirituality, as well as self-awareness, security, strength. It conveyed to her the knowledge of a "life of sorts" beyond death and the preciousness of being alive. When we spoke over a decade after that first ceremony, Alicia felt like she was still working to integrate that first Ayahuasca vision.

In the story of Alicia's very first Ayahuasca ceremony, there is the phase before Alicia's psychic death process and then there is everything that comes after. The challenging experience at the crux point between these two phases was Alicia's struggle with and resistance against dying. Although Alicia was not at risk of physical death, in the non-ordinary state that Alicia was in, she was convinced that she was actually going to die. Therefore, from a psychological point of view, Alicia was in an existential struggle between life and death. And she was terrified. For a long time, Alicia resisted dying with all her strength. And then, in a critical and decisive moment, she made a conscious decision to "LET GO" and "Surrender." The moment she surrendered to the unknown, her experiential field shifted, and she went through a dying process that included her body being split open like a germinating seed. She felt her roots shooting down into the soil and the sprout spiraling up through the dark earth and breaking open into the light.

Alicia's psychic surrender into death then led her out among the stars where she discovered a profound sense of equanimity, calm acceptance, and a universal love. The most challenging aspect of the ceremony for Alicia wasn't the dying itself, but the resistance to, and fear of death. Once she let go and released towards death, she moved quickly through a transformation which allowed her to escape the miserable, suffering confines of her physical body. She was no longer in the room with all of the other people. Instead, she was encountering what she later felt were universal truths about life after death, where everything was okay, where she felt no fear and a sense of love was pervasive. After returning to her vomiting body, Alicia no longer experienced resistance. She said that she no longer feared death and that she now held a perspective on her challenges as "comedic . . . in a gentle, sweet loving way." From this challenging and ecstatic ceremony, Alicia carried a sense of the preciousness of her life as well as a newfound feeling of strength and security which prepared her for the trials ahead. Alicia

shared that nothing else prepared her for the long and difficult labor of her daughter's birth like that first Ayahuasca ceremony.

Alicia shared that she also saw a direct correlation between her experience of confronting death during her first ceremony and her later experience of confronting mortality when she thought she was dying in the early years of her sickness. The struggle with death that she went through in that first ceremony helped her make the decision to continue to cultivate the life she wanted to live even in the face of her debilitating and potentially fatal illness. Alicia described how this lesson was brought home to her in a different Ayahuasca ceremony over a decade after her first but still well before her healing at the beach. During this ceremony, she had a vision of an elderly indigenous woman performing a traditional healing on her by shaking medicinal leaves in a rhythmic pattern over her body. Alicia pointed out to the woman where she was feeling the pain in her body, but the woman ignored her and did not address the areas Alicia felt needed healing. Alicia persisted and again told the woman where she ought to be focusing her attention. At that point Alicia said, the woman grew angry and got right up in her face and told her that healing doesn't have anything to do with hurting or not hurting and that her task was to be the person she wanted to be no matter how she felt. At the time, this was hard advice for Alicia to swallow. She wanted so desperately for Ayahuasca to heal her of her debilitating physical illness. Although this is eventually what transpired, at this point in her journey, Alicia had a different lesson she needed to learn. She shared that she learned that not all wounds get healed and that she needed to figure out who she wanted to be in the world in spite of her pain.

At the time, Alicia feared that her disease would kill her. Accepting the bitter wisdom of the old woman's advice, Alicia began to consider how to fulfill her purpose in the world despite her suffering. She began to engage in advocacy work for people that were suffering from the

same rare disorder that had upended her life. She built a Facebook page to help disseminate information and built a grassroots network. She did most of the work remotely from her bed but at times she got into her wheelchair and traveled to give trainings on her rare condition to doctors and local government officials, all from the confines of a wheelchair. Reflecting back on the ways that her challenging Ayahuasca experiences helped her to navigate her challenging life experiences, Alicia said, "You have to confront your mortality if you're really going to live."

Max: Story and themes

It was a crisp fall morning when I stepped out of the Uber and scanned the row houses along the street for Max's address. I found it and knocked on a shared door. A solidly built Caucasian man with tall, wavy hair opened the door and introduced himself. I followed Max up the stairs to his apartment. He led me straight to the living room and offered to make me some tea. I sat down on a chair near the window and pulled out my recording equipment. The living room had a cozy, well-inhabited feel. The video game console suggested the presence of kids. I heard Max talking quietly with his wife in the kitchen. When he came back in with the tea, I asked for directions to the bathroom. I almost opened the door to Max's sleeping teenage daughter's room, but he warned me just in the nick of time. Back in the living room, Max settled into the chair next to mine. Two steaming cups of tea sat on the small table between us. Max shifted in his chair and seemed eager, if a bit nervous. I said a few things to orient the discussion and Max suggested that it was important to him to give context to his challenging experiences by starting from the beginning of his story. I told him he should feel free to lead the way.

Max explained that he grew up in a "dysfunctional" family and had a "troubled childhood." His family joined the Mormon church when he was eleven or twelve. Max assured me that there were some good things about his experience in the church. Early on, he met new

friends, including girls, and had fun in the Boy Scouts. However, by the time he was sixteen, Max had become a huge fan of rock and roll. He began to emulate David Bowie, by wearing makeup and generally acting in ways that were not deemed appropriate by the Mormon church. They kicked him out in an act they called "disfellowship." Max insisted that although he was sad to go, he was already on his way out anyway and left on a "happy note."

Max said he did not do well in high school and spent his summers traveling with the county fair. After graduating, he got into drugs as well as rock and roll and traveled around playing music in different bands for most of his 20's and 30's. The thing that finally pulled him out of this "crazy, wild" lifestyle was meeting his wife, a children's librarian. They married and had two children. As a married man, Max matured in a lot of ways, but he was still abusing cannabis. When his son turned one, he decided it was time to get sober. He tried Narcotics Anonymous (NA) but did not like it. He never went back but still managed to quit "cold turkey" all on his own. Having maintained sobriety for few years, Max still felt there was something wrong with him. He returned to NA made his way through the 12-step program. Max said this process helped him to "unhook a bunch of things," get some "clarity" and work on himself. As a part of this "self-help rearranging movement" Max got interested in Buddhism, Taoism and the work of Alan Watts.

During this period of self-discovery and spiritual growth, Max heard about Ayahuasca and began investigating it. He said he felt like Ayahuasca was "calling" to him, but he was on the fence about whether he wanted to try it until the drummer in his old band told him that he had just come back from drinking Ayahuasca in Peru. Max was blown away to discover that his friend had already participated in around fifty Ayahuasca ceremonies. Max admitted to his

friend that he was "terrified" to do it even once. His friend assured him that Ayahuasca is not addictive.

Max made the decision to try Ayahuasca, but his fear did not subside. Before his first ceremony, he described begging "Mother Ayahuasca" to be gentle with him and not scare him. Max described her response as putting him on her knee and saying, "We're just gonna watch the ceremony from here." From that vantage point, Max said he was able to be a part of everyone else's experience in a way that wasn't frightening for him. He described it as a "mystical experience." He said he felt like he was being "eased" into his relationship with Ayahuasca. Max said Ayahuasca keeps him "just outside the comfort zone." Looking back, he said it was "awfully nice of her to not scare me away." Max described subsequent ceremonies in which Ayahuasca helped him to reevaluate how he has lived and how he's treated other people. Max shared that examining his past life in this way involves "challenging moments" and that he is "constantly weeping during the whole ceremony."

Purging negative beliefs

Max shared that the most challenging parts of his Ayahuasca ceremonies come when he is purging or vomiting. Max also described his purging experiences as "incredible" and "magical." While in the purge, Max said he usually has "clear visions," which "thrill and frighten" him at the same time. Max shared that he did not have a real purge until his fourth ceremony when he purged "this idea of . . . the man that I was expected to be."

Max elaborated that he always felt that he wasn't the type of son that his parents wanted, especially his father. This was really hard for him, especially in his childhood years. During this ceremony, Max said there was a "little me" part of him that was resisting letting go into the purge. When the purge finally came, he described it as a "very big purge." As he was throwing

up, he saw a vision of a chalice "like the holy grail cup" tip over and blood came "rolling out" and down some stairs. As the blood was flowing down the stairs, bright orange clouds opened up "like the heavens." He said it looked a lot like the dynamic skies in works by the famous painter Maxfield Parrish. While Max recognized this as a "real Christian vision," he clarified that he is not a "hard-core Christian" and that was the only Christian vision he has ever had.

Max described another purging experience when he let go of what he called the "I CAN'T." This was the weight of all the negative beliefs about himself that Max carried around in his life. He said that once he purged that "nasty energy" he was full of relief and gratitude. He heard "Mother" Ayahuasca say "This one will creep back in if you don't change some habits."

Max said that the "nasty energy" that he purges, sometimes comes out looking like "creatures," "demons," or "deities." He described them as otherworldly creatures he has seen depicted in other cultures. Max named one of the creatures the "not getting enough in life creature." He explained that when he experienced them during his purge, they were trying to stay inside of him and scare him. Max said these creatures can be "scary" and hard to look at and that he always feels better when he can "feel them leaving."

In addition to purging his own negative experiences, actions and thoughts, Max described purging for other people in the Ayahuasca ceremony group as well. He described feeling like he was a "colon" for the whole group. Max explained that during the ceremony he felt like he was connecting to a past life when he had been a Native American healer who purged for others in the same way. As Max described these experiences, he acted them out. He cocked his head sideways onto his shoulder and stuck his arm straight out perpendicular to his body. Gurgling vomiting noises bubbled from his throat. Max was showing me the shape and sounds of his body

as he became the conduit through which others could find relief. Max said he felt "content" as he moved the hard experiences of others through his own body, and heard the words "becoming part of the vine."

When I asked Max what it was like being the "colon" for the group, he said that it reminded him of the work he does as a maintenance man in a woman's rehabilitation center. There, he said he "fixes a lot of toilets" and cleans things. He described being up to his elbows in "dirt and grit and BS and everything." Although it might not be a job many people desire or are cut out for, Max said he loves the work and that he feels like a "secret agent of goodness." He loves helping the people there and he feels that they treat him very well. For Max, the maintenance man work is an external manifestation of the purging work that he does for other people in Ayahuasca ceremonies. He said when he is in ceremonies doing this work, he hears a voice in his head that says, "always the maintenance man."

Healing family relationships

Max also feels that Ayahuasca has helped him to be a better father, husband, and all-around better person. He shared about a time when he was having a hard time with his son. Max admitted that his son doesn't always live up to the expectations and hopes that he has for him. However, due to Max's experience of purging his own father's misguided expectations, he recognized a similar compulsion to judge his son in the same painful manner that he had been judged by his father. Max was able to take a step back from the intergenerational relational pattern and remind himself to stay involved and connected with his son.

Max shared other ways that his Ayahuasca experiences have made him less self-centered. He shared that he often went into his Ayahuasca ceremonies with "selfish intentions," wanting to reconnect with himself and find inspiration for making art. However, he said that Ayahuasca

was always "flippant" about his selfish desires and instead turned his attention continually back towards his family.

Purging negative thought patterns along with hard experiences from his childhood seems to have opened up space for Max to appreciate his family and be more present and engaged with them. Max said that after purging "bad things" that have happened in his life, Ayahuasca turns him towards his family and he feels grateful for them, the life he has led, and the person he has become. Max said Ayahuasca showed him that when people witness his family getting along so well, they are affected by the positive "vibration." During one ceremony, at the culmination point of gratitude and love, Max described having a vision of a "big blobby cross kind of thing" with carnival lights and jewels flashing in a "heavenly place." He likened it to a "pinball machine going like 'you won! You won!'"

Not only have Max's Ayahuasca experiences guided him towards becoming a better father and husband, they have also given him a sense of wanting to live life in way that will prepare himself for death. Max said he has the feeling that a part of himself may live on after he dies, and how he acts towards others and how he comports himself in the face of life's challenges determines the quality or essence of himself that may transcend death. As a consequence, Max said he tries to be more compassionate, patient, and not so quick to judge.

Meaning in suffering

Max described an Ayahuasca ceremony that hinted at the potential to find meaning inside of great suffering. Max said that during this ceremony he began ruminating on his father-in-law's struggle with Alzheimer's disease. This led him down a rabbit hole of thoughts about death and disease. He described getting closer and closer to discovering the point of fighting a battle that you can't win. Max said as he was "ping-ponging back and forth," and "shrinking

into it," when he saw a little orange colored "entity" with a large grin on its face. It was moving so fast back and forth there was a blurring effect that made it look like it had seven eyeballs and two noses. At this point the entity spoke to him and said, "this is where it gets tricky." The "entity" seemed to be offering assurance that there is meaning to such apparently meaningless suffering, but that one's job isn't to try to comprehend that meaning, but rather to meet the challenge, dig deep into oneself, and discover the resources to maintain a sense of personal dignity and honor even in the presence of deep suffering.

Hawk: Story and themes

Hawk was due to arrive on the subway from the outskirts of town and texted me saying he was going to be late. I was posted up in a coffee shop near our rendezvous point eating lunch and testing the recording equipment to see if I could filter out the background noise for the interview. The test failed. We would have another location for the interview. I finished my lunch and headed outside to wait for Hawk to arrive. When I first caught sight of him, I knew he was the one I was waiting for. In his late sixties, he looked like he had stepped right off of a Southwestern movie set. He wore a cowboy hat and boots, along with a brightly colored Pendleton wool jacket decorated with Native American patterns. A large silver buckle adorned the belt holding up his weathered jeans. Turquoise cuffs and native beadwork bracelets crowded his wrists. His scraggly shoulder length hair and gravelly voice rounded out the look.

Any apprehension I had about meeting up with a stranger in the middle of the big city melted away as Hawk spoke. He was eager to connect, earnest, and genuinely curious about my research. I told him that we couldn't record in the café and we wandered over to an adjacent park, choosing the most secluded bench we could find. Hawk told me he had come to the city to

attend a Native American film convention. For a couple of days straight, he had been sitting in a movie theatre throughout the day and sleeping in his car at night.

I offered Hawk an overview of my project. I explained to him that the interview would be fairly unguided, and I trusted that his story would emerge naturally. I offered him some Palo Santo to burn. He graciously accepted it and wafted the smoke over his body in a ritual gesture of purification that he was obviously very familiar with. I did the same. These were small but mutually meaningful gestures which brought us into a shared ritual space. There was a palpable shift in our rapport, and a deeper sense of comfort and trust seemed to emerge between us.

Hawk said he was born into a family where "reductive science" was a religion. His father was a petroleum geologist. His only sibling, a younger brother, was born with learning disabilities and Hawk felt that he was expected to raise. Although he thought his parents did not assume adequate responsibility for raising his younger brother, he said they made up for it later by helping Hawk to raise his own son, whose mother left not long after the birth. Hawk boasted proudly that his son, who was strongly influenced by his grandfather's affinity for the sciences, currently holds a PhD in physics and nanotechnology.

Hawk shared that, after years of working in a State Penitentiary, where he was in charge of "adult education," he is currently retired. He said he was currently keeping himself busy doing activist work for a small native tribe whose sacred ceremonial sites and water resources were being threatened. He explained that he spent both his employed and retired life "working with, teaching with, studying with, organizing with, in ceremonies with, and learning about and getting to know, Indian people of a number of different tribes." Hawk said "Indian people" had been like a second family to him when his own family dynamics had been challenging. He described his many enduring friendships as "rich medicine" for him and shared how he found

understanding and caring with his Native friends, especially the old women who adhered to old traditions of hospitality and would feed him when things were hard.

A child of the 60's, Hawk had long been familiar with psychedelic experiences. In his younger years he tried LSD, psilocybin mushrooms, and peyote. Later on, he participated in a number of "tipi meetings" with the Native American Church, which utilizes the peyote cactus as a psychedelic sacrament. Hawk said it was about thirty years ago that he had first been introduced to Ayahuasca. Since that time, he said he had participated in less than ten Ayahuasca ceremonies with three different ceremonial leaders in various places throughout Central and North America. It was only just a few years ago that a friend brought him to an Ayahuasca ceremony led by Sage, whom he now considers to be one of the top three "medicine" people that he has ever met.

It was during the first Ayahuasca ceremony he attended with Sage, three years prior to our interview, that Hawk had a challenging experience he was eager to share. He described how in the evening before the ceremony began he met with Sage and asked her if he could "psychically invite" a friend who was living across the country into the ceremony. Sage gave him permission. It turned out to be a fateful decision that Hawk said taught him to be more careful about "asking for insanity."

The friend that Hawk "psychically" invited into the Ayahuasca ceremony was a "younger woman, who was very beautiful, very funny, very crazy." He met her at a Native American Sundance ceremony. At the time, Hawk was going through what he called a "midlife crisis," and was "very smitten" with her although he said he "wasn't real optimistic" about the chance of a long-term relationship. The woman had Taino ancestry (Native people of the Caribbean), and grew up in Puerto Rico and New York City. He shared that she had some of the "most severe

PTSD" that he had ever witnessed, but that she was also "fearless in a crisis." Hawk described a time when she "picked up a chain and fought off a whole bike gang with her craziness." Hawk said she suffered a lot, and he felt that he had a calming influence on her.

Gaining insights into negative relational patterns

For Hawk, inviting this woman into the Ayahuasca ceremony meant that he asked Ayahuasca "to know and empathize" with her "trauma and anxiety." He got what he asked for and it was an extremely challenging experience for him. When recounting the experience, Hawk compared it to surfing as a young man, when he had been held under water for long periods of time. In the midst of the maelstrom, Hawk said Sage began to sing a song called *Tribu Tribu* ("tribu" is the Spanish word for tribe). It is a song that cycles through a similar melodic verse while listing off different native tribes of the Americas during each round. Already in the "throes of nausea and insanity," Hawk said that when the names of each tribe were sung, it "evoked" a "story of death and genocide" for him and he would "vomit more loudly and violently" with each subsequent name. Hawk was affected the most by connecting with and experiencing the mental and emotional struggles of his Taino friend, whose "craziness" he had asked to know more about. Hawk said he felt like he experienced her mental illness. Not in a second-hand or derivative way, but by directly becoming "crazy" himself. He described it as a "severe traumatic experience."

