

# Literary Theory on Acid

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In this essay, I argue for the value of reframing literary criticism as a psychedelic experience. Psychedelics, like LSD (or “acid”) and psilocybin (or “magic mushrooms”), are a class of drugs, which create mind-altering and consciousness-expanding effects that are located less in the chemical composition of the drugs than in the qualitative experience they catalyze in a user (Sheldrake 111). The signal feature of psychedelics is their ability to stimulate an extreme tuning up of the sensorium, which is experienced as a hallucinogenic state but lived differently by each person, based on their distinct psychological makeup (or “set”) and the physical context in which they take the drug (or “setting”). As Ido Hartogssohn explains,

The one uniting principle of psychedelic experience is. . . . [that it] induces a remarkable intensity of experience. . . . It is hinted at in several words that repeat themselves . . . in the discourse around the effects of psychedelics: *amplification, magnification, augmentation, manifestation, revealing, and suggestibility*. . . . Ultimately, so much of the effects of psychedelics might be traced back to the enhancement of the perception of meaning, which is extended to the different domains of the psyche. (210)

To be clear, this essay is not an argument for taking psychedelic drugs, which remain controlled substances, nor am I suggesting that these chemical compounds should be deployed or distributed by professors in any pedagogical setting. Rather, I wish to *conceptually* connect the qualitative and neurochemical effects of psychedelics with literary studies to underscore the latter’s capacity to influence an affectively intense rearrangement of one’s worldly perception

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that is experienced by individuals as consequential and life-enhancing.

Both the qualitative and neurochemical aspects of psychedelic states uncannily describe the repertoire of sensory effects that literary studies has been exploring for more than a century under the heading of *the reading experience*. Close reading, for example, is a practice that amplifies our perceptual experience of a text, requiring us to magnify the details of its form, construction, content, and appearance to manifest its potentials for meaning making. At the same time, the suggestibility of psychedelic drugs provides an apt framework for examining the set and setting of reading, where set refers to the distinct psychological outlook or mindset of a reader, and setting refers to the immense range of contextual variables that coalesce around any reading event, from its historical conditions of production to the everyday sounds, smells, and textures of the environment where reading takes place. As Wai Chee Dimock stresses, it is the infinite variety of psychosocial contexts for reading, multiplied by the potential for texts to travel through interpersonal, local, and global networks of circulation, that make the interpretative possibilities of literary and cultural objects endless (1061). It is fitting then that the colloquial description of a psychedelic experience as a “trip” invokes both the concept of traveling across time and space and of stumbling over an object, experience, or affective state that is enhanced to a near-cosmic scale of significance.

The purpose of literacy criticism at the present time should be to induce states of heightened consciousness in our students and ourselves that can enable us to see the world from multiple perspectives, make more refined judgments about the relationship of literature and culture to broader scales of social and political life, and reclaim an understanding of the literary object as catalyst for “[re]ordering our minds.”<sup>1</sup> This involves guiding students through a viscerally affecting experience of cognitive groundlessness—a constructive loss of their most tightly held assumptions and affective attachments—that will vastly broaden the limits of their thinking (and ours), rather than ossify already existing intellectual habits or belief systems. Among the most salutary outcomes of the psychedelic experience, according to Michael Pollan, is the activation of new neural pathways in the brain, which can loosen up fixed patterns of thought by “boosting the sheer amount of diversity in our mental life.” A psychedelically inflected criticism and pedagogy aims to achieve this “blossoming of mental states” (318) by revitalizing the literary text as a site for exploring, refining, and retuning the sensorium, thereby enriching one’s perceptual and imaginative capacities.

