

## **Chapter 5: The Idiosyncratic**

*A man sets out to draw the world. As the years go by, he peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and individuals. A short time before he dies, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the lineaments of his own face.*

Jorge Luis Borges, afterword to “El Hacedor/The Maker”<sup>261</sup>

### **Introduction: Reimagining Psychedelic History**

On September 12, 2019, the documentary television program “The Mind Explained” premiered an episode on the revival of psychedelic drug research in the twenty-first century.<sup>262</sup> Although “The Mind Explained: Psychedelics” provides abundant historical context for the psychedelic renaissance, it reinforces the questionable narrative regarding the long-term hiatus in psychedelic studies. As I wrote in the preceding chapter, most scholars hold legal prohibitions responsible for impeding psychedelic research after the 1960s. A small number, however, have suggested that intrinsic difficulties associated with studying psychedelic experience also contributed to the field’s long-term marginalization. This group does not include Michael Pollan and Roland Griffiths, both of whom were consulted for “The Mind Explained: Psychedelics.” Pollan’s 2018 book *How To Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence* is perhaps the best-known

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<sup>261</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley. (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 293.

<sup>262</sup> “The Mind, Explained: Psychedelics.” Netflix Official Site, September 12, 2019. <https://www.netflix.com/title/81098586>.

publication from the psychedelic renaissance.<sup>263</sup> Griffiths, a neuroscientist and psychiatrist, directs the Center for Psychedelic and Consciousness Research at Johns Hopkins University. Pollan and Griffiths both serve as consummate figureheads of the psychedelic psychiatry movement.

In separate interviews for the “The Mind Explained: Psychedelics,” they provide what appear to be complete reports of the rise, fall, and resurgence of psychedelic research after the discovery of LSD. Both identify the confluence of anti-drug moral sentiment and legal mandates in the United States and Western Europe as the field’s major adversary. Neither considers that features inherent to psychedelic experience also inhibited its development. Their testimonies contrast with the historiography I presented in chapter four, where I claimed that the more unusual aspects of psychedelic experience have long problematized scientific inquiry. As I wrote, psychedelic effects tend to resist codification, measurement, and replication in controlled settings. Henceforth, I raised the following two questions: first, how does one gather information on an experience that may be unobservable?; second, if there is a connection between unobservable phenomena and psychedelic therapeutic efficacy, how might researchers develop knowledge on psychedelics that is both widely applicable and medically useful?

Although my conceptualization of “psychedelic science” determines protocols for scholarship and clinical practice, the phrase fundamentally denotes a set of theoretical criteria for proof of psychedelic medical efficacy. As I have claimed, the qualifications for “scientificity” in the context of psychedelic medical research differ from those associated with dominant scientific

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<sup>263</sup> Michael Pollan, *How To Change Your Mind: What The New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence*. New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2018.

epistemologies. Throughout my project, I have explored the particular epistemological commitments of psychedelic science, with a special focus on the ways in which psychedelic research processes subvert the normative operations of the data episteme. In this chapter, I address contemporary studies which speak to the need for a “psychedelic science” as a specific mode of knowledge production and medical practice. These studies clarify the ways in which psychedelic science refutes the data episteme.

Before I investigate this body of literature, it is necessary for me to review my project’s major conceptual predicates. In chapter two, I claimed that the data episteme operates by means of resemblance with and amplification of positivistic properties. I also connected the data episteme with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s theory of the image of thought, and I posited an image of thought which advances the data episteme — what I called “the data image of thought.” In chapter three, I invoked Guattari’s notion of the “chaoid” to indicate the existence of a “psychedelic chaoid,” which signals the capacity of psychedelic experience to promote the cognitive function of negation. I wrote that the psychedelic chaoid effectively breaks the data image of thought by resisting its program of positivistic resemblance-making. These ideas are implicit in contemporary psychedelic science literature, although they have largely not been excavated and articulated as such. To provide adequate context for the contemporary literature, I will begin by elaborating on psychedelics as agents of abstraction.

### **Psychedelics, Abstraction, and the Image of Thought**

My treatment of abstraction as a mental process aligns with Matteo Pasquinelli’s reading of Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. After considering

abstraction as it is theorized in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Pasquinelli concludes that “there is no ontological difference between thought and perception, abstraction and negation.”<sup>264</sup> I wrote in chapter three that although data may perform certain functions associated with thought or abstraction, they do not permit negation as a mental operation which observes the unknown and unknowable. The data image of thought does not recognize that which is absolutely foreign, unequivocal, or “other.” It therefore does not permit abstract thought.

In her book *Contingent Computation: Abstraction, Experience and Indeterminacy in Computational Aesthetics*, M. Beatrice Fazi explores Deleuze’s research on abstraction as it relates to the notion of the image of thought. For Deleuze, she writes,

the separation between an ontological and an epistemological plane must be dissolved in order to leave room for “a new image of the act of thought, its functioning, its genesis in thought itself.” Abstract thought is a type of thinking that does not belong to somebody; it is unbounded, immediate, and indeterminate. This means, against the representational character of Descartes’s *cogito* and Kant’s faculty of reasoning, that Deleuze’s abstract thought is already positioned when one emerges as a subject of that thought, and that this subject cannot be identified as the source of such positioning... Suggestively, Deleuze affirmed that “the theory of thought is like painting: it needs that revolution which took art from representation to abstraction.”<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> Matteo Pasquinelli, “The Power of Abstraction and Its Antagonism: On Some Problems Common to Contemporary Neuroscience and the Theory of Cognitive Capitalism,” in *The Psychopathologies of Cognitive Capitalism: Part Two*, ed. Warren Neidich. (Berlin, Germany: Archive Books, 2014), 7.