Although Hawk felt like the challenging experience ultimately gave him some "resilience" that he had not had since he was a young surfer wrestling waves, he also shared that he learned to be more careful about what he asked for in Ayahuasca ceremonies. An important lesson that Hawk said he learned from this challenging experience was about his "entwinement and co-dependency" with his Taino friend. He elaborated on this by adding that he had a

tendency to give himself "too much over to another person's psyche." This often looked like going along with whatever was asked of him or given to him without questioning whether or not it was right or good for him. From this learning experience, Hawk said he realized that he had the "tools" to take responsibility for asserting himself and to begin doing "a little steering" both in his life and in future Ayahuasca ceremonies.

Hawk shared two other important times in his life when he had avoided taking responsibility and asserting his own agency. One time was in his relationship with the mother of his son. He described it as a "rebound" relationship with a woman who was "very damaged" and really wanted to have a baby. They were only physically intimate a few times, and she assured him that she was taking birth control. This wasn't true, and she got pregnant. Hawk said that for a period of time he felt "somewhat tricked" but now accepts that what happened was also his responsibility.

Another time he did not manage to assert his own agency was when he was asked by a Native woman to join in a Sundance at the last minute. Sundance is a yearly ceremony that involves intense self-sacrifice on the part of the dancers, who dance for many hours or even days at a time with very little rest and sustenance. Hawk had been supporting the Sundance since he was a young adult, but as a white man he had not been allowed to participate, and he said it was not something that he was really interested in doing. But when he was asked to jump in without any preparation, he agreed without question.

Having made the point that he recognized this psychological pattern of avoiding agency and responsibility recurring throughout his life, Hawk returned to emphasize the ways that his challenging Ayahuasca experience had helped to shift that pattern. He said he got to find agency

and responsibility as well as practice dying. Hawk said the lesson of owning responsibility for his actions, continued to evolve in his life and showed up in future Ayahuasca ceremonies.

In one such ceremony, Hawk said he went in with the intention of working on forgiveness. There were two people whose past actions had infuriated Hawk. He recognized that his resentment towards them was only hurting himself and he was seeking help to forgive them. The first person was his younger brother who, the day after Thanksgiving the year before, had threatened to kill Hawk's son and burn down his mother's house. Hawk shared that as he sat waiting for the Ayahuasca ceremony to begin, he remembered how he had bullied his younger brother when they were growing up. He admitted to himself that he had controlled and bullied him out of fear that he might be held responsible for his brother's unruly behavior as well as out of "exhilaration in the power" that he felt. Hawk realized that perhaps the way his brother was bullying and threatening his son, was a repetition of the way Hawk had bullied him when he was young.

The second person was a colleague, a young professor of education, who had been on a powwow planning committee with Hawk. Hawk said this man had both assaulted him and slandered him. In considering his relationship with the younger professor as he waited for the Ayahuasca ceremony to begin, Hawk admitted to himself that he had not been respectful of the professor's leadership role in the powwow planning committee. He had invited new members into the group without checking in with the professor first, an action that Hawk understood as potentially threatening. Hawk had also let the professor do most of the work, while at the same time criticizing him behind his back for his "autocratic" leadership style. When the professor had shared that he was having an "emotional crisis," Hawk had not managed to offer any words

of support or reassurance in the way that he should have done considering his role as an elder in the group.

In spite of these positive movements towards self-reflection and forgiveness early in the evening, once the ceremony was underway, Hawk struggled with parts of himself that felt like he had not done anything wrong in either of these relationships, and that he was only standing up for himself. These beliefs were powerfully confronted later on in the ceremony. Hawk described a challenging experience that began when he started to feel nauseous and broke out in a cold sweat. He was shivering and shaking although he was wrapped up in his blanket. Hawk said he felt like "toxics were coming out through [his] pores and brow." One of his close friends in the ceremony also experienced this uncanny cold and later described it as "cold as death."

Hawk saw a parallel between the deep cold of "death" and the way he had been holding onto his resentments towards his brother and colleague. Warmth was closeness and friendship, while coldness was equivalent to being unwilling to yield his antagonistic position, unwilling to take responsibility for his part, loosen his grip, and release into forgiveness. The thawing of challenged relationships with the help of Ayahuasca also extended into Hawk's relationship with his son. He described how there had been some "distance" between him and his son for the past ten years, but that recently his son had approached him with a desire to drink Ayahuasca and Hawk invited him and his son's fiancé to a ceremony with Sage. Hawk described it as a "big, big breakthrough" in his relationship with his son and his son's fiancé.

Not only have the Ayahuasca ceremonies recently brought Hawk closer to his son and his son's fiancé, but he described how they have also been an important source of structure, meaning and community in his post-retirement life. From learning about his tendency for "entwinement and co-dependency," to assuming agency and responsibility for his actions, and finding

forgiveness and deeper intimacy in familial bonds, Hawk's relationship with Ayahuasca has helped him to recognize and transform negative relational patterns in many areas of his life. It has also helped him to avoid the potential isolation of retirement and offered him a deeper sense of meaning and gratitude for his life.

Thematic Analysis

In addition to weaving together narrative accounts from participants' interviews and written submissions, I completed an in-depth phenomenological analysis of the data (see Method section). This process helped to uncover important themes and patterns of meaning in the data. What emerged was a phenomenological structure of the way participants made meaning from their challenging Ayahuasca experiences. Table 1 includes the hierarchical list of themes that form the phenomenological structure beginning with the superordinate themes of "Challenging Ayahuasca experiences," and "Relational healing/connection," followed by the themes and sub-themes that nest within them. Following the table of themes, I present each theme individually and demonstrate how it emerged from the data using direct quotes from the participants.

Table 1

Relational healing: Disconnection to connection

A. Challenging Ayahuasca experiences
    A.1. Purging relational trauma/disconnection
        A.1.1. Personal trauma
        A.1.2. Interpersonal trauma
        A.1.3. Collective trauma
            A.1.3.1. Experiencing trauma of others
            A.1.3.2. Ancestral (clan)
            A.1.3.3. Disconnection from other-than-human people and the natural world
    A.2. Death and birth
    A.3. Resistance and surrender
    A.4. Life review
    A.5. Paradox
B. Relational healing/connection
    B.1. Personal healing

B.1.1. Reflections on personal healing
B.1.2. Hardship and healing
B.1.3. Shame and self-acceptance
B.1.4. Personal resilience
B.1.5. Physical healing
B.2. Interpersonal healing
B.2.1. Healing of close relationships
B.2.2. Ayahuasca ceremony community healing
B.2.2.1. Container of the ceremony
B.2.2.2. Music in ceremony
B.2.2.3. Connection among ceremony members
B.2.3. Interpersonal healing in work/professional life
B.3. Collective healing
B.3.1. Human healing
B.3.2. Connection with other-than-human people and the natural world
B.3.2.1. Relationships with "Mama" Ayahuasca
B.3.2.2. Nature connections/relationships

Relational healing: disconnection to connection

The interpretative phenomenological analysis of the participants' written texts and interviews revealed a meta-theme of movement from relational disconnection to relational connection. Although challenging in the moment, participants' Ayahuasca experiences ultimately helped them to move towards more intimate connection and relationship with themselves, friends, family and the natural world. Although participants did not explicitly articulate this pattern, the thread of this theme wove through all of the participants' narratives.

The meta-theme further divided into two superordinate themes: "Challenging Ayahuasca Experiences," and "Relational Healing." The theme of "Challenging Ayahuasca experiences" included the ways participants made meaning of the challenging experiences themselves. This superordinate theme further divided into the themes: "Purging past relational trauma/disconnection," "Death and birth," "Resistance and surrender," "Life review," and "Paradox."

The second superordinate theme was "Relational healing/connection." It includes the ways that participants described positive shifts in their relationships. This superordinate theme included the themes: "Personal healing," "Interpersonal healing," and "Collective healing." These themes are further broken down and elaborated in the subthemes outlined below.

A. Challenging Ayahuasca experiences

The superordinate theme of "Challenging Ayahuasca experiences" is the umbrella for all of the ways that participants described their challenging Ayahuasca experiences. These experiences themselves further divided into the themes of "Purging past relational trauma/disconnection," "Death and birth," "Resistance and surrender," "Life review," and "Paradox."

A.1. Purging past relational trauma/disconnection. This theme includes participants' descriptions of healing past relational traumas or wounds by re-experiencing them and moving through them during the Ayahuasca ceremony in a visceral and embodied way. The term "purge" was used by some participants to describe their sense of getting rid of the traumas through a somatic as well as psychological process. This theme is made up of the subthemes: "Personal trauma," "Interpersonal trauma," and "Collective trauma."

A.1.1. Personal trauma. Participants shared personal hardships from their past that came up during their challenging Ayahuasca experiences. Although the bulk of relational traumas were interpersonal, certain ones were more exclusively personal. They included traumatic events as well as physical and psychological suffering.

Sam's near-death experience on the refugee boat at a young age was a significant personal traumatic event. He came close to dying and was so profoundly wounded that he felt he still carried the trauma in his body decades later:

> Going to the medicine, I said, that experience of being on the boat and getting lost, I'm sure there's some trauma that I still carry in my body that I'm not even aware of, so whatever that is Mama, just help me take it out.

Alicia said that her "birth story with [her daughter] was actually very traumatic." She also shared that she suffered for many years from a "very mysterious and hard to diagnose" condition that was a "combination of a genetic condition, an immune condition, and a neuro condition," and had her "bed bound or using a wheelchair and forearm crutches."

Maria alluded to "traumatic challenges that that happened when [she] was very young," and "always kind of held on to." In the realm of physical suffering, Maria said that she had migraines and panic attacks:

> My biggest fear in ceremony is to have a migraine or a panic attack because I sometimes suffer from these in regular life. During this ceremony I started to feel as if I was having a headache and heart palpitations . . . I went into a state where I thought I was going to die like my aunt did of an aneurysm and once I was thinking about that it was hard to come out of it . . . And once I got into ceremony, you know I do have a lot of physical stuff that goes on for me and I do suffer from migraines in my day-to-day life and when I was in a really toxic work environment working with the survivors of human trafficking doing crisis work, I was getting panic attacks every once in a while, like anxiety.

A.1.2. Interpersonal Trauma. Participants described experiences of past interpersonal traumas that came up during their challenging Ayahuasca experiences. These traumas occurred with family members, partners, friends and business associates. As could be expected, it was the relational traumas that occurred with the people participants were closest to that affected them the most. This was one of the most common themes of relational trauma.

Maria shared about processing the grief of the death of loved ones that included the murder of her father when she was very young. She also described processing grief about her unhealthy relationship with her mother and challenges in her relationship with her partner of eleven years. Maria described her mother as "very homophobic" and "very abusing" to her as a child. She said that during some of her challenging Ayahuasca experiences she would start crying thinking about these things. Maria shared:

> Like I'll think about a pet that died . . . or you know my relationship with my mother that isn't a healthy one or like my dad that died when I was very young, or you know my partner and I who have been married for 11 years and have definitely struggled.

Max also shared that he had a "dysfunctional" family and a "troubled childhood." He described "purging" his family's expectations of him:

> I purged this idea of my, the man that I was expected to be . . . and when I did that, it was a very big purge. It was my first really big purge . . . I always felt that like I wasn't the type of son that my parents wanted . . . I know that I wasn't the type of son that my dad wanted especially.

Alicia confronted feelings of grief, guilt and regret at her shortcomings as a parent to her young daughter:

> The tears of guilt, fear, and regret, streamed so fast and wide, it felt like I would drown in them . . . Her childhood was full, saturated even, with difficulty, loss, disappointment, frustration, pain, grief, and fear, and I blamed myself, my illness, my failed marriage with her father, my choice of second husband, my failings, for her suffering and lack of connection.

Part of the fear that Alicia experienced during one of her challenging Ayahuasca experiences was for her daughter's safety. She was afraid that she was unable to give her daughter the skills and resources that would protect her from the kinds of violence and violation that Alicia had experienced in her life:

> There was the assault . . . when I was eleven. I was assaulted again when I was seventeenish. And then I was assaulted in my first marriage towards the end of it . . . So, I've experienced a lot of violation. And loss of autonomy, you know? In that part of my body.

Both Hawk and Maria described unhealthy relational patterns that came up during their challenging Ayahuasca experiences. For Hawk, he said that he "got to look at . . . some of my entwinement and co-dependency" with a younger woman with whom he was close friends. Maria shared about a "toxic" relationship she had with a coworker that made her very anxious:

> I had left the human trafficking work because my cofounder was very toxic . . . and was super parasitic with me . . . and it was hard because I loved the work that I was doing with the survivors, but I was, I had developed anxiety, panic attacks, like all this stuff, um, and I'm very sensitive and empathic so I think I was picking up on a lot of her negative energy.

A.1.3. Collective trauma. Several participants described challenging Ayahuasca experiences where they personally suffered relational traumas or wounds that had actually happened to *others*, both human and other-than-human. In some cases, they even described experiencing the trauma of others with whom they had never had any direct contact.

A.1.3.1. Experiencing the trauma of others. Some participants experienced the trauma of their close familial kin. Maria shared a challenging Ayahuasca experience when she connected

with her Aunt's death. Maria said, "I started to like feel, like how my aunt died and I was like oh my god this is what it must have felt like for her . . . so I went into that whole journey of like feeling her death." Alicia connected with some of the challenges that her daughter was going through, which she felt were largely her own fault:

> I saw only my daughter and her overwhelming grief, surrounded by darkness. She didn't know ocean play and didn't know anything similar in the wildernesses available near where we lived. I saw how she was literally on the cusp of the end of her childhood . . . Her life was hard. Her life lacked play. Her life lacked joy. The absence of this sweetness and safety for her made me bawl with grief, guilt, remorse, regret and sorrow.

Hawk felt a direct connection with the trauma of a close friend:

> I asked to understand some of her psychological uh, post-traumatic stress and . . . as a consequence of asking to know something about that craziness uh, I really rocked and rolled on that journey . . . it took me back to surfing experiences of being held underwater for long, long periods of time not knowing which way was up and when I would get my next breath.

Maria experienced the suffering of her victimized clients and even their perpetrators:

> I work with survivors of severe forms of trauma such as human trafficking & sexual assault. When I am getting well [vomiting] I feel as if I am releasing all of their sorrows, stress but also the dark energy or manipulation from their perpetrators, so I see it as a physical and energetic cleanse.

A.1.3.2. Ancestral (clan) trauma. Both Hawk and Maria shared another interesting variation in the theme of experiencing the trauma of others. They both connected with the trauma of the familial or clan ancestors of others. Hawk described connecting with the genocide

of some Native American tribes during a song sung by Sage called "tribu" (tribe in Spanish), in which each subsequent verse of the song names and honors a different indigenous tribe. Hawk's own son has a native American mother, and the close friend whose traumatic stress Hawk connected with in this same Ayahuasca ceremony also had Native American ancestry. Hawk also shared that he has other friends from different tribes around the country. He said that some of the tribes' names that came up in the song were those that close friends or family belonged to, while others he had just heard of or read about. Hawk described what it was like to personally experience the suffering of these tribes. He said, "The name of each tribe evoked for me a story of death and genocide and I would vomit more loudly and violently than the tribe before."

Maria shared that when she experienced the trauma and suffering of her clients, many of whom were immigrants and refugees from Central and South America, she also felt a connection with the indigenous ancestors of her clients who had been historically exploited by the colonial powers:

> All of these threads emerged for me within the work that felt almost like it was sort of the, the indigenous people of the Americas that had been exploited themselves, that then started exploiting their women and children.

It is interesting to note, that although Maria did not mention her own ancestry in relationship to this experience, she also has ancestors who were indigenous to South America. So, perhaps when she connected with the colonial exploitation of the ancestors of her clients, she was in touch with the exploitation of her own ancestors as well.

A.1.3.3. Disconnection from other-than-human people and the natural world. Both Maria and Alicia shared challenging Ayahuasca experiences whose thematic content included a sense of disconnection from other-than-human people and the natural world. The concept of

other-than-human people was first introduced by Hallowell (1992/1975), after extensive field research with the Ojibwa people of the Great Lakes region. Ojibwa life was centered around relationships with all kinds of "people." For them, the category of "people" was not limited to human beings. They believed that plants, animals, elements and even non-corporeal beings (spirits) should be related to as "people" if they exhibited relational capacities. The term is useful for referring to the encounters and relationships described by participants in this study because "person" conveys the mutual respect and reciprocity that they experienced.

Both Maria and Alicia used language that indicated they consider the earth or nature as an animate and relational being. Maria said she understood that the intergenerational trauma that had begun with the colonial exploitation of the Americas was not only perpetrated on the human inhabitants, but also on the land itself. As you can see in the quote below, Maria considers the earth as woman, and the exploitation of earth's resources as a "rape" that continues to this day.

> I correlated it almost with the way we're taking advantage of the earth right now, you know, and like really raping her for her resources and not honoring her and not really respecting the sacredness of it.

Alicia's experience of the "overwhelming grief" of her daughter's lack of connection to the ocean and to wild places in general, also included a layer of the disconnection from other-than-human people. Alicia said that she considered the ocean as like her "mother," and felt guilty both for not managing to visit the ocean herself as an adult, and also for not introducing her daughter to her "mother."

> I felt so much shame and regret for failing to visit the sea in my adult life. I felt like I had betrayed the ocean and failed my daughter as deeply as if I had neglected to introduce my daughter to my own mother. I wept and wept with grief and guilt . . . I was so loved, and I

> so loved my daughter, but she didn't know this love for herself and she didn't have regular intervals of disappearing into a familiar beach to anchor her experience of play and wonder. The ritual of beach trips in my childhood had given my childhood a space of safety, a place to know that all was right in the world, even if life had hard times. She didn't have that.

A.2. Death and Birth. Death and birth are powerful experiences that sit at the two extremes of life. All the participants had challenging experiences that included one of these two themes. In some instances, the participants felt like they were directly experiencing their own death or birth. When Maria began to have a migraine and panic attack with heart palpitations in one Ayahuasca ceremony, she said she felt like she was dying in the same way that her Aunt had many years before.