The claim to shaking up our students’ common assumptions about the world may seem obvious, as part and parcel of what we do

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as humanists whose primary goal is to teach the bundle of skills we call “critical thinking.” Yet perhaps too many of our students today graduate from literature programs mostly capable of identifying the ideological content of cultural artifacts and applying theoretical concepts to show how a given text performs, reinforces, or resists pernicious structures of domination. Valuable as these skills may be, setting them as the ultimate goal of our pedagogy, even unwittingly, significantly risks devitalizing the full range of students’ cognitive faculties, from critical discernment and decision-making to imagination and play, from the cultivation of interpersonal communication to the construction of political ethics. Despite years of debates about the conceptual limits of ideological analysis and our ongoing declarations about the integral role of affect and sensation to the reading experience; despite all our sophisticated arguments about the historical contingency of literary and cultural texts, how many of our students, for that matter how many of their teachers, can convincingly explain how literature substantively impacts the collective human experience or intervenes in the everyday lives of readers? As thinkers like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Joseph North, and Ellen Rooney have argued, by continually figuring the literary or cultural text as a mirror reflection of, or ideological vehicle for, already existing political values, historical realities, or institutional structures of power, we diminish our capacity to perceive, draw out, and act upon what aesthetic objects can do to materially influence the lives of human beings rather than what those objects seemingly represent. These significant impacts include how cultural texts enlarge our imaginations, activate new feeling states that can alter our attitudes and behaviors, elicit collective opinions about questions of common concern, or simply forge meaningful community around characters, genres, artists, or mediums that may express shared values and experiences in aesthetic form.

Dimock characterizes literary texts as “time traveler[s] whose receding and incipient nuances fall on readers at various tangents and speeds. . . . [so that their] words become unfixed, unmoored, and thus democratically claimable” (1067–8); if so, the literature professor’s task today should be to help students learn how they wish to make such claims, with what style of approach, based on what values or commitments, and to affect what kind of change. Because a psychedelic framework takes seriously experiential, felt, or embodied transformative states, it can aid a literary criticism committed to encouraging the substantial, mind-altering outcomes of encounters with aesthetic life. I want to recover an idealistic understanding of the professor as a guide through the psychedelic experience, one committed to recurrently making visible, even undermining, their own intellectual and affective attachments. Such

criticism and pedagogy can model for students what it means to project the mind outward into a wider world of meaning making that exceeds the limits of one's identity, political ideals, or habits of thought. Hence, I am conceiving of the psychedelic experience as a descriptive framework for apprehending what reading, in all its forms, can do to dynamically disorganize and reconstitute "subjectivities and collectivities" (North 20).

It is well documented that the first psychedelic renaissance coincided with the rise of radical left-wing, youth movements of the 1960s. This was the same period that saw a revolutionary advance in the teaching and study of literature at US colleges and universities. Among the outcomes were the formation of minority literary canons, the arrival of French critical theory, and the coalescing of antiracist, antisexist, and antihomophobic political projects into clearly defined research programs and fields of study. Yet the link between the 1960s psychedelic renaissance and the contemporaneous revolution in literary studies has remained intellectually unplumbed, existing at the level of implicit historical coincidence. The rebirth of psychedelic research in the twenty-first century affords an occasion to make this link explicit and thus to see an important cultural and scientific zeitgeist as, indeed, a revitalization of the transformative power of literature and culture in the present.

Under certain set and setting conditions, the psychedelic experience can inflate and reaffirm delusional thought processes or create false epiphanies. And so too, the methods of literary studies can be used to put forward the most rigid or paranoid modes of interpretation, reassert problematic hierarchies of value, or perpetuate merely solipsistic intellectual debates with little relevance to people outside our field. The suggestibility of the psychedelic experience, however, like the infinitely variable outcomes of reading, is not a curse but a gift, one that requires extraordinary attentiveness to the affective and material contexts in which we galvanize this experience. This suggestibility also elicits a willingness to recognize that our endeavor is not to produce any single political effect but many.