<sup>265</sup> M. Beatrice Fazi, *Contingent Computation: Abstraction, Experience and Indeterminacy in Computational Aesthetics* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 34-35.

As Fazi makes clear, Deleuze's "abstract thought" cannot be said to belong to a thinking subject. This is because the subject is always identified with an image, and abstract thought is something other than that which is presupposed as the image of thought. Deleuze's abstract thought is not only disidentified with a subject, but avoids all forms of identification with recognizable or pre-existing images. Meanwhile, the data episteme operates by representing or extending identifiable properties. Digital data affix to and amplify what is already known (or, per the word's etymological origins, what is already given).<sup>266</sup> Thus the data episteme forecloses Deleuze's would-be revolution in the theory of thought. From a Deleuzian perspective, the data episteme is hostile towards the very act of thinking.

In his essay "Gilles Deleuze and Psychedelic Thought as Resistance," philosopher Oli Genn Bash argues that psychedelic experience refutes the image of thought. As he writes, psychedelic experience "escape[s] the presupposition of being supported by an Image which inclines towards the truth," and thus disaffirms any theory of thought as denotative representation.<sup>267</sup> From there, Bash argues that psychedelic experience fosters skepticism towards such presuppositions, and supports a theory of thought as abstraction.

To remain consistent with Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualization of the image of thought, Bash refers only to first-hand encounters with psychedelic substances. He does not draw

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<sup>266</sup> Alexander R. Galloway, "From Data to Information." September 22, 2015. <http://cultureandcommunication.org/galloway/from-data-to-information>.

<sup>267</sup> Oli Genn Bash, "Gilles Deleuze and Psychedelic Thought as Resistance" in *Neurotransmissions: Essays on Psychedelics From Breaking Convention*, ed. Dave King. (London: Strange Attractor Press, 2015), 27.

from anecdotal trip reports, published research, or other second-hand sources of information. This is because, as he notes, the image of thought denies the existence of such secondary or transcendent viewpoints. In his words,

There is a difficulty in analysing the psychedelic experience in general as a “psychedelic experience” might contain many different aspects, or mean various things to different people. In this instance, I do not necessarily see any merit in exploring other subjective viewpoints regarding the psychedelic experience, as there is the very likely possibility of just falling into the trap of a psychedelic image which others have created. This would not really allow for an exploration into psychedelic thought as resistance to the Image of Thought, as we would merely be viewing this resistance in a confined manner which is exactly the opposite of what Deleuze is putting forward.<sup>268</sup>

Despite Bash’s intentions, “Gilles Deleuze and Psychedelic Thought as Resistance” does not escape “the trap of a psychedelic image.” In the above passage, he implies that it may be illegitimate to assay any psychedelic experience for signs of generalizable features. Nevertheless, he uses a hypothetical scenario to exemplify general features of LSD inebriation. This imaginary presents an individual in the midst of an LSD trip who encounters a wooden table and becomes “solely concerned with exploring the patterns in the grains of the wood.”<sup>269</sup> Bash writes that this person “could be exploring the shape of the table and the patterns for hours before even noticing

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<sup>268</sup> Bash, “Gilles Deleuze and Psychedelic Thought as Resistance,” 29-30.

<sup>269</sup> Bash, “Gilles Deleuze and Psychedelic Thought as Resistance,” 29-30.

that it is a ‘table.’”<sup>270</sup> In other words, the individual does not perceive a table as such, instead fixating on details which are not determined or informed by the categorical *a priori* of “the table.” Insofar as *a priori* categories might be said to comprise an image of thought, this imaginary illustrates the LSD experience as a meaningful deviation from the image of thought. I would add that non-categorical thought is also a negative mental operation. As an act of thinking which does not depend upon pre-existing conceptual foundations, non-categorical thought unfolds beyond the ambit of that which is already known or given as an *a priori*. Stated differently, non-categorical thinking negates the known. When non-categorical thinking is induced by psychedelic ingestion, it reflects the presence of the psychedelic chaotic.

Although it serves a clear analytic purpose, the hypothetical scenario recounted above undermines Bash’s self-declared methodological principles. This is because it constructs a viewpoint which is meant to be treated as distinct from the author’s lived experience. In spite of his promise to refer only to first-hand experience, Bash still presents a second-hand source, or a source whose perspective is not his own. He appears to have run up against the paradox confronted by empirical psychedelic researchers who are obliged by convention to refer to multiple external sources in their scholarship. These obligations apply no less to scholars who acknowledge the potential for positivistic representation to violate subjective characteristics of psychedelic experience. In the previous chapter, I documented the long history of this paradox, which begins with Humphry Davy’s eighteenth-century research on nitrous oxide. It has become all the more pronounced in the era of digital and data-intensive hermeneutics, as data are by

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<sup>270</sup> Bash, “Gilles Deleuze and Psychedelic Thought as Resistance,” 29-30.

definition always positive and manifest, and such hermeneutics promote positivistic epistemic criteria.