Sam also connected to a brush with death from his past, but for him it was his own death that he barely managed to escape when he was a boy on the refugee boat. Sam's process of working through that trauma was initiated inside of the Ayahuasca ceremony but continued for several days afterwards. Sam said, "I thought that I was gonna die the next four days after the medicine."

Alicia also had an experience of dying in an Ayahuasca ceremony. It was her very first time drinking the brew. Initially Alicia powerfully resisted dying. But once she gave herself over to the process, what she encountered left a very powerful impression on her:

> You know I just, it was so much awe and so much wonder and so big. And, and sure in that, that I had died. And that this was the other side. And that there *is* something there. It's not at all what I thought it was going to be, and that it was all okay . . . It's still very hard to describe in words, the immensity of it, and the sureness it gives me about death

and life . . . I knew after this that there is life of sorts beyond flesh, and that this life is precious and dear.

Sam also expressed feeling the confluence of death and birth when reflecting back on one of his most challenging Ayahuasca experiences. He said, "So, I think I'm honing into this experience of the visceral experience of death and then the visceral experience of life, giving birth . . . happening simultaneously." He was referencing the dual experience he had of going through the challenge of being born, followed by the challenge of giving birth. Sam described it this way, "So, I was the child, and then I became the divine feminine giving birth to that child." The experience of being born for Sam was close to an experience of death. He felt like he was suffocating (note that Sam has an accent which may appear in writing to be grammatical errors):

The experience was coming out of the womb, like of my mother . . . and the suffocation of that, and the frightening experience of that.

But alongside fear and grief, Sam also said he felt joy:

Yes, I'm sure grief is there. When the child bursts into scream there's tears there already . . . Pure grief, sorrows or fear, frightened, and then also just pure joy of being alive.

Hawk described in detail the challenging experience of connecting with the trauma of the Native American genocide. For him, connecting with the suffering and death of the ancestors of his son and close friends was an experience of dying that gave him appreciation and gratitude for his life. Hawk said:

To be given in the course of eight hours, the ability to find agency and responsibility and uh, practice dying and realize that you know, every moment that we live is a, is a miracle.

A.3. Resistance and surrender. Several of the participants described resisting aspects of their challenging Ayahuasca experiences. It was often the resistance itself that amplified the challenging nature of the experience. Once participants were able to surrender into the experience, no matter how frightening it was, things tended to shift in a more positive direction. Sam described resistance as a type of hell that for him is a common experience. He said:

> My sense is that almost every [Ayahuasca] session there's hell (laughing), the hell of resisting . . . The hell of not surrendering right?

Sam further explained resistance to surrendering as associated with a fear of death and the unknown:

> All the resistance is um, wow, um, we don't even know how to let go . . . once you're in the middle of this, you have to, don't know whether it's possible to back track or not, so, just the hesitation, and I think it's just fear. Fear of the unknown and fear of death.

Three participants shared that once they were able to surrender, it led to a significant shift in the quality of their experience. Alicia thought she was surely dying from an Ayahuasca overdose during her first ceremony. She struggled against dying for a long time, but when she finally surrendered into death, she found something beautiful and transformative on the other side:

> I resisted, resisted and feared and feared . . . on and on, until finally I surrendered, thinking, ok, I made this commitment tonight. I took this into my body and trusted it. I committed to this when I drank it. If this is my time, trust this wisdom of this plant. LET GO. Surrender . . . Whatever this is, whether it's death or what not, I'm all in. Take me if that's what we're doing. And that is when boom! . . . The vision that followed it, that all became a foundational core of my . . . sense of self, and sense of security and strength. I

knew after this that there is Life of sorts beyond flesh, and that this life is precious and dear.

Sam discovered that if he used the lessons from his meditation training to just "observe" what was happening to him rather than resisting it, then his intense bodily twitching and shaking actually became pleasurable:

> I don't need to fight this, I can just observe the beauty of this so it's no longer out of control, it's just like I am just feeling, and the awareness of the feeling, of vibrating for what seemed like an hour of just pure shaking. And so, so eventually I think that's the experience of surrender and then once the surrendering comes, then everything is so beautiful, right? What was fearful now becomes pleasurable or joyful.

Although Max did not have the same kind of death experiences that Sam and Alicia had, he still learned a similar lesson about the value of surrender. He said he felt like a "little me" part of him was trying to be too involved in what was going on, which was keeping things stuck. The key for him seemed to be sitting back and surrendering to the music:

> Oh, I'm a little scared and terrified, and all of this, all of my trying to be too much a part of what's going on gets in the way of just relaxing and like giving myself to the music and then letting it happen and then going like "whoa! There it is." . . . I can feel the little me trying to hold on to it for whatever reason . . . really you just gotta like, just give yourself to the music and just you know, just let it go . . . allowing yourself to just sit in the back seat and . . . don't even try and touch the . . . controls at all.

A.4. Life review. There were two different ways that the theme of "Life review" emerged from participants' stories. There were life reviews that occurred during a challenging Ayahuasca experience and those that occurred afterwards. The ones below belong to the former category. The latter category will be reviewed under the theme "Reflections on personal healing" (B.1.1.).

Maria and Max both shared about challenging Ayahuasca experiences they had when they looked back over their lives and reevaluated some of the things that happened to them. Max said that he believes this kind of life review helped him to grow:

> I have had challenging moments reevaluating the way I lived my life, treated someone or handled a situation, but that's where the growth is.

Maria shared more detail about the nature of her life review. She said she had a very challenging childhood and that she would process the grief of what she had been through in her Ayahuasca ceremonies. One of the main themes of these experiences, was her difficult relationship with her mother, whom she said wasn't able to raise her. But looking back over these times, Maria was able to recognize and be grateful for what support and love she did have from other family members as well as from other-than-human people. She was also able to see how her hardships shaped her into the person she has become. This made it possible for her to embrace even the hardest times in her past:

> When I was crying . . . I was thinking about my mom and how it's so sad that I really didn't have a good mother . . . as much as I was sad, I was also, "thank god I had my grandparents, thank god that my mom had enough forethought to think I can't raise her so I need to send her to Colombia for my parents to raise her," you know, cause god knows where I would be if she hadn't done that. So, as much as I was resentful, I was always

> also thankful . . . I remember in this one ceremony I was like crying and I was just like ahh, like, it's so conflicting to be a good person, put yourself through school you know . . . She [her mother] was deported when I was fifteen and I stayed here alone . . . even though like you know it's dangerous . . . "thank god my aunt helped me, thank god I didn't take those drugs, thanks god I didn't let that guy have sex with me, thank god" . . . also recognizing like the angels that I've had in my life that have helped. And then also the journey, you know of like what made me who I am. And so, a lot of recognition around like okay everything happened for a reason, like it happened in the way that it needed to happen.

A.5. Paradox. Participants' challenging Ayahuasca experiences brought together ostensibly contradictory qualities. Participants said that the tension of experiencing this inherent contradiction was both difficult and liberating. One of the most notable experiences of paradox, was the juxtaposition of death and suffering with birth and life in Sam's experience of being born and then giving birth. Here are several quotes from Sam that illustrate his attempts to make meaning from the simultaneous contradictory emotions that he was feeling as he experienced being born and then giving birth:

> I'm honing into this experience of the visceral experience of death and then the visceral experience of life, giving birth . . . happening simultaneously. And um, and I think it's so terrifying and liberating . . . And so, as I'm speaking now, I'm like that has such divine experience, but that's also one of the horrible hellish experience of going from this cocoon place into this other reality that I don't know . . . Um, so I think there's a tension, there's like a divine experience . . . [and] terrifying experience happening simultaneously.

The juxtaposition of seemingly contradictory emotions emerged, for Sam, from within an experience of being "fully alive." He speculated that perhaps being "fully alive" and thus experiencing the complete spectrum of emotions, is an inherently terrifying experience:

> I can also say reflecting back at both . . . Pure grief, sorrows or fear, frightened, and then also just pure joy of being alive . . . I wonder sometimes, for some people, maybe for me, that the experience of fully alive is what's so terrifying.

Finally, Sam explains the experience of the juxtaposition of horror and beauty, which he said exist side by side in the "other reality" that Ayahuasca allows people to access:

> I think also the medicine just allows me to know there's, there's other reality that is devastatingly painful to look at, horrifying, you know, uh, horrifying to, to experience and yet it's so much beauty at the same time, so much beauty, sooo much beauty.

Alicia shared a challenging Ayahuasca experience during which an other-than-human person opened her up to the possibility that the healing she was seeking might not include deliverance from the physical pain of her debilitating illness. For Alicia, the juxtaposition of pain and healing was a paradox. She did not imagine that the two could exist side by side. See Alicia's story or the "other-than-human connections/relationships" theme (B.3.2.) for more details about this experience.

B. Relational Healing/Connection.

The superordinate theme of relational healing and connection includes the themes of "Personal healing," "Interpersonal healing," and "Collective healing." The experiences of relational healing that participants shared occurred both during the Ayahuasca ceremonies as well as in their lives afterward. Participants did not always describe explicit causal links between the challenging Ayahuasca experiences and the relational healing that emerged in their

lives. What emerged from these narratives is a gestalt of transformation and healing, not a series of cause-and-effect events.

B.1. Personal healing. The theme of personal healing in participants' narratives involved the transformation of their relationship to themselves. This included the transformation of their stories about their past, present and future. This took many forms, from narratives of self-care, and personal resilience to the positive reframing of past suffering. Some narratives involved literal physical healing.

B.1.1. Reflections on personal healing. Max said that he feels like Ayahuasca has helped guide him towards becoming the best person that he can be. He expressed this theme in several different ways:

> If you've been drinking Ayahuasca . . . you get into this zone of the type of person you'd like to become . . . a new outline has kind of been drawn of the type of person you're striving for, or what feels right for you . . . I get the feeling that everybody's moving at their own pace . . . just trying to work towards the best person I can be, and I think Ayahuasca keeps me in, you know, in check and guides me to what's next.

Alicia shared that Ayahuasca reveals difficult truths but at the same time offers hope. She said, "Medicine has this way of showing me what I may find horrifying about myself or life, but then illuminating a way through, so it's not hopeless." As an example of this, an Ayahuasca experience helped Alicia to reframe some of her past trauma by showing her that her life was "tended," and she was loved in ways she might not have been aware of before. Ayahuasca showed her that her relationship with the beach and the ocean as a child offered her the love that she needed to get through "horrible traumas" later on in her life. Alicia said, "that love that was

bigger than human beings or people . . . That really was this grounding expansiveness that made it so that when I experienced hard things, it was okay."

Maria shared that her Ayahuasca experiences have led her to take better care of her body and mind both before and after ceremonies:

> I think after ceremony then I try to really take care of myself almost like a newborn baby where maybe I am making healthier nutrition choices or I'm being more gentle with my body or my mind, or maybe not you know um having as many negative self-talk.
>
> And then I would notice how when I was preparing to go to ceremony, I started to be more conscious of like my body and what I'm putting in it, treating myself and my being well.

After Hawk got hit by a truck while walking down the street and almost died, he said that Ayahuasca helped him "to define and make meaning for myself of why I'm back on earth again and not under the earth."

B.1.2. Hardship and healing. Alicia illuminated the direct relationship between the challenging aspects of Ayahuasca experiences and their ability to offer personal healing. She explained this in several different ways:

> I trust Her, that even if it is hard and sometimes it is very hard, that there is purpose in it. It's not hard for its own sake. It's not self-flagellation. It's not punitive.
>
> [Ayahuasca] gives me the ability to see, see hard things . . . realizing where I have failings . . . It gave me the ability to see things that need healing . . . Medicine gives me a container of safety in which to be so vulnerable.

Succinctly summing up the close relationship between the challenge and healing aspects of Ayahuasca experiences, Alicia said, "Medicine creates a space where . . . I can just see clearly. And sometimes just seeing clearly is hard."

B.1.3. Shame and self-acceptance. Both Alicia and Maria mentioned the ways that Ayahuasca has helped them to address their feelings of shame in ways that bring them closer to accepting themselves just how they are. Alicia said:

> I carry enough anxiety or shame. She's helped me work through that so that I can have the strength to say okay yeah, it's alright to grow [chuckles], and to see where I've not lived up to my own standards or what's best for somebody or for myself.

Alicia added that once she has learned about the parts of her that carry shame, she can see beyond them which feels "empowering" to her:

> For me what's safe about the Medicine work is that she . . . shines lights on those places where I have shame so that I can see what's really there . . . I'm then empowered because I can see beyond the shame.

Maria said her mother was "homophobic," which led her to feel a lot of shame and have difficulty accepting her sexual orientation. Ayahuasca helped her to feel the foundation of all humans as connected in the energy of love:

> I carried a lot of shame about it and it was a lot of like internalized homophobia . . . and one of the first things that I remember feeling under the medicine was this concept of love, and how love has nothing to do with like our genitalia or our bodies . . . it was like we're all just love, like it doesn't matter, we're all just energy.

Another moment of self-acceptance occurred for Maria when she was honored by the people in her Ayahuasca ceremony group on her birthday. She shared that being honored by the group helped her to feel that she could just be herself. She said:

> Just affirming like this is who I am, like I don't have to hide it, I'm not weird, I'm not strange, I'm not a witch, you know whatever, like I'm just like this is who I am.

B.1.4. Personal Resilience. Alicia, Hawk and Sam all shared that their challenging Ayahuasca experiences gave them a sense of being able to confront and deal with the hard things that occurred in their life. Hawk said directly that he felt like one particular challenging Ayahuasca experience gave him "resilience" that he hadn't had since he was a young surfer wrestling big waves:

> As a consequence of asking to know something about that craziness uh, I really rocked and rolled on that journey . . . everything that was going on in the circle was, you know was hitting me in really heavy ways . . . I think that it gave me some, ultimately some resilience.

Alicia said she felt like her confrontation with death during her very fist Ayahuasca ceremony increased her sense of her own strength and her ability to be able to confront and survive challenges in her life:

> Most of the night was chaos and discomfort. But that initial resistance turned to surrender, and the vision that followed it, that all became a foundational core of my own spirituality and sense of self, and sense of security and strength.

This strength and resilience became very important to Maria when she was giving birth to her child:

> I knew that if I could survive the dying experience I had, and even some of the horror hell realms that I had journeyed in in that first sit. If I could do that, I could survive giving birth. If I could do that, I could survive the next wave of contractions and the discomfort.

All of this struggle and hardship, both inside and outside of the Ayahuasca ceremonies, gave Alicia a sense of resilience. She also shared that she feels such confrontations helped her to live life more fully, trusting that she can survive what life may throw at her:

> You have to confront your mortality if you're really going to live. If you don't confront your mortality I don't know if you're really, really living. And I think that's part of the value of the hard stuff. Even just to know like whoa! I survived that [chuckles]. I can withstand that.

Sam echoed this sentiment when he shared, "Everything else seems possible after death facing experiences."

B.1.5. Physical healing. As we just saw in the quotes above (B.1.4.), Alicia was told in an Ayahuasca ceremony that she had to learn how to be who she wanted to be in the world despite her physical pain and disabilities. And she did just that. She worked tirelessly, often while confined to her bed at home, to advocate for the community of people suffering from the same rare disease that she had. It wasn't until after she had come to terms with her own pain and disability that she made the discovery that would change the course of her life and heal her of her physical infirmity.

During one challenging Ayahuasca experience, Alicia saw how disconnected her daughter was from nature and wild places and got the strong message that she needed to take her daughter to the ocean. When she finally managed to do so, she discovered that being at the

ocean brought miraculous relief to the debilitating symptoms of her disease. She went from being completely wheelchair bound to walking with minimal support in a matter of days:

> So, on that trip I called my husband and was just telling him like, "I'm walking." And it's literally like, you know, day one I didn't really need the chair, and then you know I was just crutching, and then I was down to one crutch, and by day three or four I was only using one crutch to get down to the beach.

Once Alicia's husband saw how much healthier she was when she was next to the ocean, he got an online job and the whole family moved to a house within view of the ocean. Now Alicia is moving about all on her own and can hardly believe it herself. She said, "I don't need mobility aids. It's miraculous and I'm like, I'm like still afraid to even say it out loud sometimes because it feels so big. I don't want to jinx it [voice dropping to a whisper]."

Alicia also described another experience of physical healing that she received. In the same Ayahuasca ceremony, just before Alicia experienced powerful grief, fear and regret around her daughter's lack of connection with natural places, she described receiving a healing of her reproductive organs while processing the traumatic birth of her daughter. Alicia described it this way:

> I had a vision where the deity/spirit [Bobinsana] . . . appeared above me, hovering in a blooming aura of pink light and radiance, and then she moved into my body, blessed and healed me (specifically my uterus, ovaries, birth canal), filling me with a warmth, gentleness and love. I wept and wept at the beauty and love . . . I was also processing through the reality that my labor story, my birth story with [daughter] was actually very traumatic and I was also doing healing work around that.

B.2. Interpersonal healing. Interpersonal healing was one of the most common themes that emerged from the participants' stories. These were moments when participants shared how their Ayahuasca experiences contributed to processes of reconciliation and reconnection with significant people in their lives. They were an integral part of the way participants made meaning from their challenging Ayahuasca experiences.

It is with this theme that the ethical dimension of participants' Ayahuasca experiences emerged. It seems from participants' descriptions that there is an inclination that develops within their Ayahuasca experiences that guides them towards reconnection with important people in their lives. Max's description of what he has been learning from his Ayahuasca experiences sums it up well, "It's more the beauty of selflessness and opening up to others . . . we all strayed but . . . hopefully we're all trying to gravitate to the same direction and can help each other."

B.2.1. Healing of close relationships. Participants described how their Ayahuasca experiences helped them to reconnect and heal their relationships with family. All of the participants who had children (Alicia, Max and Hawk) shared stories about how their Ayahuasca experiences had helped them to deepen their connection with their children and generally be better parents.