### 1. "Signifying in More Than One Way"

In his polemic *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (2017), Joseph North argues that contemporary literary studies suffers from a chronic dissatisfaction with the "historical/contextual paradigm" that has dominated the field for more than half a century. This paradigm emerged in the heat of the radical 1960s, fiercely rebutting the idealist and elitist aspects of the New Criticism. For North, despite the many gains of the historical/contextual

paradigm—including its broadening of the literary canon to incorporate underrepresented voices, its equivalent widening of the scope of literary analysis to account for all forms of cultural production, and its attention to their ideological underpinnings—it inadvertently jettisoned one of the most profound aspects of literary criticism proper, namely the latter’s investment in using literary and cultural texts to educate the aesthetic sensibilities of readers. For the literary critics who preceded the New Criticism, most notably I. A. Richards, the refinement of aesthetic sensibilities meant a cultivation of “practical” faculties, like critical judgment and imagination, that could influence how people make ethical choices about collective life or value and nurture the free exchange of ideas. This involved at core, an ability to register, identify and refine our understanding of how aesthetic objects like art, literature, and music, “cause effects in us of one kind or another,” which are merely specific instances of a much broader capacity to feel, sense, or affectively react to the world at large (Richards, *Principles* 16).

North identifies a range of recent theoretical interventions into the study of literature—like queer studies, affect theory, and the New Aestheticism—that suggest a desire among scholars to revivify a unified theory of aesthetic experience that would still imagine the honing of readers’ aesthetic sensibilities as a means of catalyzing material change in the world. Psychedelic experience and its meta-theory of set and setting offer precisely the kind of framework holding together both the affective or aesthetic dimensions of the literary (which includes the emotional mindset of readers) with its historical/contextual dimensions (which accounts for the literary object’s distinct settings in space and time), without undervaluing, overlooking, or conflating them.

There are at least four ways I can imagine in which psychedelic experience fruitfully coincides with the mode of literary criticism North outlines: first, insofar as psychedelics intensify our experience of our primary senses, they enliven us to the relationship between mind and body, frequently blurring the socially constructed boundaries between the two and leading us to intuit concepts in an immediate, visceral way. For instance, the hyperassociative effect of psychedelics which tunes up our ability to make cognitive connections between previously cordoned off ideas finds a sensory corollary in the “sinuous, wavy forms” (Hartogsohn 209–10) of psychedelic sights and sounds, which blur the boundaries between the senses and literally make the world look fractal, undulating, and kaleidoscopic. All these qualities are central to a mode of literary criticism aimed at accounting for the multiplicitous mental and sensorial effects of reading because they encourage us to pay attention to the link between thinking and feeling. So, when we teach students

to read closely, we are engaging in psychedelic pedagogy by training them “to look and see, to pay maximal attention to the words on the page” using the entire repertoire of their senses, a skill, Toril Moi observes, that can ultimately be scaled upward to make meaning of practically anything that can be conceived, from a poem to our galaxy (179). The psychedelic experience’s extreme augmentation of sense perception frequently elicits a visceral feeling of cosmic oneness or interconnection with the universe, but one that is ultimately unique to every individual user. Similarly, the grand conceptual reach of literary studies and its method of close reading can encourage an individual reader to imaginatively extend out from their unique vantage point to account for or conceive expansive networks of relationships among individual texts, audiences, contexts, and circulation networks, without collapsing into universalizing or essentialist claims about any of these scales of experience. In this sense, the psychedelic framework opens us to touch upon those aspects of literary study *felt* to be universal, cosmic, even spiritual in scope, while recognizing the highly idiosyncratic ways each person renders an idea of universality.

Second, the theory of set and setting, the coalescence of which constitutes one dominant framework for studying psychedelic experience, stresses the dual importance of psychological states and environmental contexts in shaping the psychedelic journey; in parallel form, a literary criticism committed to a holistic view of the reading practice envisions the nature of reading as simultaneously an embodied, affective experience and a historically situated event.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the tremendous “interpretive flexibility” of psychedelic drugs dovetails with the unlimited variability of the reading experience, which is fundamentally shaped by exceptionally varied psychic and social contexts, but whose meanings are never ultimately reducible to either (Hartogsohn 203–4). Tellingly, Pollan compares the diverse neurochemical effects of psychedelic drugs to the multiplicity of meanings that can attach to words when placed in different rhetorical contexts. Consider, for example, how psychedelics mimic the work of serotonin, which, Pollan explains,