This paradox has received some attention from today's psychedelic scholars.<sup>271</sup> As noted in chapter four, historian Matthew Oram has claimed that the twentieth-century trend towards scientized protocols in psychopharmaceutical research contributed to the suspension of psychedelic inquiry after the 1960s. He writes that certain FDA regulations which date to the early 1960s problematized efforts to establish the efficacy of psychedelic medicine. These policies, he notes, reinforced the post-Enlightenment epistemological bias towards quantitative and positivistic mechanisms of proof for epistemic validation. Oram's research speaks to the need for a bespoke "psychedelic science" as opposed to a normative "science of psychedelics" which would fully comply with epistemological norms. Because it substantiates the irreconcilability of psychedelic science and the data episteme, his work deserves further examination.

### **From "Drug Efficacy" to "Experience Efficacy:" Legitimizing Psychedelic Medicine**

In his article "Efficacy and Enlightenment: LSD Psychotherapy and the Drug Amendments of 1962," Oram compares the history of psychedelic studies in the United States with that of amphetamines, a category of nervous system stimulants which includes the prescription drug Adderall and the illicit methamphetamine, among many other substances. Oram indicates that psychedelics and amphetamines were both subject to the United States' Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act of 1970, which imposed stringent regulations on

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<sup>271</sup> Including Neşe Devenot, Nicolas Langlitz, and Ben Sessa, among others.

pharmaceutical research.<sup>272</sup> While this legislation had a chilling effect on psychedelic studies, it did little to hinder the medical development of amphetamines.

Here, Oram recounts the events leading up to the enactment of Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act:

LSD's criminalization did not prohibit research and, until 1970, permission to conduct clinical research with LSD was obtained through the same process as any other drug. Additionally, many drugs, such as morphine, maintained dual lives as illegal street drugs, and valuable and legitimate tools of medicine. Indeed, a similar public, medical, and political outcry over the dangers of medical and non-medical abuse of amphetamines occurred concurrent with the LSD controversies of the mid to late 1960s. Amphetamine abuse was a target of the same prohibiting legislation as LSD, yet the drug retained a legitimate medical use.<sup>273</sup>

Central to this story is the classification schema of drug "schedules" introduced as part of the Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act. The legislation's five schedules rank various substances based on their accredited medical use and level of safety. Psychedelic substances were placed in Schedule I, which indicates no medical applicability and highest potential for harm, and imposes the most rigorous regulations.<sup>274</sup> Amphetamines, meanwhile,

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<sup>272</sup> Matthew Oram, "Efficacy and Enlightenment: LSD Psychotherapy and the Drug Amendments of 1962." *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Science* 69, no. 2 (August 2012): 223.

<sup>273</sup> Oram, "Efficacy and Enlightenment," 223.

<sup>274</sup> Drugs.com, "CSA Schedules."

were divided between the more permissive Schedules II and III.<sup>275</sup> Pharmaceutical firms were therefore at greater liberty to develop amphetamine-based as opposed to psychedelic medical products.

Oram attests that the divergent scheduling of psychedelics and amphetamines did not reflect any measure of these substances' risk or medical value, but was instead determined by industry interests. At the time of the Controlled Substances Act, he writes, amphetamine compounds were highly successful as both prescription and over-the-counter medications. Psychedelics, on the other hand, had yet to prove their commercial viability as pharmaceuticals. To make this point, Oram cites Nicolas Rasmussen, who studies the social history of amphetamines. In his article "America's First Amphetamine Epidemic, 1929-1971," Rasmussen writes that drug scheduling decisions were subject to industry influence. As he explains,

The 1970 Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act established the modern set of controlled substance "schedules" in harmony with new international agreements and enabled federal narcotics authorities to establish and enforce production quotas on drugs in the most strictly controlled Schedules I and II. However, reflecting industry interests, only a handful of rarely prescribed injectable methamphetamine products were placed in Schedule II, while some 6000 oral amphetamine products on the US drug market were classed in Schedule III, meaning they were subject to no

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<sup>275</sup> Drugs.com, "CSA Schedules."

manufacturing quotas and to looser recordkeeping and their prescriptions could be refilled 5 times.<sup>276</sup>

By Oram's account, psychedelics could never achieve amphetamines' level of market success. This is because their medical applicability could not be established in accordance with the Kefauver-Harris Drug Amendments of 1962, which, as noted in chapter four, brought forth new criteria for proof of safety and efficacy in the wake of the thalidomide crisis of the 1950s.<sup>277</sup> Oram writes that these policies emphasized "the need for large patient populations and sophisticated statistical analysis to determine the significance of results."<sup>278</sup> He proceeds to comment on the procedural difficulties that these requirements posed to psychedelic studies:

This technique theoretically allowed the objective assessment of drugs, as all extrapharmacological factors that could influence the outcome of a treatment were equally present in the experimental and control groups. Therefore, any statistically significant difference in the results between the groups could only be due to the drug. However, this method was not well suited to test all treatments, particularly those that utilized psychological elements, and it carried with it the assumption that drug therapies worked through a direct biological action.<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> Nicolas Rasmussen, "America's First Amphetamine Epidemic, 1929-1971"

<sup>277</sup> Katherine Hendy, "Placebo Problems: Boundary Work in the Psychedelic Science Renaissance." *Plant Medicines, Healing and Psychedelic Science*, 2018: 155.