Some of the clearest examples of this dynamic were described by Max. He shared that he had been feeling critical of some of the things his son was engaged in. Due in part to his Ayahuasca experiences, Max said he was able to catch himself and remember that his own father had been critical of him as a teenage punk rocker. So perhaps now, Max realized, rather than be judgmental of his son, he should just try to "keep that connection" with him. Here's Max describing the situation in his own words:

> I'm kind of going through it with my son right now and it's hard because I have this whole harkening back to my father with me, and now my experience with Ayahuasca and knowing that I shouldn't judge him . . . I do this whole dance in my head of like, you know your father didn't understand the things that you liked either, so just you know try to guide him with the big stuff and just try to be in his life and keep that connection as much as you can, stay involved.

Max also described a process of letting go of a "self-involved artist" part of himself so that he could be more present to his family. He said that Ayahuasca had helped to guide him in this direction:

> I used to be a very self-involved artist and it's been a hard journey for me to open up and become . . . the kind of dad that my kids deserve you know . . . just being able to let go of all that like, you know, you've done plenty of that, and um, and you'll do more of it but it's time to expand to other branches of yourself you know? These are things that Mother Ayahuasca has told me . . . getting me on track with other things about like, just look at that boy, you know, just look at the family.

Max took this message to heart and implemented some changes. He said, "And so right now I'm really taking a step back and just kind of giving myself to my you know, my job, my kids my family and stuff." The changes Max has made in his life to orient more towards his familial responsibilities have been recognized and reaffirmed in his Ayahuasca experiences. Max shared an intricate "vision" he had which validated the importance of his role as a father, not only the ways his actions affected his children, but also the impact such healthy and loving relationships have on the people who bear witness to them:

> I just bawl tears and then . . . when I'm having these really extreme moments of gratitude, I'll see images . . . when you go to these places and people see you with your children, you're affecting other people, just your vibration, how your family gets along when you go out and interact with other people . . . just telling me how good I'm doing and just stick with it and stuff and then I'll have this vision of like . . . it's jeweled with like flashing light jewels all over it . . . and it kind of represents to me just like you know, look what you have, you're so rich . . . it's just a feeling of gratitude of like you have it all feeling . . . it always comes with like when I'm having these visions of like gratitude and you know when it gets into the family . . . the love and how we all get along and joke and like just how much communication is there you know? Like . . . it's not the family that I experienced when I was a kid.

One of the challenging Ayahuasca experiences that Alicia shared (A.1.2.) was intimately interwoven with a process of healing her relationship with her daughter. In the previous theme of physical healing (B.1.5.), Alicia shared about a beautiful womb-blessing experience that she received just before the challenging Ayahuasca experience of grief and guilt about not raising her daughter to have a strong relationship with wild places. Alicia shared that in addition to a personal blessing, she was told that the womb-blessing was also meant for her daughter. She was given reassurance by Bobinsana that she would look out for Alicia's daughter as she grows up. Alicia explained:

> She [Bobinsana] told me she loves me, and my daughter . . . and that this blessing and healing was actually for my daughter, and that She . . . would care for my daughter . . . even protect her as she grows into a mature human being.

It was after this moment in the ceremony that Alicia saw how blessed she had been to have grown up with a strong relationship to the ocean which she felt protected her during traumatic experiences later in life. She then sank into hard feelings of guilt, grief, remorse and regret that she hadn't been able to raise her own daughter with that same level of connection to the ocean, or any wild places. Alicia shared that after these challenging moments her Ayahuasca experience returned to the feelings of love and support from Bobinsana and Ayahuasca. She then made a promise to get her daughter to the ocean as soon as possible:

> I came back to the part where I had been assured of this love for me, and for her. I came back to being told that my daughter is loved by a vastness she doesn't know . . . I promised to bring her to the sea while she was still young enough to play.

Although it did not happen right away, Alicia did manage to keep this promise. As described in greater detail in Alicia's story (as well as in B.1.3.), once she got to the ocean with her daughter, she realized being at the ocean was a miraculous balm for her debilitating physical symptoms. She also noticed that getting her daughter to the ocean was shifting the dynamic in their relationship as well:

> And so, by the end of this trip I was like "I'm healed! I'm walking! Everything is groovy! I've gotten this benefit, my daughter's getting to have this experience and the way it's changing our relationship just in those days!

Alicia reflected that by helping her to find healing from her debilitating physical symptoms, Bobinsana and Ayahuasca (Alicia said she considers them as acting in concert with one another) were making good on their promise to look after her daughter because they were making it possible for Alicia to be involved with raising her in a way that she had previously been unable:

> If I were bed bound right now and cognitively not capable of being a parent my kid would really be at risk. So, she's still making good on it. Moving my family here, so that my body and my mind are available is absolutely part of how it is that this promise or safeguard put in place is there. It's not just all faith, it's that I'll have my wits to tend to her through her adolescence.

Hawk described Ayahuasca's healing impact on his relationship with his son, which came about because his son asked to participate in an Ayahuasca ceremony with him. According to Hawk, this led to a "big breakthrough" in their relationship:

> There's been some distance between us over the last ten years and that gesture from him as well as the follow through of joining the circle has been a big, big breakthrough in relationship between us.

At a different moment in the interview, Hawk emphasized how important this shared experience had been to their reconnection when he said, "I could go on and on about how it's reuniting my relationship with my son."

The two participants who did not have kids of their own (Maria and Sam) both shared about the ways that their Ayahuasca experiences had improved their relationships with their parents. Sam said his relationships with both his mother and his father improved on account of his Ayahuasca experiences. He credited the challenging Ayahuasca experience he shared (A.2.) with helping him to be less judgmental of his mother. Sam explained:

> For years I couldn't figure my mother out because I thought well, here is someone who seem very smart, very enthusiastic about life and, and uh, beautiful, why is that after giving birth to six children and living through a war and coming to America, why is she playing Mahjong all the time? Why isn't she doing something with her life?

But after having the experience of giving birth to himself (A.2.) Sam's perspective shifted:

> My relationship with my, my mother also changed. Because once I had the experience of what it's like for her to give birth to me, I have no judgment for someone who come through that for me . . . she'd done everything that you, a few lifetimes you couldn't even do . . . a twenty-one-year-old, this little girl, gave birth to twins, and then went on to give birth . . . five more times. She has done her purpose! . . . You know she gave birth to six children in the middle of a war, trying to get us here and there, trying to get out. Yeah, she can play a thousand year of Mahjong if she likes [laughing]!

Sam also shared that his relationship with his father significantly shifted on account of his Ayahuasca experiences. He described it this way:

> I would say the impact is that my relationship with my father is as beautiful as it's ever been. And for thirty years I avoided him . . . even with therapy and meditation I just couldn't find compassion.

But then, in an Ayahuasca ceremony, Sam saw his father as a little boy. He said,

> And I just feel so much love for this little boy, so much compassion for all the beauty and pain and devastation that he's seen, or he experienced. After that experience I cannot help but feel like truly compassion to my father.

It is interesting to note that, similar to Sam's experience, Maria's relationship with her mother also improved after Ayahuasca showed Maria her mother as a little girl. She said,

> In ceremony there's been times when I'm like you know what "F" my mother, like she was a bitch or she put me in really fucked up situations and then Mama, the Medicine would be like, "yeah honey but she's still your mother, you still need to make sure she's eating or you still need to send money to Colombia or like those are still your roots," and

> so . . . I go visit and I send money if I know my mom doesn't have money for food or something . . . almost like she showed me my Mom like a little girl kind of thing.

Maria also shared, "I think that in terms of my romantic relationship it [Ayahuasca] has definitely helped me." She elaborated on this point when she said:

> You know like we had a lot of trouble we almost got divorced a couple times and just every time she'll [Ayahuasca] give me like a list, like she'll be like "okay sweetie, so when you go home you need to tell her you love her, you need to help out with the dishes more, don't go out as much by yourself . . . make more art together." She'll literally give me like a laundry list.

B.2.2. Ceremony community healing. Many participants made reference to the importance of the community of people that they regularly interacted with in the Ayahuasca ceremonies. This included the facilitators, supporters of the facilitator, and all of the people who gathered to participate in the ceremony. These people helped participants to navigate their challenging Ayahuasca experiences as they were occurring as well as help them to integrate them afterwards.

B.2.2.1. Container of the ceremony.

Study participants referred to their Ayahuasca "community" because in Sage's ceremonies, many of the same people would come together again and again with ceremonies occurring approximately one to four times a year. In this study, the word "container" is equivalent to the term "setting," or the external environment in which the psychedelic experience takes place.

Maria, Alicia, Sam and Hawk all spoke about how important the container of ceremony was to their Ayahuasca experiences. Sam and Maria both referred to the container as critical to

their challenging Ayahuasca experiences. Sam said that the container makes it possible for him to work with a "horrible experience" by giving him a safe and supportive place to process:

> I think why I have . . . such a positive experience with Ayahuasca I would say that has a lot to do with [Sage] and how she holds space. And the community, you know, other people, the wise elders like [Matthew] and other people. So, so the community, the container is so helpful. And I think because of that I'm able to work with the horrible experiences . . . the medicine allows me to have these experiences then have a container to process them . . . I think that make a huge difference.

Maria explained that when she went through the challenging Ayahuasca experience when she thought she was dying, her trust in Sage helped her feel an important fundamental level of safety:

> I trusted the organizer and I knew that they were gonna do whatever they needed to do in that moment to help me. That made me feel safe. I can't imagine drinking in like the middle of nowhere with a stranger. That would scare me.

Both Alicia and Hawk described a transition from other Ayahuasca groups, and how happy they are to have found Sage and her Ayahuasca community, which they both felt was superior to the groups they had been a part of previously. The death experience that Alicia shared (A.2.) happened before she found Sage's Ayahuasca group (in the quote below, Alicia's use of the word "circle," is equivalent to the idea of container discussed above):

> You know my initial experiences weren't with the same facilitator, and while I went deep, it was because I was obliterated. And I was lucky to bring anything out of it, to be able to remember anything. And I learned over time, once I was in a circle, that one, was a circle. It actually had you know consistent facilitators, hosts and kind of a core people

of a community. And I could have space and intentions set, and guided through the just nuts and bolts physically of why it matters to prepare in a certain way through diet and all that, to set yourself up for a best odds experience. Those things really made a difference for me also, a huge difference for me in terms of how deep and clear the work was.

Hawk shared that he found Sage's Ayahuasca group/community after participating in Ayahuasca ceremonies led by two other facilitators. He thinks very highly of Sage and said he is "grateful" to be a part of the community of people that gather regularly for her ceremonies:

> I'm just grateful that . . . man on the third try, to get somebody like [Sage] my god! I mean I think she's on the level of medicine person that's um you know maybe only three that I've [known] in my life . . . This is becoming more and more precious to me all the time . . . having a community, a new community is becoming more precious to me.

B.2.2.2. Music in ceremony. Alicia, Maria, Max and Hawk all spoke to the critical role that music played for them during their Ayahuasca ceremonies. One of the primary responsibilities of the facilitator (Sage) was to provide the live music that accompanied and guided the participants during the Ayahuasca ceremonies. Towards the end of the ceremony, the participants themselves might be invited to offer either instrumental or vocal contributions of their own.

Max summed up the importance of the music during the Ayahuasca ceremony when he said:

> I think that, I don't know what the journey would be like if there were no, uh if there was no icaros [traditional indigenous Amazonian songs] . . . it would be like going through a ride at Disney land . . . without the car or something. You know, you'd just get lost . . . you're not on it, you're not in a safe place to take the journey.

Alicia noted that the music helped her navigate her challenging Ayahuasca experiences. She described the music as a "lifeline" that helped her to feel less "lost and terrified":

> When things get hard . . . the music is described as like a cord or a lifeline, and that the music isn't just pretty to be pretty . . . it is the Medicine . . . There were moments in that first sit where it got real hard. And I didn't know the music, but I would figure out how to mumble along or just kind of hum it. And that that would open something in me so that I wasn't so lost and terrified.

It is notable that while Alicia described the music's role as helping her get through challenging experiences, Maria and Hawk explained that the music helped to nurture or even cause challenging experiences. Maria said that the music can "cause" her to vomit ("getting well") or cry tears of grief:

> For me the music can cause huge purging feelings both on getting well or in tears often about grief, maybe grieving a loved one or a pet that has passed on or even stages of life that have come and gone.

Hawk described a particular song as a "traumatic experience":

> Every time that I heard the tribe in the tribu song, just the uh, just the horribleness of the genocide was causing me to vomit and not quietly. Uh, and uh, actually that song was one of the most severe traumatic experiences in that particular journey.

Although Maria and Hawk described how the music brought them into challenging places, both of them, in different parts of their interviews, referred to these challenging experiences as ultimately helpful and growth enhancing. Hawk later described his "severe traumatic experience," as helping to promote a "resilience" in him that he hadn't felt since he was a young surfer wrestling big waves. While Max echoed the interconnection between

purging and the music, he emphasized that throwing up is not always a bad feeling. He said, "Throwing up even feels magical. I don't feel nauseous, I just feel something needs to come out. Something interacting with the moment, the music and the ceremony."

Maria described instances when the music brought her into a deeper connection with other participants in the ceremony, as well as with her own ancestral lineage. In one such instance, when Maria felt like she was going to die, other participants rallied in support that helped to pull her out of the dark place she was in. Maria described how she had made a pact with another participant to sing a particular song together. When Maria was really struggling, her friend started singing the song:

> She started to sing and ironically it was a song called Abrete Corazon, like open your heart, and so I hear her and I was like, oh my god, oh my god and the shaman was like do you want to go up and sing with her and I was like yeah. And so, she like helped me up, like I could barely walk, I mean I was like all over the place. So, I held the other participants hands and then we sang together. And that like totally took me out of that tunnel that I was in.

In another instance, Maria described how when she sings, she feels "tapped into the universe," and like the "indigenous tradition" of her ancestors is "coming through" her. During these times she said that she also feels "very connected to the group" like she is "sharing this journey" with them. Then Maria said, "After I finish singing, I do have this feeling like ecstasy in my body . . . like this space of gratitude . . . it feels very religious for me."

Alicia said that a special song helped bring her into connection with "deity/spirit" that gave her body a healing during an Ayahuasca ceremony (see theme B.1.5.). The "deity/spirit" of the song Alicia was referring to was Bobinsana. The song had been a favorite of Alicia's

husband who had often played it in their house. During the experience, Alicia said she received a specific message from Bobinsana:

> Bobinsana specifically said, "I know you and I love you and I know your child and I know your husband and I know the shapes of your walls because I bounce around in them when your husband sings my song.

The way Alicia understood it, playing the song of Bobinsana in their house had established a special connection with what Alicia called the "deity/spirit" of Bobinsana. As you can read in Alicia's chapter, as well as the thematic section "Physical healing" (B.1.5.), this relationship with Bobinsana was critical to a cascading process of relational and physical healing that unfolded after this Ayahuasca ceremony.

B.2.2.3. Connection among ceremony participants. Maria, Alicia, Max and Hawk all said that meaningful connections and relationships were formed with the other participants in their Ayahuasca ceremonies. According to participants in this study, their Ayahuasca communities offered them special opportunities for social support and a level of intimacy that is not often encountered in contemporary social spaces. Ceremony participants are all present throughout the night as they and others in the group go through what can be extremely vulnerable experiences. It is widely understood that being vulnerable with others fosters intimacy. Those present during the ceremony offer support to one another emotionally, psychologically and sometimes physically, before, during, and after the ceremony.

Maria described a feeling of deep intimacy with everyone who sings and plays music during the ceremony:

> I also love to hear the facilitator's voice and instruments, other people sharing in [the] room is like you can feel their soul through their sharing. Even though we are all in the

> dark and cannot see each other it almost feels like we can truly see each other's essence in those moments.

Alicia shared that once she found Sage's "circle," she consistently returned over the years and her trust in the space and the people grew. She said that she felt "encouraged to bloom":

> Right, knew the people, felt very safe, very nurtured. Had been, you know, um, encouraged to bloom over the years into feeling comfortable and expressive and able to sing in that space, you know all kinds of stuff.

In a similar vein, Maria explained that she felt like she could truly be herself in her Ayahuasca ceremony community because her special idiosyncrasies were accepted by everyone without judgment. Maria described coming to an Ayahuasca ceremony near her birthday:

> The shaman actually had like a little candle for my birthday and like sang to me and the group sang to me and I had this moment of like "it's so nice to be seen and loved exactly the way that I am, like for my spirituality and my sexuality and all those pieces and just feeling whole. Like it was like this, this sadness that turned into happiness cause I was like, but I'm seen, I'm seen in this community and I'm not weird because you know I pray to the moon and I pray to the water like, this is normal, this is me.

An example of participants supporting one another during vulnerable moments in an Ayahuasca ceremony occurred during Maria's encounter with death when people supported her to sing a song with her friend. The details of this story are elaborated in Maria's introductory chapter as well as in the discussion of the theme of death and birth (A.2.).

Max described supporting other participants in the Ayahuasca ceremony by being a conduit through which the stuff the group was purging could exit. He put it this way:

> Sometimes I feel as though I'm an organism for others . . . I must have spent an hour just feeling so content just being like the colon for the whole group . . . while these people are, you know having their big purge moments and stuff I was just like this . . . place for stuff to go out you know?

Hawk described connecting with a ceremony participant in the evening before the Ayahuasca ceremony had begun. He said he overheard a guy that he did not know well talking about forgiveness. Hawk shared that hearing this conversation helped him to realize that forgiveness was also a major theme for him in his life and something that he wanted to focus on during the ceremony that night. A little bit later, Hawk approached the man and asked him if he would be willing to agree to a mutually supportive conversation about forgiveness. Hawk described the moment this way:

> We're just sort of getting settled . . . and I said hey I overheard you guys talking about forgiveness . . . I said I'd like to make a pact to talk about our work with forgiveness. So, he agreed to that.

B.2.3. Interpersonal healing in work/professional life. All of the participants described having jobs or professions that involved interpersonal connection and healing. Maria's job as a therapist for survivors of sexual trafficking was perhaps the most directly tied to her challenging Ayahuasca experiences. She described connecting with her clients during her Ayahuasca ceremonies and helping to purge their trauma:

> I work with survivors of severe forms of trauma such as human trafficking and sexual assault. When I am getting well [vomiting] I feel as if I am releasing all of their sorrows, stress but also the dark energy or manipulation from their perpetrators, so I see it as a physical and energetic cleanse.