... binds with a dozen or so different receptors ... across many parts of the brain [and] throughout the body. ... Think of it as a kind of word, the meaning or import of which can change radically depending on the context or even its placement in a sentence. (292)

By reaching for a linguistic metaphor to explain a neurochemical phenomenon, Pollan serendipitously provides us with a comparable physiological analogy for one of the abiding insights of literary

study: every word, image, sign or text always, Barbara Johnson teaches, “signifies in more than one way” (21).<sup>3</sup> Cultural texts, like serotonin or LSD molecules, can connect up to an enormous array of possible transmitters (that is, psychic states and reading contexts), initiating an equally wide gamut of unpredictable psychological and somatic effects in a reader, like stimulating neurons to fire in the brain, altering our breathing and heart rate, and affecting our mood. The psychedelic framework then, might provide a richer conceptual vocabulary for grasping the coextensive nature of discursive and physiological phenomenon, both highly variable and mutually influencing.

Third, because psychedelic experience is shaped by the mindset of a particular user but paradoxically also affects a suspension of their ego, it parallels how the humanities classroom centers the role of the student as an agent of meaning making while simultaneously encouraging them to extend beyond their own identity when embarking on the task of interpretation. As Pollan and Merlin Sheldrake recount, recent neuroscientific studies of the tripping brain reveal that under psychedelics, the portion of the mind that houses “the default mode network,” a neurological system that organizes our sense of self, is significantly reduced in activity. As a result, the “brain,” says Pollan, “becomes more integrated as new connections spring up among regions that ordinarily kept mainly to themselves” (316). When we train students to read closely, we ask them to suspend their ego to allow the text to speak in many voices, rather than ascribing a narrow meaning to it based on their projected assumptions. Yet, ironically, it is also a given reader’s unique perspective that allows them to identify and make meaning of different aspects of a text that others might miss. The neurochemical outcomes of psychedelics’ suspension of the default mode network coincide with what humanist pedagogy accomplishes at its best, namely encouraging the “blossoming of mental states” by transforming a rigidly defended conception of self or identity into a diversity of metacritical perspectives on any object of study (Pollan 318).

Finally, because psychedelic drugs alter consciousness in the present and can also have sustained positive effects on cognition long after a hallucinogenic experience, they can promote a shift from merely knowing or recognizing the world’s sensuous complexity to *acting* upon that knowledge. While the unique psychic and environmental conditions of any given psychedelic experience heavily shape its immediate outcomes, its enduring effects can be enriched by the contexts in which users process a trip by themselves, and with others, following the journey. Analogously, the literary studies classroom is essentially a perpetual space of collective dialogue about one’s reading experience. By encouraging the sustained

sharing of diverse and competing lines of flight, a psychedelic pedagogy can disturb the “usual seamlessness of consciousness,” provide students the opportunity to “establish new neural circuits,” and facilitate the “[sharpening of] one’s sensitivity to one’s own mental states” (Pollan 320–22).

In sum, psychedelic experience and literary criticism and pedagogy share the qualities of amplified sensory intensity, suggestibility and variability based on mindset and environment, the suspension of the ego, and the diversification of mental states. In identifying some of the overlaps between psychedelic states and the reading experience, I also gesture toward how the contemporary science of psychedelics is increasingly discovering and characterizing neurochemical processes that apparently coincide with the cognitive and embodied aspects of aesthetic experiences the humanities have always been qualitatively describing. Certainly, ingesting a hallucinogenic chemical like psilocybin and reading a novel are not identical physiological experiences. Yet reading is an activity that requires one to rapidly project imagined or fantasized images in the mind, while connecting those images to an infinitely varied set of associations with one’s existing memories, feeling states, and frameworks for self-understanding.