<sup>278</sup> Oram, "Efficacy and Enlightenment," 224

<sup>279</sup> Oram, "Efficacy and Enlightenment," 224

As I have noted throughout my project, scholarly consensus holds that psychedelic psychiatry does not work exclusively through what Oram calls “direct biological action.” Psychedelic research trials may only be able to prove efficacy if their standards of proof account for the influence of non-chemical factors on subject outcomes. Such factors might include subjects’ psychological condition, the physical environment of treatments, and the effects of adjacent therapies, among many possible others.

Psychedelic psychiatrists have echoed Oram’s perspectives on the poor match between psychedelic qualia and the regulations on methodology stipulated by the Kefauver-Harris amendments. They claim that psychedelic research must acknowledge the many differences between the psychotherapeutic operations of psychedelic drugs and those of more conventional psychopharmaceutical treatment, especially including the importance of extrapharmacological factors to the treatment process. Among these factors, the role of psychotherapy might be said to be the most significant. Although psychedelic psychiatry is still in its infancy, it seems unlikely that any model of practice will emerge which does not include some form of psychological counseling.<sup>280</sup> The role of psychotherapy is so essential, in fact, that psychiatrist Eduardo Schenberg refers to psychedelic psychiatry as “psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy,” or “PAP.” Schenberg remarks that PAP “can be conceptualized as the induction of an experience with positive long-term mental health consequences, rather than daily neurochemical corrections in brain dysfunctions,” heralding a key difference between the healing mechanisms of psychedelics

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<sup>280</sup> See, for example, Janis Phelps, “Developing Competencies and Guidelines for the Training of Psychedelic Therapists,” and Rick Doblin, “The Future of Psychedelic-Assisted Psychotherapy”

and those of the most well-known psychopharmaceuticals, such as antidepressant and antipsychotic medications.<sup>281</sup>

In “Psychedelic-Assisted Psychotherapy: A Paradigm Shift in Psychiatric Research and Development,” Schenberg describes PAP as a watershed break with psychiatric norms. Specifically, it “suggests a conceptual expansion of ‘drug efficacy’ to ‘experience efficacy,’” which should influence the criteria for proof of medical value.<sup>282</sup> The distinction between drug efficacy and experience efficacy comports with Oram’s perspectives on the unique methodological requirements of psychedelic trials. It also follows the distinction I have made between a “science of psychedelics” and a “psychedelic science.” Whereas a normative science of psychedelics might primarily investigate the effects of psychedelics on the brain, psychedelic science would give special attention to factors external to these substances’ neurophysiological effects. Psychedelic scientists would relatedly recognize that pharmacological and extrapharmacological variables cannot be datafied in exactly the same way. The former category more swiftly accommodates discretization and quantification, while the latter is at greater risk of being misconstrued by such techniques. It is not so much that psychedelic science would entirely avoid rendering its subject matter as digital data, but that such practices would have to be implemented with a reflexive awareness of its limitations.

In his article “The Persistence of Subjectivity In Neuropsychopharmacology: Observations of Contemporary Hallucinogen Research,” Nicolas Langlitz explores the role of subject-reported testimonies in the field of neuropsychopharmacology through the lens of digital

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<sup>281</sup> Schenberg, “Psychedelic-Assisted Psychotherapy: A Paradigm Shift in Psychiatric Research and Development”

<sup>282</sup> Schenberg “Psychedelic-Assisted Psychotherapy: A Paradigm Shift in Psychiatric Research and Development”

psychedelic research. Specifically, he examines the use of encephalograms and neuroimaging techniques in studies which document the impact of psychedelic inebriation on the human brain.<sup>283</sup> Such investigations, he writes, attempt to identify empirical markers for the subjective effects of psychedelics, or what is known in the field of neuroscience as “neural correlates” for altered states of consciousness. Langlitz claims that the aforementioned digital tools need to be supplemented by first-hand reports from the research subjects. “Otherwise,” he writes, “it would be impossible to tell what the measured neural correlates were correlates of.”<sup>284</sup> He also believes that psychedelic scientists benefit from having had experiences with the drugs themselves, as such personal familiarity would allow researchers to evaluate neural correlates of psychedelic effects from the perspective of direct experience — a perspective which, he suggests, may not bear in second-hand sources. As he explains,

In the quest for neural correlates of (drug-induced altered states of) consciousness, introspective accounts of test subjects play a crucial role in neuroimaging studies. Firsthand knowledge of the drugs’ flamboyant effects provides researchers with a personal knowledge not communicated in scientific publications, but key to the conduct of their experiments. In many cases, the “psychedelic experience” draws scientists into the field and continues to inspire their self-image and way of life.<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> Nicolas Langlitz, *The Persistence of the Subjective in Neuropsychopharmacology: Observations of Contemporary Hallucinogen Research.* *History of the Human Sciences* 23, no. 1 (2010): 38.

<sup>284</sup> Langlitz, “The Persistence of the Subjective,” 43.

<sup>285</sup> Langlitz, “The Persistence of the Subjective,” 37.