Maria also shared that she took some of the lessons that she learned in her challenging Ayahuasca experiences and brought them back into her therapeutic work with her clients.

> And even use . . . my experience in ceremony . . . to help the survivors to be like look if you need to release, if you need to cry just cry, if when you're having somatic symptoms in your stomach and you feel nauseous like it's okay, tap into that nauseousness . . . they're like but I feel nauseous when I think about the rape, or you know why do I vomit, you know, and it's like well that's your body's way of releasing this stuff.

Maria explained that her Ayahuasca experiences have also been a crucial part of preventing burnout for her by giving her a place to purge the vicarious trauma that might otherwise have built up in her system. She said:

> I think it's prevented a lot of vicarious trauma for me . . . I think that the medicine has given me the space to tap into that like very guttural, earthy lioness kind of anger . . . and also to purge in a healthy way. Not just . . . drown it out and not address it and then have negative coping skills but have like a positive depository for it to be you know compost and let go of . . . I'm very thankful for the medicine for that.

Although Alicia was often bed bound during the height of her illness, she still managed to find a way to serve others in spite of her debilitating pain:

> Even though I physically was just not able to do much and cognitively it took me much longer to do anything that I wanted, I still found myself in this position . . . to essentially lobby administrators at regional specialty hospitals and medical centers . . . and propose that creating a specialty center for us would one, be viable and feasible and make better use of everybody's time and resources . . . . . And then trying to teach the community, this is how we get what we need. And in managing resources for the community . . . And

helping to build a regional network of clinicians who can actually be of assistance . . . And so, helping, essentially doing patient navigation, but for a whole community.

B.3. Collective Healing. The theme of "Collective healing" includes experiences of relational connection and healing outside of the realm of direct human-to-human contact. Some of the experiences described occurred during Ayahuasca ceremonies; others took place in the day-to-day lives of participants outside of the ceremonies. The sub-themes which make up the theme of "Collective healing" are: "Collective human healing," and "Other-than-human connections/relationships."

B.3.1. Collective human healing. The sub-theme of collective human healing includes participant experiences of connection and healing with human people they had not personally known or come into contact with. This includes connection with familial ancestors or ancestral clans. It also includes connections with people or groups from the past which were not a part of the participant's own genetic lineage.

Both Maria and Max each had Ayahuasca experiences that exemplify this sub-theme. Maria said she felt more deeply connected with her indigenous South American ancestry on account of her Ayahuasca experiences. Maria said that when she sings during the Ayahuasca ceremonies, she enters "into a whole other realm" where she feels "tapped into the universe" as well as connected to her indigenous ancestry. Maria said:

> I feel like it is sort of like this indigenous tradition coming through me, which I didn't really discover until the Medicine, you know it wasn't a part of me that I really had harnessed um, and so then I feel like I'm honoring sort of the elements, it feels very almost like Native American, indigenous and I feel very connected to the group, to the collective like it's like I'm sharing this journey with them.

Whenever she returns to the South American country she grew up in, Maria said that she tries to support the tribe her ancestors were a part of. She added that when she sings, she is "honoring" and "valuing" indigenous cultures. Maria shared, "I feel much more connected to them and like wanting to honor them and in sort of a very prideful way."

Max shared an experience of connecting with what he felt was perhaps a "past life" as a Native American healer although he did not say he if he knew of any native blood in his genetic lineage. He said he hasn't shared the experience with anyone before for fear it would be considered cultural appropriation. Max described how during the Ayahuasca ceremony he felt like he was "a native American Indian inside of a buffalo skin" in what seemed like "a peyote ceremony or something." He said he got the sense that he was engaged in the same healing work that he had been doing in the actual Ayahuasca ceremony, which he described as "like purging for others," or "being a colon for others." More can be read about Max's experience in previous sections (B.2.2.3.).

B.3.2. Connections with other-than-human people and the natural world. As described above (A.1.3.3.), other-than-human people are beings or presences that, although they might not present themselves in physical forms that we are used to relating to, nonetheless exhibit relational capacities and reciprocal behaviors. In other words, it is possible to connect with, interact with, and have relationships with other-than-human people, even if they don't look and feel like human people.

Of all the participants, Alicia described having the most enduring, intimate and complex relationships with other-than-human people. They were "Mama" Ayahuasca, Bobinsana, and the Ocean. Alicia called them her personal "deities." Her complex and intimate relationship with

these "deities" is described in Alicia's story. These relationships included reciprocal exchanges of love, care, compassion, and even practical real-world healing advice.

Alicia's relationship with the Ocean "deity" went all the way back to early childhood family vacations when she would play near the ocean. Her relationship with Bobinsana was cultivated by her husband playing one of the traditional icaros (Amazonian songs) of Bobinsana on his guitar in their home. Her relationship with "Mama" Ayahuasca was cultivated by consuming the plant brew in many community ceremonies over the course of many years. Below is a quote that gives an idea of the quality of Alicia's relationship with these other-than-human people, her "deities":

> My childhood play at the ocean, pretending to be a mermaid, dolphin, draping seaweed all around me, singing out to the waves with all my heart, was actually a foundational strength for me, a courtship, a connection to a deity, a force big beyond comprehension. My love for the sea, dolphins and imagined mermaids, though built from imaginative play, within innocence, solitude, it built this VERY real love, that was reciprocated to me, and to my daughter even. It was pure bliss. I saw how this play formed a connection that literally guarded my heart from perils of dysfunction in my family and perils of adolescence.

During another Ayahuasca ceremony, Alicia had a challenging but ultimately very transformative exchange with an other-than-human person that appeared in a "vision" as an "old leathery-skinned curandera" (traditional healer). Alicia shared that the curandera was diligently performing a healing on Alicia's body but curiously avoiding the places where Alicia was hurting. When Alicia tried to direct the old woman to work on the places on her body that were actually hurting, the old woman's entire demeanor shifted:

> And then it changed from me lying there . . . to her getting right up in my face, nose to nose with me where I could just feel and smell her breath and grabbing my shirt and pushing me into the earth and saying . . . "what makes you think healing has anything to do with hurting or not hurting? Your task is to be the person you want to be regardless of how you feel."

At the time, Alicia said she just cried and cried because she really just wanted the pain to go away. But the powerful exchange really struck a chord for Alicia and ended up changing the direction of her life. She said it was due in part to this exchange that she gathered the courage to continue moving forward with her life, to begin imagining what she would want to do if she was not in such great pain all the time, and then to just begin moving towards that goal in spite of her disabilities.

It is interesting to note that Max received a similar message, about how to navigate extreme suffering, from an other-than-human person that he encountered in an Ayahuasca ceremony. Max alternately called the other-than-human person "the little orange man" and a "deity." During that ceremony, Max said he "started to ponder about trials . . . just all of the death and all of the sickness and disease . . . we go through." He went on to explain:

> I was just meditating and pondering it . . . getting closer and closer to pinpointing what the point is of ultimate suffering, as I got closer to it there was like this uh, entity kind of ping-ponging back and forth and as I got closer to it, I could see it and it was kind of like it had the huge grin on its face and it had like seven eyeballs . . . I like could hear it say like this is where it gets tricky . . . this is the deepest you'll ever dig inside of who you . . . it's like the Everest of being . . . the big challenge . . . there *is* meaning behind something that horrible . .

. don't try to understand it . . . if you're in that situation, you have to, *it's up to you to be you through it* . . . you'll find out the stuff you're made of [emphasis added].

The two messages are very similar. Alicia was told by the "curandera," "Your task is to be the person you want to be regardless of how you feel." Max's "little orange man" said of human suffering that "it's up to you to be you through it . . . you'll find out the stuff you're made of." The common message from the participants' other-than-human allies here seems to be that the challenge of ultimate human suffering in the face of death is to not get lost in self-pity, but to learn to accept, adapt, and move forward, to maintain one's core identity, integrity and purpose even in the face of what may seem to be a futile fight.

B.3.2.1. Relationships with "Mama" Ayahuasca. All of the participants spoke about the importance of their relationship with Ayahuasca, who they spoke about in the most intimate and personal terms. The most common epithet for Ayahuasca was "Mama," and participants invariably used the gendered pronouns "she" and "her" when referring to "Mama" Ayahuasca.

When sharing about their relationship with "Mama" Ayahuasca, participants used language that was reminiscent of the qualities that would be used to describe a healthy attachment to a primary caregiver. They described feeling safe, loved, and protected by "Mama." Maria is one example of this. She never really had a positive and healthy relationship with her mother, a grief which she processed in her Ayahuasca ceremonies. With "Mama" Ayahuasca, Maria described feeling safe, cared for, and a part of "something bigger":

> And Mama, and to know that she's there, to know that she's gonna take care of me, that I'm gonna be okay. That it has sort of made all those really intense experiences feel okay. Cause it's like I'm protected, I'm okay, I'm safe, I'm here, I'm strong . . . it's like I can just feel her around me you know and it's an inner knowing of like I am, I am safe, I'm

> protected, you know I'm part of something bigger and I'm interconnected with everything in the universe and the earth. And that has felt very powerful as somebody that felt really orphaned for a very long time.

On the other hand, participants described "Mama" Ayahuasca as like a very firm and exacting parent. They described having their boundaries pushed, sometimes to the limits of what they thought they could handle. But looking back they realized that the experience expanded their self-imposed limitations. Max said:

> Mother Ayahuasca knows . . . this is the type of person he is; I can't move too fast in this direction or that direction, but I really want to . . . I'm just outside this comfort zone a little bit, you know keeps me just outside the comfort zone and not, you know not too much and just always expands at that, at a very healthy relationship.

Alicia described an experience of receiving tough love from "Mama" Ayahuasca:

> She can be rough, don't get me wrong, she can be really harsh, but there's such clarity in it. She has a way of illuminating and showing me what in my life needs attention. What needs tending. And sometimes even very specifically how. Where I may have blinders up because of my own insecurities, and she busts those down so that I can see clearly and get to work . . . She can show me my weaknesses and my faults and my deficiency in a way that blows my heart open instead of making it collapse in shame.

Maria described moments in Ayahuasca ceremonies when "Mama" Ayahuasca would give her advice in a way that reminded her of a parent reprimanding their child:

> It's like if your parents are not yelling at you but if they're like reprimanding you like . . . "you know that's not good for you why do you keep doing that? . . . So, like I'll go

through that period where's she sort of like "honey you were supposed to be exercising more," or like "you haven't been eating right" or you know like those kind of things.

All of the sage wisdom and advice-giving reminded Maria of being in therapy. She said that these Ayahuasca experiences were like a combination of individual and couple therapy. Maria said, "So it's interesting it's almost like couple's therapy and individual therapy all at the same time. You know supervision, clinical supervision."

Alicia said she thought that her relationship with "Mama" Ayahuasca was even better than a relationship with a therapist because "Mama" has knowledge of all of her thoughts, memories and past experiences:

> I think the difference too with Medicine is that it's, the difference between Medicine and a therapist doing it is that she's actually in my head and she knows my whole story and every facet of me in ways that you can't hide anything from Mama. She knows it all. And as much as I would hope that I would be completely transparent with a therapist, it's just not the same. She can get into depths for me that I wouldn't even be willing to go into myself.

Although Max did not make the direct comparison to a therapeutic relationship, he did echo both Alicia's and Maria's description of therapeutic support as well as Ayahuasca's complete access to one's entire biography, all past and present actions, thoughts and beliefs:

> She travels through my stories, beliefs, judgements and understands the way I treat others and how I live my life . . . She will show you things you need to process and as you unpack, embrace it with love and gratitude then let it go with forgiveness. If you can stay in a trusting mindset that she knows what is best and let go.

The relationship with "Mama" Ayahuasca that participants described was not just a one-sided exchange. There was a sense of back-and-forth interchange, of reciprocity. Max said, "I can also feel my relationship with mother Ayahuasca growing together and becoming more entwined like a vine. There seems to be a trust growing both ways."

Participants shared times when they spoke back to "Mama" Ayahuasca about their own needs and desires. Max described an exchange that took place during his first Ayahuasca experience:

> My first experience with Ayahuasca was just that, because I get the feeling that I was so terrified, I was going "please be gentle with me, I'm just, I don't know what to expect, I don't know to see, just please don't scare me, don't jump of any, like, you don't know what to expect. So, I got the feeling Mother Ayahuasca, and she basically did say like "I'm just gonna put you on my knee and we're just gonna watch what's gonna happen here and you can be a part of this, we're just gonna watch the ceremony from here."

Sam shared an experience of asking "Mama" Ayahuasca to help him remember the experience he was having by putting his body into a shape that he can replicate in his daily life:

> So, in the medicine I ask Mama, put me in the posture where I will remember this experience, and then my body just goes "shoop" [moves body into posture] So my hands together, feet together, legs spread open. And so that's how I continue to um deepen that experience.

Maria described how sometimes when she is the first one to vomit in the ceremony, she feels like "Mama" Ayahuasca is using her body as a way of letting everyone else in the ceremony know she has arrived. When this occurs, Maria shared that she has an exchange with "Mama" Ayahuasca acknowledging her presence and asking her for a short reprieve:

> It feels like it's Her, like through me, just like "ahhrrrrggg like I'm here, I hear you guys, I feel you," . . . And so I think in those moments I'm like "okay, I got it Mama, yeah you're here!" Like, and I'm like "Alright honey! Amen, now give me a second. Lemme breathe," [laughing].

Maria also shared that when something difficult appears in her Ayahuasca visions, that she feels that she can ask "Mama" Ayahuasca to shift or "change" the vision. She said, "I'm like if I see something that I don't like I'm gonna ask her to change it."

Reciprocity in any relationship requires exchange and mutual benefit. In the exchange between participants and "Mama" Ayahuasca, on the surface it seems that the participants are doing most of the receiving and "Mama" is doing most of the giving. Yet, the participants described giving two things back to "Mama" Ayahuasca, gratitude and reverence. Maria described offering love and gratitude to "Mama" Ayahuasca,

> So, after ceremony, you know after like she's kicked my butt and I've purged and then whatever and then I kind of go into this space of gratitude, right? Um, then I'm like really like, like thankful and I communicate with her and I'm like I love you and thank you for being in my life and I hope you're proud of me.

Sam also described an attitude of respect and reverence,

> I feel my relationship is one of reverence, of respect . . . I know I'm loved. And I know that I've received. That I think that's one of gratitude I would say, deep gratitude, reverence.

B.3.2.2. Nature connections/relationships. While participants' relationships with Ayahuasca, other plants, and the ocean (B.3.2.; B.3.2.1.) could all be considered relationships with "nature," this sub-theme includes more general references to the ways that Ayahuasca

experiences brought about a deeper sense of interconnection with the universe, the earth, and all that the earth contains.

Maria described a transformation in her relationship with her natural surroundings, a transformation that she equated with a more indigenous ethos and ethics of reciprocity:

> Just being more conscious of the environment or you know whenever I travel now and I'm in a body of water something like that I always sing to the water. Um, I try to do blessings you know just like be very kind and appreciative and I think much more aligned with maybe that Native Americans have taken care of the earth as like we're all interconnected, everything is sacred, you know like almost going back to the roots. I'm part of something bigger and I'm interconnected with everything in the universe and the earth.

Describing a powerful moment in a particular Ayahuasca ceremony, Maria said, "I also felt a huge connection to mother earth and send her, the environment, the animals, the plants, the water a lot of love and healing."

Max shared that he got the "feeling" from "Mother" Ayahuasca that she was working through the people that participated in Ayahuasca ceremonies to initiate a "movement" that would help keep the planet alive:

> I get the feeling that mother Ayahuasca is trying to make a movement happen as well. Yeah, I get the feeling that um, in all her openness and vastness and everything that there is kind of a bottom line and opinion and [laughs] and an agenda to stay alive, you know to keep the planet going and you know, it's not just like a lot of mystical you know, this or that.

Alicia shared a moment during an Ayahuasca ceremony when "Mama" Ayahuasca reminded her about a deep connection and reciprocal love-bond that she had had with the ocean and a particular beach she often visited as a child. She described it this way:

> She showed me where, you know, this experience of visiting this beach in my childhood, over and over, throughout many years, this one beach was just this place where I just, it was home, even though I didn't live there. And this, the way that when I was a kid, I would play so fully and so just purely in the water and in the waves and in the tide pools and the way that I loved being there, that that place actually loved me the same way that I loved it.

It was this reminder by "Mama" Ayahuasca about how important that relationship had been for Alicia that inspired her to reestablish that bond with the ocean and also help her daughter to forge that connection as well (see B.3.2.).

Discussion

"We humans appear as particularly lively, intense, aware nodes of relation in an infinite network of connections, simple and complicated, direct or hidden, strong or delicate, temporary or very long-lasting. A web of connections, infinite but locally fragile, with and among everything—all beings" (Le Guin, 2017, p. M16)

As psychedelic-assisted therapy moves towards legalization in the United States, it will be important to understand what elements or processes within the psychedelic experience contribute to positive therapeutic outcomes and how best to facilitate them. This will make it easier for therapists to help clients enhance the therapeutic potential of their psychedelic experiences. Now that we have explored all of the themes which emerged from the participants'

accounts of their challenging Ayahuasca experiences, the following sections will elaborate upon what the results of this research may have to offer to the field of psychedelic-assisted therapy and beyond.

I begin by outlining the phenomenological structure of challenging psychedelic experiences as a process of relational healing. Following this I present the Purge as a theoretical construct that is helpful for foregrounding the importance of the body in the psychedelic change process. I will discuss the importance of somatic connection and relational engagement in contemporary (non-psychedelic) trauma treatment modalities. Then I explore how meaningful relationships with other-than-human people may be an undervalued factor mediating psychedelic-assisted therapeutic outcomes. In conclusion, I present my Relational Healing Model as a tool for therapists who would like to support clients as they prepare for and integrate their psychedelic experiences.

A phenomenological structure of challenging psychedelic experiences

The organization of the themes that emerged from participants' accounts revealed a phenomenological structure of the way participants made meaning from their challenging Ayahuasca experiences (Fischer, 1984, p.163). At the heart of this phenomenological structure are the challenging Ayahuasca experiences which provide the fulcrum for a larger process of transformation in participants' lives. The transformation process initiated by the challenging experiences helped move participants from a feeling of disconnection to a sense of connection with themselves, others, and the broader world (nature and cosmos). This movement towards connection is a process of *relational healing*.