At some level then, the imaginative forms of literary and cultural texts are foreign substances in the guise of aesthetic structures that are introjected and cognitively metabolized by every reader, becoming added to, while also irrevocably altering, the existing archive of one’s psychic and affective landscape in a distinctly material way. The degree to which the neurochemical and cognitive experience of psychedelic drugs and the reading experience overlap is more than incidental since both are fundamentally aesthetic experiences insofar as they activate our affective response to the world. The point of pursuing this link is to marshal the rich and growing data about the deep interconnection between cognitive and physiological processes of meaning-making and thus to reencounter the continual surprise of the aesthetic experience, which can often unwittingly catapult us into new, enlarged states of perception.

The value of surprise is a recurrent theme of nearly all the most innovative literary theories of our time. This includes the continual capacity of texts to offer up new meanings in infinitely diverse contexts, and the importance of pursuing self-reflexive methods of analysis that mitigate against banal or rote modes of argumentation. Yet to value surprise intellectually is a very different thing than to feel it as an electric jolt to the system that sensitizes one to the contingencies of literary and cultural texts. Psychedelics necessarily induce a hypersaturated experience of life that represents facets of the world to us in unfamiliar, intensified form; the psychedelic

experience then homes in on the aspect of reading that invigorates the mind and body. This concentration makes it possible to take the full measure of what we are doing when we reintroduce the literary or cultural text to our students as a portal for radical change rather than inert object to be mined for political representations and meanings.

## 2. Psychedelic Pedagogy

Having briefly highlighted some of links between psychedelic experience and literary criticism, below I enumerate three psychedelically inflected teaching strategies that can help affect the kinds of expanded consciousness I have been describing. These short examples come from my recent seminar in cultural theory, “On Groundlessness,” which explores the concept of contingency across theoretical traditions and cultural productions.<sup>4</sup> Conceived and taught amid the COVID-19 pandemic, this course asked how we might cope imaginatively with the loss of organizing categories, social bonds, and political values we once thought stable or permanent. My aim was to offer a class whose content and organization might psychedelically reorganize the various elements of this picture, refracting our shared groundlessness as one instance of a broader existential phenomenon, the unpredictability of life on earth. By grouping these approaches together under the rubric of a psychedelic pedagogy, I hope to produce set and setting conditions that can up-end students’ received frameworks for understanding at both cognitive and affective levels.

I. Psychedelic pedagogy is *kaleidoscopic* in its conception and structure. Like an optical instrument refracting the various parts of whatever object or scene it represents, this pedagogy dramatically rearranges the object of study to form a dazzling new picture. Psychedelic pedagogy manifests this experience both conceptually and emotionally in students, by relentlessly presenting multiple perspectives on the same idea, object, concept, or question. The aim should be to maximize the heterogeneity of each variable, including the types of texts assigned, the affects elicited, the theoretical approaches offered, even the style, tone, and structure of discussions and/or lectures. Thus, a kaleidoscopic approach reconceives weekly units *as distinct dimensions or angles on the same problem*. I confronted my students with the problem of contingency from at least eight distinct frameworks, like political theory, critical race, feminist, queer and trans\* studies, posthumanism, popular Buddhism, and the science of psychedelics. At the same time, the concept of contingency itself was multiplied, both in the way it was described, including unpredictability, surprise, anti-essentialism, indeterminacy, and groundlessness, and the objects to which it adheres: the students learned that all concepts,

categories, and phenomena can be contingent, including cultural identities, physical bodies, the unfolding of history, democratic politics, aesthetic sensibilities, and interpersonal relationships.

II. A psychedelically informed syllabus prioritizes productively eliciting intensified emotional states in students that can then become an issue for collective dialogue. Put psychedelically, the professor should create a pedagogical *setting* that animates students' *mindset* while providing the means to perceive their affects as part of the way they communicate with others. To this end, early on, I assign students a short reflection paper, which asks them to explain their most powerful attachment to something that has both significantly shaped their worldview and that may have inhibited their ability to apprehend alternative perspectives. The way students talk about their affective investments in their papers can then be frequently imported into the classroom, where they may articulate more clearly their attachment to ideas, cultural objects, or beliefs, which seemed invisible or unexamined; this expanded self-awareness, in turn, frees them to explore new grounds for thought or enables them to feel more expansively about whatever objects they train their attention toward.