To be sure, the arguments Langlitz makes in “The Persistence of Subjectivity” extend to research initiatives which are not specifically concerned with psychedelic compounds. “The Persistence of Subjectivity” uses psychedelic science as a means to corroborate the inexorable role of subjectivity across the field of neuropsychopharmacology as a whole. It is significant, however, that among all possible case studies, Langlitz takes psychedelic research as his point of entry into the dependence of neuropsychopharmacology on the authority of subjective information from research volunteers and scientists’ own lived experience with psychedelic compounds. It would appear that psychedelic scholars are unusually willing to work beyond the traditional object-subject dynamic, wherein the input of the research subject is always mediated by the hermeneutic work of the scientist, who represents objectivity and epistemic validity.

There is precedent for reflexive approaches to psychedelic methodology beyond the scope of studies which rely on digital measurement tools. In chapter three, I addressed the use of interpretative phenomenological analysis, or IPA, in psychedelic analyses. IPA, which was originally developed for qualitative psychology research, requires investigators to explicitly acknowledge the fact that their viewpoint is partial and biased. The authority of the researcher is not considered absolute, but is balanced by the authority of the subject under study. Interpretative phenomenological analysis also maintains that psychological knowledge is processual and open-ended rather than stable or finite.

IPA is epistemically aligned with the burgeoning initiative to allow psychedelic researchers and clinicians to openly draw upon knowledge gained from first-hand psychedelic use. This movement might be described as a radical affirmation of the role of non-empirical information in psychedelic medical practice. As a means by which to prioritize both the

subjective aspects and incommunicable nature of psychedelic phenomena, this radical affirmation embodies the principles of “psychedelic science” as opposed to a “science of psychedelics.” In the following section, I will contend that it affirms forms of knowledge which resist datafication.

### **Psychedelic Savoir-faire Meets the Ecstasy of Communication**

Of course, certain aspects of first-hand psychedelic use may very well be expressed as digital data. Verbal reports can be rendered digitally, as can artistic works reflecting the lived experience of a hallucinogenic trip.<sup>286</sup> However, in light of so many claims to the ineffability and personal significance of psychedelic experience, it would seem that these substances impart upon their users a certain *savoir-faire* and *savoir-vivre*. I use these terms in accordance with the definitions provided in chapter two, where I refer to Bernard Stiegler’s book *For A New Critique of Political Economy*. To briefly recapitulate, *savoir-faire* entails a certain savvy, finesse, or incommunicable “know-how.”<sup>287</sup> *Savoir-vivre* describes the related faculty of “how to live,” which comes from the practice of living, and cannot be grasped through language alone. *Savoir-faire* and *savoir-vivre* are epistemic faculties which can only be obtained through direct experience. They cannot be learned and practiced by secondhand means, as in reading books, receiving instruction in educational settings, or utilizing digital applications. As I wrote in chapter two, Stiegler in fact

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<sup>286</sup> See, for example, the artwork and statements published by Alex and Allyson Grey at [www.cosm.org](http://www.cosm.org).

<sup>287</sup> Bernard Stiegler, *For A New Critique of Political Economy*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 30.

maintains that the use of digital tools effects “a vast process of the loss” of *savoir-faire* and *savoir-vivre*.<sup>288</sup>

The likelihood that psychedelic scientists might one day be allowed to deploy knowledge gained from first-hand psychedelic use — what might be called psychedelic *savoir-faire* — seems remote. So far, this technique is purely speculative, perhaps because there exist clear ethical injunctions against it. Its advocates, however, claim that the potential benefits of this technique are too high for it to remain uninvestigated. In their article “The Influence of Therapists’ First-Hand Experience With Psychedelics on Psychedelic-Assisted Psychotherapy Research and Therapist Training,” psychiatrists Elizabeth M. Nielson and Jeffrey Guss attempt “to open an academic dialogue on the role of researchers’ and clinicians’ personal experience with psychedelic compounds... by asking what may be the impact of this experience on therapeutic outcomes.”<sup>289</sup> The article has a clear polemic function, as it proposes that “this should now be an askable and researchable question,” and that that this question should “be moved from theoretical debate to a subject of formal inquiry.”<sup>290</sup>

Nielson and Guss clarify that first-hand experience does not constitute a valid source of information in pharmaceutical research. They maintain their position nevertheless. As they write,

we can confidently state that variation in therapists’ personal experience with LSD and

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<sup>288</sup> Stiegler, *For a New Critique of Political Economy*, 30.

<sup>289</sup> Elizabeth M. Nielson and Jeffrey Guss, “The Influence of Therapists’ First-Hand Experience with Psychedelics on Psychedelic-Assisted Psychotherapy Research and Therapist Training.” *Journal of Psychedelic Studies* 2 (2): 4. <https://doi.org/10.1556/2054.2018.009>

<sup>290</sup> Nielson and Guss, “The Influence of Therapists’ First-Hand Experience with Psychedelics” 4.

psilocybin introduces a potential confound to research efforts to demonstrate the efficacy of psychedelic therapy in a rigorous way. The nature of this confound is, in fact, an unaddressed empirical question: no contemporary studies have systematically studied whether or how therapists' first-hand experience with psychedelics affects clinical outcomes in psychedelic therapy... Even though it is methodologically quite complicated, empirical exploration of these questions is vital, and that question is rendered outside the scope of inquiry if academic psychedelic research remains wholly embedded in the epistemology of objective psychopharmacologic research.<sup>291</sup>

Here, Nielson and Guss highlight the fact that “objective psychopharmacologic research” does not recognize the epistemic import of *savoir-faire*. The incorporation of psychedelic *savoir-faire* and *savoir-vivre* would challenge this precept. Insofar as the existence of these faculties cannot be empirically proven, such an official inclusion would deviate from positivist approaches to psychedelic knowledge production.