This process of relational healing had two parts. The first part was the challenging Ayahuasca experience. The content of participants' challenging experiences often involved

memories, emotions, and somatic sensations of relational trauma from the participant's past. This included personal trauma, interpersonal trauma and collective trauma (see A.1.1., A.1.2., and A.1.3.). By revisiting these traumas and allowing them emotional and somatic expression, participants were able to release the trauma. This contributed to the second part of the relational healing process, which were the experiences of reconnection and relational healing that subsequently emerged in participants' lives. In summary, the process of relational healing encompasses a general movement from disconnection to connection, from trauma to healing, that is mediated by an experience of "purging" and positively affects personal, interpersonal, and collective relationships (B.1., B.2., B.3.). These findings support the theory put forth by Roseman et al., (2019, 2018), who suggested that it is helpful to consider challenging psychedelic experiences as a process of emotional breakthrough. My research also aligns with the speculation of some scholars that abreaction and catharsis are terms that support an understanding of this process of emotional breakthrough, but I suggest that there may be a more suitable alternative (Belser et al., 2017; Gasser et al., 2015; Grof, 1985; Swift et al., 2017; Watts et al., 2017).

The "Purge" as a theoretical construct

Freud and Breuer (1895/2004) wrote on the subject of abreaction and catharsis in the late 19th century. They used hypnosis to access repressed traumatic memories and emotions. Hypnosis is similar to the psychedelic state in that it enhances access to subconscious thoughts and memories along with powerful emotions. According to Freud and Breuer (1895/2004), for a traumatic experience to be resolved, a person must engage in an "energetic reaction" (p. 11) which matches the intensity of the trauma. They suggested that this reaction, which could involve anything from crying or screaming to enacting revenge, would facilitate an "emotional

discharge" (p. 11). They also theorized that if this emotional energy is not adequately discharged, then it retains its potency and could cause negative symptoms. Freud and Breuer concluded that the memory of the trauma *together with* its accompanying emotions had to be reexperienced in order to bring relief to the hysterical symptoms (p. 10). They used the term "abreaction" to describe this expression and energetic release of previously repressed memories and emotions and the term "catharsis" to describe the feeling of relief that comes from the release (p.11). Foreshadowing Freud's future rejection of abreaction and catharsis, they suggested that the energetic release could be accomplished through talking alone. They wrote, "language provides a surrogate for action and with its assistance the affect can be '*abreacted'* almost as well," (p.11).

According to Scheff (2007) in the early 20th century, Freud summarily dismissed his work with Breuer in favor of a purely verbal intervention without providing any evidence that abreaction and catharsis were ineffective. Scheff (2007) noted that Freud's dismissal of the value of catharsis was "brief and casual, compared to his careful documentation of its effectiveness in the case studies that make up *Studies on* Hysteria" (p.100). Even so, the psychoanalytic community followed in Freud's footsteps largely without question.

Decades later however, the results of Grof's (1985) experiments dosing thousands of research subjects with the psychedelic compound LSD in the 1950's and 60's, caused him to reconsider the power of abreaction and catharsis as a clinical intervention (p. 30). He concluded that psychedelic therapy "rehabilitated to a great extent the principles of abreaction and catharsis as important aspects of psychotherapy" (p. 381). Grof suggested that the reason abreaction had been abandoned as an effective therapeutic intervention is that therapeutic attempts at abreaction were "not encouraged or allowed to go to the experiential extremes that usually lead to

successful resolution" (p.381). Grof noted that in his research with psychedelics, these "experiential extremes" included "alarming suffocation, loss of control, blackout, projectile vomiting, and other quite dramatic manifestations" (p.381). In other words, clients needed to be allowed and supported to experience even the most challenging somatic manifestations that the psychedelic experience evoked. Scheff (2007) noted that clinical reports from the latter half of the 20th century on successful psychotherapeutic interventions also suggested that catharsis was an integral factor.

The participants in my research study commonly described experiences similar to abreaction and catharsis as "purging," a word whose roots are similar to "catharsis." In medical parlance, the definition of "catharsis" is the "purgation of the excrements of the body" ("Catharsis", n.d., para. 1). The root of the word "purge" is from the Latin pū*rgāre* which means "to make ritually clean . . . to expel from the body, to rid (the body) of waste or harmful matter, to absolve, clear," ("Purge", n.d., para. 1). Both words originally referred to a process of *somatic* cleansing, purifying and releasing, but the term "purge" has retained its connotations with physical release while "catharsis" more commonly refers to an emotional release. The term "purge" (*purga* in Spanish) is common among people that use Ayahuasca in Central and South America as well as in contemporary Western neo-shamanic Ayahuasca ceremonies (Fotiou and Gearin, 2019). It refers to "a means of purifying and healing a polluted mind and body of afflictive psychic entities, substances, emptiness, past experiences and states of being" (Fotiou and Gearin, 2019, p.4). It is important to note that the way the term is used in the context of Ayahuasca ceremonies is very different from its association with repression, dissociation, and avoidance or the behaviors adopted by people who purposefully vomit or use laxatives to lose

weight. In those circumstances, "purging" is detrimental to overall psychological and physical health.

Findings from my study support the adoption of the term "Purge" as a theoretical construct within the broader discourse of psychedelic-assisted therapy, beyond the limited context of its association with Ayahuasca. As a broader theoretical construct, the term could refer to the moments during psychedelic experiences (of any kind) when memories of past traumas emerge and are processed in a way that involves emotional and somatic release. It could also include experiences of emotional and somatic release that are not consciously related to past traumas. The somatic and the emotional are two inseparable aspects of this transformational process. The *somatic manifestations* of the Purge may include yawning, crying, burping, moaning, sweating, fever, shivering, shaking, physical contortions, defecating, and vomiting. The corresponding *emotional manifestations* of the Purge may include fear, anxiety, grief, loneliness, sadness, anger, remorse, shame and even ecstasy, awe, relief, and gratitude. I believe that the Purge is a more useful concept than abreaction or catharsis because those terms are overdetermined due to their historical association with psychoanalysis and verbal processing. With psychedelic experiences, it is the *somatic*, not the verbal processing of memories and emotions, that emerges as a central element in the therapeutic process. The concept of the Purge foregrounds these somatic elements. Fotiou and Gearin (2019) affirmed that, "Bodily processes of purging represent key means by which the meaning of Ayahuasca experiences, along with their emotional charge, are materialized and processed" (p.7).

It is useful to conceptualize the Purge not as a discreet action or event, but rather a *traversable experiential realm*. It is like a sphere of somatic and emotional experience that varies in intensity as one approaches a central node. The farther one gets from the node of the

realm of the Purge, the less intense the emotional and somatic manifestations become. Closest to the node are extreme experiences of suffering and/or dying. One's proximity to the node of the Purge shifts throughout the psychedelic experience as different memories, emotions and somatic sensations emerge and are processed. Although the term "purge" has often been associated with just the most extreme somatic experiences, the Purge as a theoretical construct encompasses the full spectrum of somatic release from burping and crying to vomiting and defecating. Although the description of the Purge may make one wonder why anyone would ever volunteer to go through such a challenging experience, as evidenced by the participants' accounts, the sense of unburdening and release engendered by the Purge, made them willing, to return to it again and again.

Various somatic expressions of the Purge were revealed in the stories of the participants in my study. They used the word "purge" to refer to moments when they were somatically processing and releasing trauma. Sam described continuing to experience the "purging that happened on the boat" for days after his Ayahuasca ceremony. The somatic elements to his Purge were fever, sweating and vomiting. Max said that when he vomited, he "purged this idea of . . . the man that I was expected to be." Maria shared that the music could bring on "huge purging feelings" which included the somatic manifestations of crying or vomiting. Even when participants were not using the term "purge," they described processes of somatic cleansing and releasing. Maria shared that when she vomits, she feels like she is "releasing" the sorrows and stress of her trauma clients, she also described vomiting as feeling like she was "cleaning the earth" of the collective trauma of incessant resource extraction.

The Purge, the body and relational connections

Researchers outside of the field of psychedelic-assisted therapy and research have also emphasized the importance of the body in healing trauma (Levine & Frederick, 1997; Porges, 2011; Van Der Kolk, 2014). Van Der Kolk (2014) is a medical doctor specializing in trauma therapy and research. His discoveries lend support to the idea that the construct of the Purge, with its somatic emphasis, would be a valuable conceptual tool for therapists and researchers interested in psychedelics. In his book, *The Body Keeps the Score*, which outlines his groundbreaking research into the neuroscience of trauma, Van Der Kolk (2014) explained that "the memory of trauma is encoded in the viscera, in heartbreaking and gut-wrenching emotions," (p.88). He went on to elaborate that healing from trauma involves the combination of two factors: mind/body communication and social engagement (p.88). Psychedelic experiences can offer both.

Somatic communication.

Mind/body communication helps people to get in touch with their body and begin to "feel what they feel and know what they know" (p.27). Van Der Kolk (2014) explained, "We can get past the slipperiness of words by engaging the self-observing, body-based self system, which speaks through sensations, tone of voice, and body tensions. Being able to perceive visceral sensations is the very foundation of emotional awareness," (p.240). Psychedelics are general amplifiers of experience, including somatic sensations. In the realm of the Purge, the amplification of somatic sensations helped participants in this study to connect with their trauma that was "encoded in the viscera" (p. 88). Van Der Kolk concurred, "when you follow the interoceptive pathways to your innermost recesses—things begin to change," (p.240). Van Der

Kolk (2014) recognized that verbal processing often fails to access the trauma but allowing the non-verbal messages of bodily sensations to speak can lead to healing.

Fotiou & Gearin (2019) found a similar relationship between trauma and purging in interviews with tourists that came to Iquitos, Peru to drink Ayahuasca for healing or personal transformation. Similar to the present study, they found that a common theme in descriptions of Ayahuasca purging was "the expulsion of past traumatic experiences" (p.5). They went on say that,

> Drinkers describe "letting-go", "releasing", and "unblocking" past experiences and healing trauma through the act of ayahuasca purging . . . there was an emphasis on purging sexual abuse, domestic violence, and social or familial disagreement and disorder as well as addictive patterns or negative aspects of one's personality. (p.5)

The amplification of somatic sensations and the experiential connection between the sensations, traumatic memories, and emotions in the realm of the Purge may be a key mechanism of action that underlies the ability of psychedelics to support healing.

Relational Networks

The other half of Van Der Kolk's (2014) equation for healing from trauma is social engagement. He said that social engagement is important because it engenders feelings of safety and belonging. Van Der Kolk explained:

> Humans are social animals, and mental problems involve not being able to get along with other people, not fitting in, not belonging, and in general not being able to get on the same wavelength. Everything about us—our brains, or minds, and our bodies—is geared toward collaboration in social systems. This is our most powerful survival strategy, the

> key to our success as a species, and it is precisely this that breaks down in most forms of mental suffering. (p. 168)

In other words, relational connection is an important key to relieving psychological suffering. The importance of relational connection that emerged from the findings in my study confirm the findings of other researchers who also found "connectedness" (Carhart-Harris et al., 2017; Watts et al., 2017) and "relational embeddedness" (Belser et al., 2017) were important mediating factors in the therapeutic efficacy of psychedelics.

In my study, relational connection unfolded at two distinct times: after the ceremonies in the day-to-day lives of the participants and during the Ayahuasca ceremony itself. Participants described multiple ways that their relationships shifted in positive directions after their challenging Ayahuasca experiences (see B.2. for details). Every one of the participants described realizing the importance of their relationships with family and most described prioritizing spending more quality time with them. Maria shared how she came back with clear instructions from "Mama" Ayahuasca for how to heal her relationship with her wife. Max described having more patience with his teenage son which allowed them to stay connected.

During the ceremony itself, there were multiple co-occurring layers of relational connection. There were the connections among the ceremony participants, the connections between the ceremony participants and the facilitator (Sage), and the connections between the ceremony participants and the other-than-human people such as "Mama" Ayahuasca. Participants described the importance of their relationships with Sage as well as with the other partakers in the ceremony (see B.2.2.3. for details). This dense relational network of mutual trust and care allowed participants to feel safe enough to surrender into even the most challenging

Ayahuasca experiences. Maria shared that when she thought she was dying, her trust in Sage allowed her to feel safe.

The ritual framework of the Ayahuasca ceremony itself provided a sense of communal support and belonging that should not be underestimated. Relational traumas often involve the experience of being shamed or made to feel "alone, defective, unwanted, worthless and unlovable" (Sweezy, 2011, p. 186). Sweezy (2013) explains that shame is an "extraordinarily dynamic phenomenon" that "gather[s] strength like a hurricane that can blow the message *I am flawed and alone* through generations" (p.33). The Ayahuasca ceremony offered participants a safe space to be witnessed and accepted by both human and other-than-human people during emotionally vulnerable moments. Van Der Kolk (2000) suggested that, "Traumatized individuals need to have experiences that directly contradict the emotional helplessness and physical paralysis that accompany traumatic experiences" (p.256). Processing trauma in the safe and communally supportive atmosphere of the Ayahuasca ceremony may have offered participants a powerful antidote to past experiences of shame and exile.

Other-than-human people. The relationships between ceremony participants and other-than-human people were some of the most important findings of this research. These connections were a significant component of the dense relational network that the Ayahuasca ceremony facilitated. Such relationships may also be a novel and supportive addition in the "social engagement" that Van Der Kolk (2000) suggested was a necessary part of healing trauma (p. 88). Relationships with other-than-human people brought a sense of love, care, trust, safety, universal connection and meaning into participants' lives during the Ayahuasca ceremony and beyond (see B.3.2.). The relationship with "Mama" Ayahuasca was an important factor in the healing outcomes of all of the participants (see B.3.2.1.).

The concept of "other-than-human person" was first published by the anthropologist Hallowell (1975/1992), after extensive field research with the native Ojibwa people. Detwiler (1992) summed up Hallowell's findings when he said,

> As the Ojibwa understand the cosmos . . . human persons and other-than-human persons are not ontologically different. They are manifestations of being on an ontological continuum of personhood . . . the Ojibwa hold that all aspects of their world are ontologically related to them. (p. 237)

For the Ojibwa, plants, animals, elements and even non-corporeal beings (spirits) were equally considered "people" if they exhibited relational capacities.

As a construct, "other-than-human people" is helpful because it highlights the *relational behavior* of all sorts of phenomena that may emerge during psychedelic experiences: animals, plants, and other things of the natural world as well as spirits, angels, entities, aliens, plant spirits, guides, deities, gods, or God. The term eliminates the need to create an ontological dissimilarity between what is "natural" and what is "supernatural." Rather than resorting to culturally relative ontological distinctions, the term "other-than-human person" focuses on behaviors of meaningful reciprocal exchange. If something can engage in meaningful reciprocal exchange, then it is an other-than-human person regardless of whether or not it is a plant, a rock, a god, or any other non-corporeal presence. Relational capacity and reciprocity are the primary prerequisites for personhood.

The Ayahuasca experiences initiated the participants' connections and relationships with the other-than-human people. These unique relationships then helped the participants to identify disconnections/traumas in their relational networks, supported them through the Purge, and guided them towards relational healing in their everyday lives. In other words, relationships with

other-than-human people were a critical part of the phenomenological structure of relational healing for the participants in this study.

In the participants' narratives, the most common other-than-human relationship was with "Mama" Ayahuasca (see section B.3.2.1.). All of the participants made reference to this relationship as a valuable part of their Ayahuasca experiences, as well as a valuable part of their lives outside of the ceremony. "Mama" Ayahuasca was described as an exacting but loving guide and mentor on their journey of relational healing. Relationships with other-than-human people in the participant accounts also included relationships with other plants (Maria, Alicia), the ocean, and various other presences without physical form (Sam, Max, Maria, Alicia). These relationships with other-than-human people often transcended the boundaries of the ceremonies themselves, extending into participants' day-to-day lives. They encouraged the participants to restore relational connections with other humans (see B.2.) and helped them to feel more interconnected with nature and the cosmos (see B.3.2.2.).

This phenomenon of people encountering and relating with other-than-human people during psychedelic experiences is not unique to Ayahuasca. Such relationships have shown up in research studies where participants and survey respondents ingested various psychedelic compounds including psilocybin, LSD, and DMT (inhaled), as well as Ayahuasca (Davis et al., 2020; Griffiths et al. 2019; Harris, 2017; Shanon, 2002; Swift et al., 2017; Watts et al., 2017). For instance, in the Watts et al. (2017) study participants were given psilocybin. The researchers collated participant encounters with other-than-human people under the theme heading "connection to a spiritual principle" (pp. 525-526). One participant described a female "ancient being" that was "omnipotent and unconditionally loving" (p.535). This description echoes descriptions of "Mama" Ayahuasca, shared by participants in the present study.

In the Belser et al. (2017) study participants had also taken psilocybin. The researchers organized participant encounters with other-than-human people under the thematic heading "Loved Ones as Guiding Spirits" (p. 365). Multiple participants described hearing or seeing a "being" or "guiding angel" who often had the appearance of family members and guided them through their psilocybin experiences (p. 365). The authors specifically remarked on the "interpersonal nature" of these encounters, noting that participants' experiences were "often mediated by the presence of a guiding spirit" (p. 366).

Two large internet surveys previously asked thousands of respondents specifically about their encounters with other-than-human people after consuming a psychedelic substance (Davis et al., 2020; Griffiths et al., 2019). Relational and reciprocal behaviors were at the core of these encounters in both studies. In one, 3,476 respondents endorsed having encounters with "God (e.g., the God of your understanding), Higher Power, Ultimate Reality, or an Aspect or Emissary of God (e.g., an angel)" after ingesting either Ayahuasca, psilocybin, LSD, or DMT (Griffiths et al., 2019, p. 3). No matter which psychedelic they had taken, more than half of the respondents endorsed *communicating* with that which they encountered, with approximately three-quarters of respondents saying they received a "message, mission, or insight" (p. 7). In addition, over two-thirds of the respondents said that what they encountered was "benevolent (i.e., kind, compassionate, altruistic)," "conscious," and "intelligent" (p. 12). In addition, over three-quarters of the respondents considered this relational encounter as one of the top five most meaningful and spiritually significant experiences of their lifetime (p. 11).