III. A psychedelically inspired curriculum undermines identity work in favor of affective transformation and the cultivation of aesthetic sensibilities. This lesson includes multiplying traditional notions of self while extending other capacities like associational thinking, creativity, the reception of pleasure, community-building, the development of critical discernment, and the construction of values and beliefs. I remind students that an extraordinary amount of what we do as human beings has very little to do with the formation of self, including assimilating new information, providing emotional support to others, or engaging in basic human functions like eating and sleeping. Moreover, I further try to make students aware of the range of variables complicating more traditionally recognizable cultural or social identities, like personality, temperament, spiritual beliefs, geographical origin, or family history. In the manner of a psychedelic pedagogy then, students come to view cultural objects not as mirror reflections of existing social, cultural, or political identities, but as tools for refracting and reorganizing the self.

### 3. Entering Area X

The psychedelic pedagogy I have so far described, to borrow from North's prescriptions, would aim to be "sensitive to feeling and affect; able to move broadly . . . across times, places, and cultures; willing to use the literary as a means of ethical . . . education; [and] have its emphasis on therapeutic rather than merely diagnostic uses of the literary" (194). It would not only impart knowledge and skills but create new kinds of "subjectivities and collectivities" (20). But what then of the literary text itself? How can the work of

literature be marshaled to activate the kinds of psychedelic experiences I have been describing? I conclude by turning to the final literary text that I teach in my course: Jeff VanderMeer's visionary science fiction trilogy, *Area X* (2014). The title refers to a mysterious alien phenomenon that has altered a territory of Southern Florida into a zone of perpetual biological mutation for anyone or anything that enters its sphere of influence. VanderMeer tells the story of a band of misfit explorers intent on understanding the secrets of this terrifying region.

Though at first glance the text appears to be a commentary on environmental catastrophe, the narrative repeatedly returns to the problem of reading, obsessively concerned with different characters' interpretations of Area X's transformational effects but also how they make meaning of the endless discourse produced about it, including government reports, field journals, even vegetal script composed by the region's monstrous inhabitants. Throughout, VanderMeer presents the reading experience as a biological infection that irrevocably mutates one at a cellular level—to read is always to be physiologically altered. *Area X* not only induces hallucinatory, perhaps even psychedelic states in its audience through its dreamlike descriptions of awe-inspiring mutations, but it also provides a prismatic view of the many ways one might choose to respond to such changes, without ever prescribing one avenue over another. In this sense, it dizzily models the psychedelic criticism and pedagogy I have been calling for.

Near the end of the first volume, the protagonist, known only as the biologist, encounters an inexplicable creature she dubs “the Crawler,” a “complex, unique . . . awe-inspiring. . .” shapeshifting organism—a hybrid mollusk, human, jellyfish-like being—who slinks up and down a winding stone staircase that plunges into the ground at the heart of Area X (118). As the Crawler moves, it writes an endless sermon on the walls penned in living organisms, or “fruiting bodies . . . forming words” (18). Long before the biologist confronts the Crawler itself, she stumbles upon its lush fungal text, which explodes a delicate spore she inadvertently breathes in. This split-second inhalation sets off an epic transformation: within hours, the biologist experiences a “brightness infecting [her] senses,” witnesses the walls of the tower “breathing” as if carrying “the echo of a heartbeat,” and undergoes a dissolution of self so that she “did not feel [like] a person but simply a receiving station for a series of overwhelming transmissions” (55, 27, 114).

Now irresistibly drawn toward the Crawler's radiant “golden” light, the biologist rounds a final curve:

*No words can . . . no photographs could. . . .* [The] Crawler kept changing at a lightening pace. . . . It was a figure within a series of refracted panes of glass. . . . a series of layers in the shape of an archway. It was a great sluglike monster. . . . a great star. . . . [Within] all of these different impressions . . . I thought I saw [an] an arm in constant . . . motion, continuously imparting to the left-hand wall . . . its message. . . . [I] believed I was in the presence of [a] living creature. . . . pulling these different impressions of itself from my mind and projecting them back at me. (117–19)

The biologist's encounter with the Crawler is psychedelic. Held by the Crawler's regard, the biologist is unraveled, her ego disintegrated before a creature that seems to witness her from numerous angles, deconstructing the biologist and remaking her merely by presenting itself in a kaleidoscopic fashion. It is the sheer multiplicity of the Crawler's forms, as well its liquidation of the boundaries between discourse and materiality, text and body, self and other, that expands the biologist's consciousness—allowing her to assimilate new sensations and conceptual possibilities previously inaccessible to her—yet also puts in relief the limit of her cognitive capacity to empirically “capture” the world around her (117).