The relationship between first-hand psychedelic experience and normative epistemologies is also a concern for anthropologist Beatriz Labate and public health researcher Kenneth Tupper. Their article “Ayahuasca, Psychedelic Studies and Health Sciences: The Politics of Knowledge and Inquiry into an Amazonian Plant Brew” examines personal experience as an esteemed source of information in the ritual use of the hallucinogenic brew ayahuasca by

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<sup>291</sup> Nielson and Guss, “The Influence of Therapists’ First-Hand Experience With Psychedelics,” 4.

Amazonian indigenous groups.<sup>292</sup> They suggest that psychedelic scientists may similarly benefit from self-experimentation, and describe the initiative to officially permit this strategy as a grassroots scholarly effort to construct epistemic norms which better fit their research. “Despite the political and cultural forces operating to discourage it,” they write, “some psychedelic researchers not only admit to having experiences with the substances they study, but even suggest that to do so is epistemically desirable.”<sup>293</sup>

Like Nielson and Guss, Labate and Tupper identify the virtue of objectivity as problematic for this movement. In “Ayahuasca, Psychedelic Studies and Health Science,” they emphasize that the presumptive scientific authority of the “objective fact” is a product of technological developments which followed the Enlightenment. The nineteenth century, they claim, saw the rise of “novel mechanical devices in experiment and observation” after which “the personal idiosyncrasies of the human researcher could be overcome through the mediation of external instruments and the assiduous self-effacement of the scientist.”<sup>294</sup> In other words, technological mediation made it possible to factor the scientist out of the science, so to speak. The ethic of objectivity which Labate and Tupper describe holds that “personal idiosyncrasies” and other possible disruptions to the seamless transmission of fact may be warded off by proper device use.

The campaign for the incorporation of first-hand knowledge in psychedelic science corroborates the importance of *savoir-faire* to the field. Because *savoir-faire* determines an

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<sup>292</sup> Beatriz C. Labate and Kenneth Tupper, “Ayahuasca, Psychedelic Studies and Health Sciences: The Politics of Knowledge and Inquiry into an Amazonian Plant Brew.” *Current Drug Abuse Reviews* 7, no. 2 (2015): 71–80. <https://doi.org/10.2174/1874473708666150107155042>.

<sup>293</sup> Labate and Tupper, “Ayahuasca, Psychedelic Studies and Health Sciences,” 77.

<sup>294</sup> Labate and Tupper, “Ayahuasca, Psychedelic Studies and Health Sciences,” 77.

expressly individualistic practice of sensemaking, it circumvents the homogenizing function of datafication. *Savoir-faire* would act as a shield against what Jean Baudrillard calls “the ecstasy of communication,” or the uninhibited flow of communication facilitated by technological media. Baudrillard contends that the ecstasy of communication — which is the subject of an eponymously-titled book — permits no communicative depth or signification. All that it mediates is the media form itself, much in the sense described by media theorist Marshall McLuhan in his seminal essay “The Medium Is The Message.”<sup>295</sup>

Baudrillard writes that the ecstasy of communication denudes all information of profundity, distance, or illusion, and is therefore “obscene.” As he explains,

Obscenity begins when there is no more spectacle, no more stage, no more theatre, no more illusion, when every-thing becomes immediately transparent, visible, exposed in the raw and inexorable light of information and communication. We no longer partake of the drama of alienation, but are in the ecstasy of communication. And this ecstasy is obscene. Obscene is that which eliminates the gaze, the image and the representation.<sup>296</sup>

That which cannot be expressed positively constitutes a barrier to the ecstasy of communication. This incommunicable element, however, is prone to be violated by the ecstasy of communication, which promotes the objective virtues of transparency and totality. If psychedelic

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<sup>295</sup> Marshall McLuhan. *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 7-21.

<sup>296</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*. Trans. Bernard and Caroline Schute. (New York: Semiotext(e), 1988), 21-22.

scholars were to invoke phenomena which fundamentally resist expression as informants to their work, they would, in effect, contribute to the deceleration of the ecstasy of communication. This alternative mode of scientific practice is not a pellucid transfer of knowledge. It instead implies a reflexive recognition of the constructed nature of knowledge, much like the stage upholds the fictional constructs of theater.

The ecstasy of communication is indiscriminating and ruthless in its program of revelation. Baudrillard writes that it generates a “pornography of information,” or a lurid and overwrought mass of communicative material. As he puts it,

Today there is a pornography of information and communication, a pornography of circuits and networks, of functions and objects in their legibility, availability, regulation, forced signification, capacity to perform, connection, polyvalence, their free expression... it is no longer the obscenity of the hidden, the repressed, the obscure, but that of the visible, the all-too-visible, the more-visible-than-visible; it is the obscenity of that which no longer contains a secret and is entirely soluble in information and communication.<sup>297</sup>

Pornography is that which is “entirely soluble in information and communication.” Insofar as the data episteme subjects all phenomena to intelligible expression, it always yields a certain informational pornography. Stated differently, digital data always produce an ecstasy of communication.