In the second survey, 2,561 respondents endorsed having had an "entity encounter" after ingesting smoked or vaporized DMT (Davis et al., 2020, p. 1008). Of respondents, 84% said that they communicated with the entity, and more than three-quarters said the entity was benevolent,

conscious, and intelligent (p.1013). Over half of the respondents said that they felt love, kindness, trust and joy during the encounter. In addition, over half of the respondents from this survey reported the experience to be "one of the top five or single most personally meaningful, spiritually significant, or psychologically insightful experiences of their lives" (p. 1012).

Connections and relationships with other-than-human people (mediated by ingesting psychedelics) is an important phenomenon that is only recently garnering the attention that it deserves. Participants in my study and the others cited above said that other-than-human people were mediating, guiding, and supporting their psychedelic experiences, as well as offering advice, psychological insight, love and care (Davis et al., 2020; Griffiths et al. 2019; Harris, 2017; Shanon, 2002; Swift et al., 2017; Watts et al., 2017). Relational connections with other-than-human people are an underappreciated element in the categories of "connectedness," "relational embeddedness," and "social engagement" put forth in the research literature (Belser et al., 2017; Van Der Kolk, 2014; Watts et al., 2017).

Relational connections and encounters with other-than-human people may also have been an overlooked aspect of the 21st century pioneering psychedelic research which assessed for participant's "mystical experiences" (Griffiths et al., 2008; Griffiths et al. 2006). In fact, participant descriptions of encounters with "God," and "the Beloved," did appear in a table of participant comments in one of these publications, but the implications were not elaborated (Griffiths et al., 2008, p. 629). Griffiths et al., (2019) admitted that "Although previous laboratory studies of psilocybin did not assess God encounter experiences per se, some participants in the laboratory studies spontaneously described such experiences" (pp. 2-3).

One of the reasons that these types of relational encounters with other-than-human people, which participants and respondents have described as so valuable (Davis et al., 2020;

Griffiths et al., 2019), did not show up in those early studies is that the quantitative results were dependent upon scales, such as Hood's M-scale & the MEQ, whose measures were based upon a conceptual model of mystical experience developed by Stace (1960). Stace deliberately rejected important categories of experience from his model of mystical experience including "visions and voices" (p. 47), and "Raptures, Trances, and Hyperemotionalism" (p. 51). Taking an unfortunately prejudiced position, Stace stated at the beginning of his work that he would only be taking into account the "mysticisms of all the *higher cultures"* for his research (p.38, emphasis added). He made allusions to visions as products of the devil (p. 49) and said that raptures and trances only occur among "the more emotional and hysterical mystics and not among those of the more calm, serene, and intellectual types" (p. 52-53). Visions and voices, seen and heard in altered states of consciousness induced by rapture and trance, are some of the most common forms of spiritual communion in many indigenous and shamanic cultures, including the ones that use psychedelic plants and fungi.

By deliberately removing embodied, emotional, ecstatic, and relational forms of spiritual communion, Stace (1960) created a white-washed definition of mystical experience that was scrubbed of the values and experiences of the vast majority of the indigenous people on the earth. And by using Stace's work as a foundation for the mystical experience questionnaires (Hood's M-scale and the MEQ) that have been widely used in psychedelic research trials, researchers eliminated from measurement the kinds of experiences that were the foundation of the religious beliefs and practices of the indigenous cultures from which the use of psychedelics originated.

I suggest that future quantitative measures designed to evaluate psychedelic experiences be revised or expanded to eliminate the implicit racism in Stace's (1960) "mystical experience"

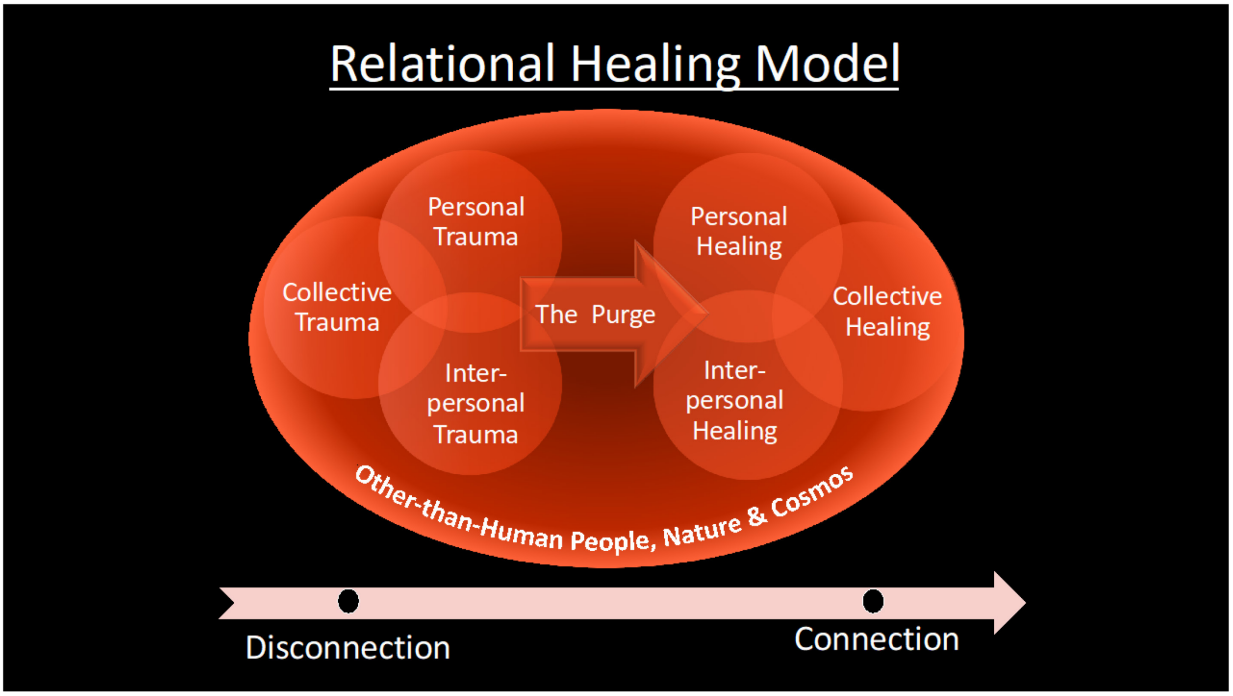
construct and include questions that assess for encounters with "other-than-human people." This umbrella term is preferrable because it avoids ontological value judgments and foregrounds relational behavior. Griffiths et al., (2019) and Davis et al., (2020) used different terms such as "god" and "entity" to describe similar relational encounters. They found that such encounters were very significant to respondents, but the lack of a shared vocabulary between the studies may have diluted the value of the results. The term "other-than-human people" or "other-than-human beings or presences" would serve to collect all such encounters under one descriptive label.

A Model of Relational Healing

I developed the Relational Healing Model (see Figure 2) based on the experiences my participants shared. It offers a simple conceptual and visual map of the phenomenological structure of relational healing that was revealed by my research. I will begin by explaining the different parts of the model and how they relate to my participants' experiences. Then I will discuss how the Relational Healing Model could help therapists support their clients to get the most therapeutic benefit from their psychedelic experiences. Finally, I will consider how psychedelic-informed psychotherapeutic modalities may be useful to incorporate with clients who have no interest in taking psychedelics.

Figure 2

The Relational Healing Model



As seen in Figure 2, the model is separated into a "Disconnection" side and a "Connection" side. On the Disconnection side is the relational trauma from the participant's past. On the Connection side are the experiences of relational healing that unfold in response to the Purge. In the center, facilitating the movement between disconnection and connection is the Purge. The Purge is a realm of experience where the memories of relational traumas from the past emerge and are processed in a way that involves an emotional and somatic release.

The model differentiates between three types of relationships that move from disconnection to connection via the Purge: Personal, Interpersonal and Collective (see themes A.1.1., A.1.2., A.1.3.; B.1., B.2., B.3.). Each type of relationship is considered a different "layer" of the model. The Personal layer includes experiences of healing the relationship to one's self and one's life by discovering a sense of meaning and purpose (A.1.1.; B.1.). The Purge experiences encountered on the Personal layer include confronting suffering and death (A.2.). For Sam, the Purge included reliving a past traumatic confrontation with death. Maria's migraine combined with the memory of the death of her Aunt also initiated a dying experience.

Alicia, on the other hand, did not relate her death experience to a past trauma. Psychedelic confrontations with death may not always be associated with past traumas. There seems to be an existential pull in humans to reconcile with their own death in a more intimate way. Many indigenous cultures around the world have rites of passage that facilitate such direct confrontations and reconciliations with death. In the West we do not have equivalent ritual containers. Instead, there may be a tendency to compulsively and pathologically avoid death (Becker, 1997; Mellor & Shilling, 1993). Psychedelic experiences of death like the one shared by Alicia, may be a way of fulfilling the existential need to have a more intimate relationship with death.

Other forms of physical and psychological suffering on the Disconnection side of the Personal layer (A.1.) include physical ailments such as diseases (Alicia), as well as migraines and panic attacks (Maria). On the Connection side of the Personal layer (B.1.) all of the participants shared that moving through Purges that included suffering and/or death gave them a sense of gratitude for being alive and brought a deeper sense of meaning and purpose into their lives. Some participants also initiated healthier self-care habits (Maria), experienced greater self-acceptance (Maria, Max; B.1.3.), stronger personal resilience (Alicia, Hawk; B.1.4.), and literal physical healing (Alicia; B.1.5.). In other words, participants reconnected and found healing in their relationship with themselves.

Interpersonal relationships include family, partners, friends, foes, or acquaintances. The Disconnection side of the Interpersonal layer includes experiences of past traumas or wounds that occurred in relationships with others (A.1.2.). Some participants already knew a lot about their past traumas before the psychedelic experience. For others, insights into the nature and depth of the traumas were revealed during the experience itself. On the Connection side of the

Interpersonal layer is the healing of close relationships, especially with family members (B.2.1.). Also included here are the beneficial relationships with the therapists, guides, facilitators and the community of people that come together around the psychedelic experience (B.2.2.3.). The participant's relationships with the other people involved in the experience are a crucial part of the healing process.

The Disconnection side of the Collective layer includes the participant's experiences (usually in the Purge) of *vicarious trauma* that happened to *other* individuals, groups of people, or the natural world (Max, Maria, Hawk, Alicia; A.1.3.1.). It also includes experiences of *ancestral trauma*, in other words the trauma of familial ancestors or ancestral clans (Maria, Hawk; A.1.3.2.). Intimately experiencing the wounds and traumas of others, may lead to a sense of deeper connection with these individuals, groups, ancestors and the natural world. This phenomenon is not unique to this study. Fotiou and Gearin (2019) recognized a similar collective phenomenon with their Ayahuasca study participants. They called it "relational modes of purging" (p.7). Their participants "described purging for other people who were present, or in some cases not present, at the ceremony . . . In some instances people describe purging for groups of people" (p.7). Modern science is lacking in frameworks or theories that explain how it may be possible to experience wounds and traumas that occurred to other people in different places and different times, including the trauma of the natural world.

Surrounding all the other layers is the Other-than-human layer which includes connections and relationships with other-than-human people, nature and the cosmos (B.3.2.). Other-than-human people include any being, entity or presence that exhibits relational and reciprocal behaviors (communication, exchange, or care) regardless of their presenting form or ontological status. The other-than-human layer encompasses the other layers in the Relational

Healing Model which reflects the way that our human relationships are embedded in the larger relational matrix of nature and the broader cosmos. Connection in this layer is not facilitated by the Purge. Instead, the entire psychedelic experience helps to support these relationships. In a reciprocal fashion, the relationships with other-than-human people help to facilitate the process of relational healing. Participants felt that other-than-human people, especially "Mama" Ayahuasca, were supporting relational healing on all levels, both during the ceremony and in their daily lives (B.3.2.1.).

The Relational Healing Model as a therapeutic method

If psychedelic-assisted therapy continues to be legalized in more states and municipalities, there will likely be a corresponding increase in people seeking the support of psychedelic-informed therapists to help them maximize the benefit of their psychedelic experiences. To fill that need, some therapists will seek training to prepare clients for psychedelic sessions as well as help them integrate the experiences into their daily life. Other therapists will also get trained to facilitate the psychedelic sessions themselves, and that role will require a unique skill set. The Relational Healing Model may have something to offer to both roles, but I believe it may be most applicable to psychedelic preparation and integration therapy. In the following discussion I will focus on this particular therapeutic role and describe how psychedelic preparatory and integration therapy sessions could look based on the Relational Healing Model. Therapists can hold this model lightly and meet their clients where they are in any given moment. Clients may have transformative psychedelic sessions that only partially align with the contours of the model, or not at all.

Therapists with clients looking for support in preparing for and integrating psychedelic experiences should educate themselves (and their clients) about the potential risks as well as the

possible benefits of psychedelic experiences. Not all psychedelic experiences will be therapeutic. Some psychedelic experiences may be strange, uncomfortable, and ultimately benign. Although extreme long-term negative consequences appear to be very rare, long-term psychological imbalance (including psychosis) is possible.

Other more common psychological risks of psychedelic use include spiritual bypass, spiritual narcissism and spiritual addiction (Trichter, 2010). Trichter explains that *spiritual bypass* is a term for the use of a spiritual practice (in this case ritual psychedelic use) to *avoid* confronting unresolved psychological issues and unhealthy relational patterns. *Spiritual narcissism*, is a term that Trichter associated with clients that became so involved in their spiritual path that they pushed aside their loved ones and their professions to pursue spiritual connection with no compassion for the negative impacts on others. Another potential psychological trap of psychedelic use is *Spiritual addiction,* which is a phenomenon where people compulsively seek out more and more spiritual experiences and become dependent on them as a "soothing coping mechanism" (p.139). These psychological risks may be productively navigated or avoided all together with the support of a psychedelic-informed therapist. In an era of "conspirituality" (Ward & Voas, 2011), when peoples' spiritual beliefs are overlapping with widespread conspiracy theories in ways that have serious social and political consequences, it is critical to have therapists trained to recognize the psycho-spiritual hazards of psychedelic use. Psychedelic-informed therapists can help clients to translate the insights gained during psychedelic experiences into grounded, prosocial changes in their relationships with themselves and others.

Psychedelic preparation and integration therapy informed by the Relational Healing Model would include three basic elements: the exploration of past traumas, deepening somatic

awareness, and strengthening and expanding the client's relational network. The therapeutic application of these three elements would look slightly different depending on whether the therapist was preparing the client for a psychedelic experience or helping them to integrate one into their lives. I will begin by discussing the application of the model to psychedelic preparation.

Psychedelic-informed therapists that are working to prepare clients for psychedelic-assisted therapy sessions could support them through an assessment of their "set" as well as the planned "setting" of the experience. As a concept, "set and setting" refer to the fact that people under the influence of psychedelic substances are in a very suggestive and malleable state (Hartogsohn, 2017). Everything that is happening in their external environment, as well as everything that is happening in the internal environment of their body and psyche, can profoundly influence the course and outcome of the psychedelic experience. "Set" refers to the internal state, both psychological and physiological, that the client will bring to the psychedelic session. "Setting" refers to the external environment in which the psychedelic session will take place. This includes the physical location as well as any therapists or guides that will be present. The therapist could begin a preparatory session by exploring the "five W's" of the psychedelic setting, the "who, what, when, where and why." Who will be supporting the client through the psychedelic-assisted therapy session? What psychedelic drug are they planning on taking? When is the psychedelic session scheduled to occur and how long does the client have to prepare for it? What is the quality of the physical space where the session will take place? And finally, why have they chosen to seek out a psychedelic experience at this point in their life?

The exploration of past traumas would be an important contribution to an understanding of the "set" that the client will bring into their psychedelic session. The Relational Healing

Model outlines three "layers" of relationships that may have been compromised by trauma, the Personal, the Interpersonal, and the Collective Layers. The Personal Layer involves the client's relationship to themselves. The exploration of the Personal Layer with a client would include their hopes and intentions for their psychedelic session (the why?) as well as their fears and concerns. What do they imagine may come up for them during their psychedelic experience? The Personal Layer also involves the client's consideration of the quality of their life and their personal habits. Does the client engage in unhealthy behaviors or lack self-care? The Interpersonal Layer involves the consideration of the client's relationships with family, friends, foes, and colleagues. Are there any significant disconnections in these relationships that the client feels may arise during the drug session? Through the discussion of the Collective Layer, the client becomes aware that they may encounter relational traumas or wounds that do not originate from their personal histories. This could include connecting with the trauma of family, intimate partners, friends, groups, ancestors, or the natural world. Although there is no way to predict what may arise during a psychedelic session, this assessment may bring to light some important disconnections in the client's relational network that would be helpful to address.

The final layer of the Relational Healing Model encompasses all the others. In this layer, connections, encounters and relationships may occur between the client and other-than-human people, nature and the cosmos. The client may have a personal encounter with what they experience as God, a nature "spirit," or they may feel connected to the entire living cosmos. The model would help orient therapists and clients to the wide range of non-ordinary connections and relationships that may occur during the psychedelic experience. It is important that the clinician not impose their own values and beliefs into the discussion but rather share the possibilities and allow the client to orient according to their own belief system.

One of the most important roles of the psychedelic integration therapist may be to help the client deepen their somatic awareness. During the psychedelic session, somatic sensations may be amplified to the point of feeling overwhelming. If the client is not prepared for this, it may lead them to resist the sensations, which could make the experience more difficult and the Purge less effective. Therefore, it may be helpful for the client to prepare for the drug session by practicing moving in and out of the realm of the Purge without the added somatic intensity of the psychedelic.

Therapists can help their clients to do this in their preparatory sessions. As the client verbally explores past traumas, the therapist may notice the client's voice becoming restricted, or their eyes getting moist. In that moment the therapist may invite the client to close their eyes, notice their breath, and turn their attention inward to see what they notice. This helps the client connect with somatic sensations that may be associated with the traumatic memories they were exploring. Attending to even the most subtle somatic sensations and corresponding emotions in this way puts the client within the realm of the Purge.