In this sense, the Crawler can be likened to a literature professor, who transcribes and highlights units of text to present them as living, mutating, multiply signifying cultural organisms, while providing critical frameworks and skills to amplify and refine students' sensorium, thereby strengthening their ability to apprehend a richer, more variegated understanding of the world. Across VanderMeer's trilogy, we discover that the Crawler is a former priest, now a lighthouse keeper, Saul Evans, who is metamorphosed into an otherworldly creature by the mysterious event of Area X. Yet we also learn that every creature changed by Area X is altered in relation to the unique coordinates of its life before this phenomenon arrived on earth. The Crawler's biblical writing radiates the sedimented history of Evans's years in the priesthood, and the plunging tower he inhabits is a living extension of the lighthouse he once diligently tended. Much like the psychedelic experience, the setting of Area X quite literally modifies the molecular structure of every form of life that enters it based on that organism's own unique mindset, or psychic landscape.

For at least the past four decades, scholars have been preoccupied with the dual reality that (a) the historical context within which a work of literature emerges can provide a new set of coordinates by which to analyze its meaning and significance; and (b) that that context can never exhaust the possible readings we can produce of a

given text as it travels across space and time and collides with the infinitely varied psyches and worldviews of countless readers. The fact that all beings who enter Area X are changed, though always in ways distinct to their individual histories and personalities, beautifully describes this conundrum: to be changed by the act of reading is a widely shared phenomenon, but exactly *how* we are changed is unique to our formations as specific people reading and responding to texts in specific times and places. Like professors who explicitly bring their own personal history to bear on the literature they choose to teach and the intellectual attachments they hold dear, the Crawler facilitates a type of psychedelic experience—a mind-expanding, viscerally affecting encounter with a text that revivifies its potential to reorganize one’s cognition. And yet the Crawler typifies a singular being whom—also like the professor—each student perceives differently. From this angle, the greatest gift of literature professors is the recurrent public performance of their highly individualized intellectual and affective outlook, presented to students in as many ways as possible, from as many angles of approach as one can imagine.

If the Crawler can be considered a stand-in for the professor of literature, and the biologist the student who discovers the kaleidoscopic methods of literary analysis through an encounter with this strange, manifold being, Area X might capture the vast field of reading itself, an ever-expanding terrain of seemingly infinite size and scope capable of eliciting continuous, unpredictable, heterogenous, along with particularized transformational effects. As if to confirm this hypothesis, near the end of the trilogy, VanderMeer introduces the character Ghost Bird, who aggregates all she has learned about the region—combining government research, the journals of previous explorers, and her own lived experience—to give the book’s most expansive description of Area X:

Membranes and dimensions. Limitless amounts of space. Limitless amounts of energy. Effortless manipulation of molecules. Continual attempts to transform the human into non-human. The ability to move an entire biosphere to another place. . . . What if an infection was a message [?]. . . . If so, the message [was] buried in the transformation itself. (490)

Here Ghost Bird admits to herself, and to readers, that the alien phenomenon that is Area X “signifies in more than one way.” Area X is infinitely multidimensional, capable of effecting the radical mutation of all living forms within it; its message is coded in the very metamorphic process it catalyzes in all forms. This describes what literature does.