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<sup>297</sup> Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, 22-23.

As detailed in chapters one and two, data serve the same function as capital. To briefly recapitulate, data and capital are both media of equivocation. Digitization and commodification processes render objects ontologically in the sense that they refigure them in accordance with standard forms of data and financial currency. It is therefore not coincidental that Baudrillard connects the “obscenity” of communicative media with Karl Marx’s writings on the obscenity of the commodity form. According to Baudrillard, “the obscenity of the commodity” had “already been denounced” in Marx’s work.<sup>298</sup> He adds that the Marxist notion of the commodity form is structurally supportive of the ecstasy of communication, as commodities depend on the principles of equivalence and free circulation. In Baudrillard’s words,

The commodity is legible, as opposed to the object, which never quite reveals its secret, and it manifests its visible essence — its price. It is the locus of transcription of all possible objects: through it, objects communicate — the merchant form is the first great medium of the modern world. But the message which the objects deliver is radically simplified and is always the same — their exchange value.<sup>299</sup>

As Baudrillard demonstrates, the principle of exchange value renders all commodities fungible, that is, modular and fully interchangeable. In chapters one and two, I demonstrated that units of data are also modular and fungible. And because data can only self-replicate, digital exchange

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<sup>298</sup> Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, 22-23.

<sup>299</sup> Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, 22-23.

only resolves in more data. The ecstatic transfer of data thus unfolds as a proliferation of sameness.

Byung-Chul Han makes a similar claim in his book *The Transparency Society*, which describes the social effects of unrestricted commodity exchange. The principle of exchange, he writes, makes societies “transparent.”<sup>300</sup> As he puts it, “things prove transparent when they abandon singularity and find expression through their price alone.”<sup>301</sup> Han holds that the acceleration of capitalism has led to the rise of a “transparency society,” insofar as economic value “makes it possible to equate anything with anything else, [and] abolishes all incommensurability, any singularity.” For this reason, the society of transparency is “an inferno of the same.”<sup>302</sup> Han’s “inferno of the same” conceptualizes the same phenomenon as Baudrillard’s “ecstasy of communication.” The data episteme attempts to make this phenomenon total by rendering all objects soluble in communication. This process excludes that which cannot be figured as discrete, atomizable, and fungible — stated differently, that which does not resemble itself. That is, it systematically denies uniqueness.

Deleuze has also observed the loss of the unique under conditions of increasing technologization. In his 1992 essay “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” he reflects on the deterioration of “the individual” amidst the accelerating technological profusion of information. “Individuals have become ‘dividuals,’” he claims, or figures whose distinctive characteristics are occluded by technologically-mediated information. He writes that dividuals might be defined

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<sup>300</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *The Transparency Society*, trans. by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 1.

<sup>301</sup> Han, *The Transparency Society*, 2.

<sup>302</sup> Han, *The Transparency Society*, 2.

as “masses, samples, data, markets, or ‘banks.’”<sup>303</sup> They are informational replicas stripped of all quirks and irregularities.

The conceptual opposite of the “dividual” is not “the individual,” but rather “the idiot.” In *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, Han describes the idiot as a storied figure in the history of philosophical thought. The idiot, he writes, dates to Ancient Greece. In Han’s view, Socrates — “who knows only that he does not know” — is an archetypal “idiot.” Rene Descartes, who “thinks by thinking Thought (*das Denken denkt*),” also counts as an idiot. Han claims that the Cartesian formula *cogito ergo sum* is “idiotic,” as it “takes an inner contraction of thinking to make a new beginning.”<sup>304</sup> But Han is primarily interested in Deleuze and Guattari’s treatment of “the idiot,” which appears to exist “in opposition” to the Cartesian idiot. He quotes directly from Deleuze and Guattari’s book *What is Philosophy?*, where they describe this new sort of idiot:

the old idiot wanted indubitable truths at which he could arrive by himself: in the meantime he would doubt everything ... The new idiot has no wish for indubitable truths; he... wills the absurd — this is not the same image of thought. The old idiot wanted truth, but the new idiot wants to turn the absurd into the highest power of thought.<sup>305</sup>

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<sup>303</sup> Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control.” *October* 59 (1992), 5.

<sup>304</sup> Han, *Psychopolitics*, 81-82.

<sup>305</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, “What is Philosophy?,” qtd. in Han *Psychopolitics*, 81.

Han writes that Deleuze and Guattari's "idiot," and perhaps all other idiotisms, are on the verge of extinction. "Thoroughgoing digital networking and communication have massively amplified the compulsion to conform," he attests. "The attendant violence of consensus is suppressing idiotism."<sup>306</sup>

Digital networking does not acknowledge any division between society and "the individual," or the singular figure whose mind might have at one time been metonymized with an image of thought. The digital suppression of idiotism violates the interiority of the mind or psyche as much as it does society. The suppression of idiotism is both psychical and political — it is psychopolitical.