At this point the therapist can help their client to amplify the somatic sensations by inviting them to imagine approaching the sensations in the body, describing them, and even asking the sensations what they want the client to know or understand. During this process, memories, emotions and images may arise that are associated with the trauma. This may lead to a somatic release such as crying. The therapist would allow this process to move through a natural culmination and completion. Supporting the client in this way may help them to gain comfort and proficiency working in the realm of the Purge which could be good preparation for the psychedelic session. There are several therapeutic models and techniques that attempt to strengthen somatic awareness in a similar way including, Internal Family Systems (IFS), Eye

Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), Focusing, Gestalt therapy and Somatic Experiencing (SE).

During the first integration meeting that takes place after the psychedelic session, the client could be invited to share the story of their experience. After the story has been shared, the clinician can support an exploration of any past relational traumas or wounds that emerged during the psychedelic experience, as well as the emotions and somatic sensations that were associated with them. In addition, the therapist could consider the following questions: How did the client navigate the Purge? Was there an experience of release or resolution? What was the quality of the relationship with the therapist(s) or guide(s) of the psychedelic session? Did the client experience any feelings of connection or relationship with other-than-human people? As the therapist asks open-ended questions, the client could guide the reflection and exploration. If at any point, the client appears to be reexperiencing aspects of the psychedelic experience, the therapist may gently guide the client to go inward and connect with their somatic sensations as a way of moving back into the realm of the Purge.

The therapist may then use the information that they learned from the client's story to support them in their process of relational healing. This includes exploring which relational traumas emerged as most salient during the psychedelic experience, whether or not they were resolved, what new connections or relationships were formed, and which frayed relationships they want to work on mending. Did the client have a realization that they have been out of sync with family members, and they would like to try to reconcile and reconnect with them? Did they have an encounter or connection with an other-than-human person such as a god, a deity, or a plant spirit that they want to continue to be in relationship with? Maybe the client had important insights into how they have been treating themselves, including unhealthy patterns that they

would like to change. The therapist can invite the client to consider what concrete steps they could take to begin healing old relationships and cultivating new ones.

The Relational Healing Model is also relevant for therapists that are not interested in psychedelic preparation and integration. The movement from relational disconnection to relational connection is a central goal of most therapeutic modalities but strengthening a client's somatic awareness by exploring the realm of the Purge is a unique way of approaching that goal. Perhaps once legal psychedelic use has been integrated into our society, psychedelic-informed therapeutic techniques will be widely taught and practiced with or without the use of the psychedelic drugs themselves.

Limits of the Study

There are several limitations to this study that are important to keep in mind. The first is the number of research participants. The second is the narrow scope of the research topic. An additional limitation is the homogeneity of the participant group.

In-depth qualitative research offers a depth of understanding that quantitative research cannot. It is valuable for uncovering meaningful and significant phenomenological details of lived experience that would otherwise be overlooked. On the other hand, it can be very time consuming which means that the number of participants included in in-depth qualitative research studies is often small. This study analyzed the experiences of five participants. This may mean that there are important aspects of the phenomenon in question that were not experienced by the participants and therefore not accounted for by this study. Nevertheless, it offers findings and hypotheses that can be further elaborated upon with research on larger and more diverse populations.

In addition to the limited number of participants, the scope of this study is narrow in a couple of ways. The subject of challenging psychedelic experiences is broad. When people think of difficult psychedelic experiences, they often think of so-called "bad trips." Psychedelic experiences that do not lead to positive outcomes are certainly an important phenomenon to investigate, but this study deliberately recruited participants who had challenging psychedelic experiences that were ultimately positive and transformative. This means that the conclusions I draw are may only be applicable to people whose challenging experiences find resolution and lead to positive outcomes.

It is also important to note that I chose to focus on just one type of psychedelic experience, the Ayahuasca ceremony. Due to the small number of participants that I would be recruiting, I thought it would be most valuable to investigate just one type of psychedelic experience. While I have cited research that suggests experiences with different psychedelic compounds exhibit significant overlap in terms of their phenomenology and therapeutic action, there are certainly aspects of the Ayahuasca experience that are unique. One of the main differences is that Ayahuasca is often taken in a group setting or ceremony that includes a strong ritual framework. This kind of communal setting offers some therapeutic benefits that might significantly affect outcomes. Another difference is that Ayahuasca has a reputation for offering a more physically rigorous experience than other psychedelics.

Furthermore, all of my research participants were recruited by the same Ayahuasca ceremony facilitator (Sage), and almost all of the challenging Ayahuasca experiences shared by participants took place in ceremonies that Sage facilitated. The purpose of this was to reduce potential variables that could have affected outcomes such as the quality and potency of the Ayahuasca brew, and the way the ceremony was organized and conducted. However, this means

that the findings may not generalize to Ayahuasca experiences that occur with different facilitators in different settings, much less to experiences with other types of psychedelics. The powerful influence of "set and setting" on psychedelic experiences means that people may not feel the same level of safety, trust and competency with their facilitators or therapists and therefore may not experience similar positive outcomes.

Suggestions for Future Research

The limitations of qualitative research also contribute to its strengths. An in-depth phenomenological analysis can discover details of participants' experiences that quantitative analyses would have missed. However, the two methods may work best in combination.

The construct of the Purge fits naturally into Ayahuasca experiences which have a reputation for powerful somatic releases such as vomiting. However, the somatic manifestations of the Purge may also be more subtle such as crying, yawning, and sweating. I would suggest that future phenomenological analyses examine the Purge process to see if it occurs in a similar way with other psychedelic compounds. Such studies could also be helpful in developing quantitative measures that are sensitive to the combination of psychological, emotional *and somatic* processing and release of past trauma during challenging psychedelic experiences.

It is clear that the participants' relationship with Sage was an important component in their healing process. She cultivated a sense of trust and safety with her ceremony participants. Each one of the participants described feeling that they had a close personal connection with her as well. These factors cannot be separated from the effects of the Ayahuasca in this study. Yet, measuring the effect of the relationships with the therapists or ceremonial facilitators on the therapeutic outcomes of psychedelic experiences could lead to important discoveries. Future

research could focus on the experiences of participants that didn't feel they had good relationships with the therapists or ceremonial facilitators.

There are several unanswered questions in regard to the applicability of the Relational Healing Model that could be investigated. Is the model applicable to challenging experiences that occur with psychedelics other than Ayahuasca? Is the model relevant to psychedelic experiences that clients or participants may not initially label as "challenging?" There are many questions that remain unanswered in the blossoming field of psychedelic-assisted therapy. It is my hope that these substances are legalized for supervised therapeutic use so that diverse funding streams can become available to future scholars and therapists for research.

Conclusion

The potential return of psychedelic-assisted therapy as a legal and professionally endorsed mental health intervention could usher in a new paradigm of treatment within the fields of psychiatry, psychology, and psychotherapy. Unlike other psychiatric drugs, it is the psychedelic *experience* and its ongoing ramifications, that mediates outcomes. But the psychedelic experience is both unpredictable and easily influenced by external circumstances. Therefore, it is important that future psychedelic-informed researchers and therapists pay particular attention to understanding and enhancing the variables that lead to positive therapeutic outcomes. The current study was completed in an attempt to contribute to the understanding of these variables.

I focused on challenging psychedelic experiences because, although they might seem like something to avoid, results from previous studies showed that participants found that such experiences increased their sense of well-being and life satisfaction as well as being deeply meaningful, and spiritually significant (Barrett et al., 2016; Carbonaro et al., 2016). Researchers

were not clear about why these positive outcomes emerged from such challenging experiences (Barrett et al., 2016; Carbonaro et al., 2016). This study explored the phenomenology of the way people make meaning from challenging psychedelic experiences in an attempt to discover clues to this mystery.

I analyzed the stories of five participants who took Ayahuasca in a ritual context. The results of this analysis revealed a phenomenological structure of challenging psychedelic experiences consisting of a change process that moved the participants from a sense of disconnection to a sense of connection with themselves, others, nature and the cosmos. At the heart of this therapeutic change process was an experience of contacting past relational traumas and processing them emotionally and *somatically* in a way that led to a sense of release and relief. The somatic and the emotional are inseparable aspects of this transformational process. Somatic engagement was revealed as a key component, and the concept of the Purge was elaborated as a way of emphasizing the centrality of the body in the healing process, as well as the full spectrum of somatic expressions that belong to it. The Purge helped participants to recognize relational disconnections and begin to strengthen and diversify their relational networks which was the other key component of the therapeutic change process.

One of the most important ways that participants described strengthening and diversifying their relational networks was the inclusion of relationships with other-than-human people who supported and guided them through the challenges and transformations of the psychedelic sessions as well as beyond in their daily lives. The exploration of these elements of the therapeutic change process contributes to a deeper understanding of the mediating factors that are most significant to the long-term therapeutic outcomes of psychedelic-assisted therapy.

Based upon the phenomenological structure that emerged from my participants' stories, I developed a conceptual model (the Relational Healing Model) to serve as a concise visual and conceptual map of the various components of the therapeutic change process. The study culminated in the presentation of a practical therapeutic application of the Relational Healing Model that gives future psychedelic-informed therapists a guide for organizing and implementing psychedelic preparation and integration sessions. I believe that findings from this research, such as the construct of the Purge, the importance of relationships with other-than-human people, and the Relational Healing Model with its accompanying therapeutic application, may be of value to future psychedelic researchers and therapists as this exciting field of psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy begins to flourish.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Letter

Hello, my name is Leland Guthrie, and I am conducting research as a clinical psychology PhD student at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, PA. A few years ago, I returned to academia with the goal of becoming a psychedelic psychotherapist. I want to help make psychedelics more accessible to those in need of their healing potential. I have been lucky enough to find myself in an academic program that is supporting me to conduct research about the ways that Mamacita may sponsor growth, transformation and healing. I am hoping that you will be willing to support my research. Specifically, I am interested in talking with you if you experienced any of these things during a ceremony with Mamacita within the past year or so (including but not limited to): resistance, fear, grief, despair, insanity, isolation, death, darkness, paranoia, suffering, confusion, anger, shame and physical distress, or any such similar phenomena. If so, then I am asking if you would be willing to write a detailed description of your experience and then have a conversation with me about it.

Your time commitment would be the time it takes for you to write the detailed description of your experience and 1.5-2 hrs. for the interview. I will focus on maintaining your confidentiality throughout the process by using pseudonyms and deleting any personal communications with identifying information. Although this is not specifically intended to be a therapeutic process, you may find value in spending time thinking about and bringing voice to your ceremonial experiences. It is also my goal that your participation will make a valuable contribution to the scientific understanding of the

healing potential that Mamacita offers to the world in these tumultuous times. Thank you for your consideration! I look forward to meeting you.

Appendix B

Semi-structured Interview Questions:

1) Are there reasons that you can imagine that these particular experiences showed up for you in this ceremony? Do they have any significance in relationship to your personal history? Childhood?
2) When these challenging moments began to emerge, how did you respond? Did you find yourself struggling against them?
3) How did these challenging experiences unfold for you over the course of the ceremony? Did you find some kind of resolution with them? Or not?
4) How has your Ayahuasca journey continued to affect you in your life? Have you noticed any changes in your attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors towards yourself, others, or the world?
5) How has your understanding of the experience, or the ways you find meaning in the experience changed over time?
6) Have your experiences with Ayahuasca changed your sense of self, your worldview, or your ways of living? If so, please offer concrete examples of these changes.
7) Is there anything that you feel is important for me to know that we have not touched upon in the course of our conversation?

Appendix C

Research Process

1) Journal reflection- biases and presuppositions
2) Invitation script sent to the Ayahuasca ceremony facilitator
3) Receive email addresses of potential participants
4) Send description of research process and informed consent along with a solicitation of written detailed descriptions of Ayahuasca experiences
5) Read participants' descriptions
6) Journal reflection on what drew my interest and what did not
7) Schedule and conduct interviews
8) Transcribe interviews
9) Initial pass – free coding
10) Close line-by-line analysis identifying phenomenological codes in NVivo software
11) Organizing emerging codes into thematic groupings using NVivo software
12) Developing psychologically informed interpretations of emerging themes
13) Analyzing relationships between interpretative themes to discover a phenomenological structure

Appendix D

Informed Consent Agreement:

DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY

PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

TITLE:

The phenomenology of the spiritual ordeal in psychedelic experiences: Paradoxical healing in challenging ayahuasca experiences

INVESTIGATOR:

Leland Guthrie, Doctoral Candidate in the Duquesne University Clinical Psychology department (guthriel@duq.edu)

ADVISOR: Will W. Adams, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Psychology (adamsw@duq.edu)

SOURCE OF SUPPORT:

This study is being performed as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral degree in Clinical Psychology at Duquesne University.

STUDY OVERVIEW:

This research study seeks to understand how psychologically or spiritually challenging moments during an Ayahuasca ceremony may potentially be an important part of the healing process. Emphasis is often placed on the spiritually cathartic or uplifting moments of the Ayahuasca ceremony and the challenging moments are sometimes left out and forgotten all together. By making an in-depth and detailed examination of the challenging moments in Ayahuasca ceremonies it is hoped that this aspect of psychedelic experiences may be better understood. If you consent to participate in this study, I will ask that you provide a detailed written description of an entire Ayahuasca experience that included challenging moments (including but not limited to any of the following: fear, grief, despair, insanity, isolation, death, darkness, paranoia, suffering, confusion, anger, shame and physical distress**).** In addition, I will ask that you agree to allow me to interview you, either in person or in an online video chat platform, so that we can elaborate upon certain aspects of your experience as well as talk about how this experience has affected your life. You may find it beneficial to take the time to write down a detailed description of your Ayahuasca experience as well as explore it with a researcher devoted to understanding the experience. Because of the questionable legality of psychedelic

substances, precise and thorough steps will be taken to ensure your privacy and the confidentiality of all that you share (outlined below). Know that you may withdraw from this study at any time should you decide for any reason that you no longer wish to participate.

PURPOSE:

You are being asked to participate in a research project that is seeking to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenology of challenging psychedelic (Ayahuasca) experiences. Specifically, the ways that passing through what could be called the "spiritual ordeal" of challenging psychedelic experiences may be paradoxically healing.
In order to qualify for participation, you must have had moments during an Ayahuasca session that involved psychological struggles including but not limited to: fear, grief, despair, insanity, isolation, death, darkness, paranoia, suffering, confusion, anger, shame and physical distress**.**

PARTICIPANT PROCEDURES:

If you consent to participate in this study, I will ask that you:

- Provide a detailed written description of an entire Ayahuasca experience that included challenging moments (including but not limited to any of the following: fear, grief, despair, insanity, isolation, death, darkness, paranoia, suffering, confusion, anger, shame and physical distress**).**
- I will also ask that you agree to allow me to record an interview with you, either in person (at a location of your choice) or in an online platform (only audio, not video will be recorded), so that we can elaborate upon certain aspects of your experience as well as talk about how this experience has affected your life. The interview should take between an hour and two hours of your time. I will have a list of questions that I may ask you during our discussion, but I also want to allow for the interview to unfold naturally and organically. Due to the need for analyzing each detail of the interviews, only people willing to allow the interview to be audio recorded will be invited to participate in this research study.

The total amount of time dedicated to this study may be between three and five hours. This will depend up on how much time you dedicate to the written description of your experience as well as how long the interviews last.

RISKS AND BENEFITS:

There are minimal risks associated with this participation but no greater than those encountered in everyday life. It is not anticipated, but potential risks to participation in this study could include psychological distress from talking about particularly challenging aspects of your Ayahuasca experience. If this were to occur, appropriate therapeutic referrals would be made. Participants can opt out of any question that they do not wish to answer. You may actually find it beneficial and to take the time to write a description of your Ayahuasca experience as well as talk about it and process it in a more in-depth way in our conversations. In addition, you will be contributing to the accumulation of scientific data that could support more people to access the therapeutic potential of Ayahuasca. Know that you may withdraw from this study at any time

should you decide for any reason that you no longer wish to participate. At any point the participant can choose to discontinue the interview for any reason.

COMPENSATION:

Aside from the potential benefits noted above, there will be no compensation for participating in this study. In addition, there is no cost for you to participate in this research project.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

Your participation in this study, and any identifiable personal information you provide, will be kept confidential to every extent possible. Your name will never appear on any survey or research instruments. Your response(s) will be de-identified to protect your privacy. All written and electronic forms and study materials will be kept secure. Audio files will only be stored on password-protected computers. No video recordings will be made. Any hard copies of documents with identifying information will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. In addition, any publications or presentations about this research will only use data that is deidentified; therefore, no one will be able to determine how you responded. Any materials with personal identifying information will only be held for three years after the completion of the research and then destroyed.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW:

You are under no obligation to start or continue this study. You can withdraw at any time without penalty or consequence at any time by calling or emailing Leland Guthrie (guthriel@duq.edu). If you choose to withdraw from the study, the recorded data from the interview along with any data directly related to your responses will be destroyed by deletion. Any hard copy notes from the interview or from subsequent data analysis that contain any reference to the participant or their interview responses will be shredded.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS:

A summary of the results of this study will be provided to you at no cost. You may request this summary by calling or emailing Leland Guthrie (guthriel@duq.edu). The information provided to you will not be your individual responses, but rather a summary of what was discovered during the research project as a whole.

FUTURE USE OF DATA:

Research findings may be published in scholarly journals, books, and/or in popular media, with confidentiality of participants strictly protected.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT:

I have read this informed consent form and understand what is being requested of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, for any

reason without any consequences. Based on this, I certify I am willing to participate in this research project. To protect your privacy you do not need to sign this form. Instead, please include the acknowledgment of your understanding and acceptance of this consent form along with the submission of the written description of your Ayahuasca experience via email.

I understand that if I have any questions about my participation in this study, I may contact Leland Guthrie. If I have any questions regarding my rights and protections as a subject in this study, I can contact Dr. David Delmonico, Chair of the Duquesne University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at 412.396.1886 or at irb@duq.edu.

This project has been approved/verified by
Duquesne University's Institutional Review Board.