Ghost Bird's description of Area X is ultimately a psychedelic one, because it involves an expanded apprehension that takes in the full cosmic magnitude of this alien phenomenon. By explicitly naming Area X's countless powers, Ghost Bird reveals that the real problem for all those encountering this phenomenon is not how best to explain it, but what to do with what they already know, especially how to act once they realize that Area X is reshaping their very being. This perhaps is the central task of the literary scholar: to enable transformational effects in our students and to guide them in figuring out what they will do with the changes they undergo.

As "On Groundlessness" draws to a close, the students and I discuss how all of us, like the biologist, like Ghost Bird, like every character of this epic fantasy narrative, must now decide what we want to do with everything we have learned together so far. All the class has done is to equip us with the skills to assess, discern, interpret, and ultimately decide "'What aspects of the world do you want to disclose? What change do you want to bring into the world by this disclosure?'" (Moi 204). *Area X* then multiplies the figures, images, and possibilities of reading as metamorphic process to a vertiginous level. It captures in imaginative form what a psychedelic literary criticism and pedagogy might accomplish, an experience of opening up to the text and its broader, even cosmic significance as a catalyst for how we will choose to make meaning of and live in the world among others.

Ultimately then, to think literary study psychedelically might occasion three positive shifts in our current approach to the profession: first, it recenters the student/reader as a site of ceaselessly renewable change and an active agent of interpretation, rather than a mere applier of predetermined political values or theoretical frameworks and concepts. Second, it revivifies the role of the literary studies professor as a dynamic, self-aware, and inventive leader through the psychedelic experience, thereby locating our politics directly in the classroom, that space where we have the most immediate influence "to use the literary as a means of ethical (or political?) education" while still remaining "committed in a deep and rigorous . . . way to a public role" (North 194).

As we live through a period of extraordinary collective trauma characterized by well-documented forms of expanding immiseration, "deaths of despair," a global mental health crisis, and mind-numbing political nihilism, it seems worth risking a charge of arrogance to argue that literary and cultural studies can offer a society-wide therapeutic role not unlike the current psychedelic renaissance, which would be crucial to the success of long-term resistance to and alteration of our nigh-apocalyptic circumstances. Rather than pacifying, condescending to, or emotionally hand-

holding our students, we can meet them exactly where they are, by galvanizing the extraordinary diversity of feeling states and cognitive capacities they possess. This activation means reminding them that they can live and think far beyond cynicism, paralysis, or despair. If we continue to devalue the life-changing outcomes of the humanities classroom, endlessly handwringing about how little impact we seem to have on other seemingly more significant political arenas, we will effectively rob ourselves of our most potent platform.

Third and finally, the psychedelic framework relocates literary study at the center of the production of highly aware, creative citizens adept at taking on the issues of their time by virtue of their ability to judge critically and act collectively in response to the contingent circumstances of modernity. It reminds us that literature is not only good for *knowing* something about history, culture, ideology, or politics, but for constituting entirely new kinds of subjects capable of *making* history, culture, ideology, and politics.

### Notes

1. I am revising I. A. Richards' original formulation in *Practical Criticism*: "It is less important to like 'good' poetry and dislike 'bad,' than to be able to use them both as a means of ordering our minds" (327). By updating this to read "reordering our minds," I am stressing the psychedelic experience's useful disturbance and disorganization of the brain's traditional neurological functions, "with the result that the system reverts to a less constrained mode of cognition" (Pollan 314).
2. The theory of psychedelic set and setting was originally developed by Timothy Leary and his Harvard psilocybin project group at Harvard University in the early 1960s. See Leary et al.
3. Pollan's analogy echoes psychoanalytic theorist Silvan Tomkin's classic description of affect as a highly variable embodied "mechanism" which is, "in some respects like a letter of the alphabet in a language, changing in significance as it is assembled with varying other letters to form different words, sentences, paragraphs" (Tomkins 51).
4. The full syllabus can be found on my Academia.edu page. Direct link provided here: [https://www.academia.edu/44644805/On\\_Groundlessness\\_Topics\\_in\\_Literary\\_and\\_Cultural\\_Theory\\_](https://www.academia.edu/44644805/On_Groundlessness_Topics_in_Literary_and_Cultural_Theory_)

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