Data "dividuals" are produced by the psychopolitical suppression of the unique or irregular. The idiot, on the other hand, is categorically singular. Han writes of the idiot's "idiosyncrasy," which "literally refers to a specific and peculiar mixture of the body's humours and the oversensitivity this entails."<sup>307</sup> He explains that idiosyncrasy obstructs the homogenizing processes of datafication. "When communication is to be accelerated," he writes, "idiosyncrasy poses an obstacle inasmuch as it amounts to an immunological defence against the Other."<sup>308</sup>

In my project, what is crucial about the idea of the "subjective" as it is deployed by psychedelic scientists in fact has little to do with the concept of subjectivity as it is normally understood. Rather, "the subjective" bears epistemic value as a sort of cipher for the idiosyncratic-idiot in the context of psychedelic science. By its very definition, the idiosyncratic

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<sup>306</sup> Han, *Psychopolitics*, 82.

<sup>307</sup> Han, *Psychopolitics*, 82.

<sup>308</sup> Han *Psychopolitics*, 82.

can only be approximated or articulated in oblique terms. That which Langlitz, Labate, Tupper, Nielson and Guss invoke with the terms “subjective” and “subjectivity” would more accurately be considered the idiosyncratic acting in the capacity of informant to psychedelic science, where it assists scholarly investigations into the therapeutic mechanisms of psychedelic substances. The “subjective” of psychedelic science gestures towards the element which, although indescribable and non-positivistic, is still critical to the aims of research and practice.

On principle, “the idiosyncratic” has no special relationship with “the subject” or “subjectivity.” This is especially crucial considering that the concepts of “the subject” and “subjectivity” substantiate the epistemological and ontological validity of “the object,” whereas the idiosyncratic does not exist in relation to any object at all. The idiosyncratic posits epistemic and ontic features which do not rest upon any preexisting determining or independent factor. It is unique in the most literal sense, or *sui generis*.

It is possible to speak of the digitization of subjectivity in the sense that digitization is capable of creating subjects and subjectivity. In fact, it might be said that when the idiosyncratic assumes a digital form, it becomes a subject of the data episteme. In his book *The Burnout Society*, Han uses the language of immunology to illustrate the way in which positive phenomena, including data assemblages, subsume the idiosyncratic, or what he calls “the Other.” When the Other comes into contact with positive phenomena — which he calls “the Own” — it seeks to introduce negativity into the Own’s positive territory. But the Own cannot be structurally negated, and thus, in turn, it “negates the negativity,” or that which is singular about the Other. Han describes this function as follows:

The immunologically Other is the negative that intrudes into the Own [*das Eigene*] and seeks to negate it. The Own founders on the negativity of the Other when it proves incapable of negation in turn. That is, the immunological self-assertion of the Own proceeds as the negation of negation. The Own asserts itself in—and against—the Other by negating its negativity. Immunological prophylaxis, that is, inoculation, follows the dialectic of negativity. Fragments of the Other are introduced into the Own in order to provoke an immunoreaction. Thereby, negation of negation occurs without the danger of death, because the immune system does not confront the Other itself.<sup>309</sup>

When the idiosyncratic, or “immunologically Other,” encounters the positive Own, it does not maintain its singularity. It rather becomes subject to expression, or the “negation of negation.” It becomes a subject to the positive object. Here, I am using the concept of “the subject” not as a semantic approximation of the idiosyncratic — that is, not in the same sense that psychedelic scientists conceive of “subjectivity” — but in keeping with its more conventional usage, where it is understood as always relative to an object. Insofar as the data episteme yields subjects, it is not subjects which subvert the data episteme.

I have described the target of psychedelic science as subjective experience. In the psychedelic science literature, “the idiosyncratic” is often indicated through recollections of subjective experience, including first-hand psychedelic substance use. But the target of psychedelic inquiry is more properly understood as the idiosyncratic. In the context of psychedelic science, “the idiosyncratic” entails an awareness of fundamental uniqueness or

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<sup>309</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, trans. by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 1.

alterity which may be leveraged towards therapeutic practices. This knowledge, which cannot withstand the digital ecstasy of communication, is consecrated in the methodological operations of psychedelic science. In closing, this chapter will examine the idiosyncratic as the object of psychedelic inquiry and as a meaningful confound to the data episteme.

### **The Idiosyncratic**

Han's figure of "the idiot" is not necessarily constituted by a single person, consciousness or intelligence. Per Deleuze's theory of abstract thought, the idiot— or "he who wills the absurd," as opposed to an image of thought — should not be identified with any such figure, as this figure is always preceded by an image of thought. The idiot may be defined simply as a validation of idiosyncrasy. Under the digital epistemic regime, the idiosyncratic is that which cannot be networked, mediated, or — ultimately — observed. Han's "idiot," as he writes, "escapes communication and networking altogether."<sup>310</sup> As such, the idiot testifies to the existence of the idiosyncratic.

I cannot positively express the ways in which psychedelic scientists might observe the unobservable-idiosyncratic, except through the sort of first-hand encounter which normative scientific procedure does not permit. As it is, however, the existence of the unobservable is not contingent upon witness. What the idiosyncratic requires instead is acknowledgement. Psychedelic scientists are thus tasked to enlighten their field to the possibility that phenomena which resist observation are not only epistemologically valid, but necessary.

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<sup>310</sup> Han, *Psychopolitics*, 83-84.

Han writes that the idiot “does not ‘communicate.’”<sup>311</sup> At least, he does not communicate in the sense that communication heralds exchange with another communicating body. The idiot instead “communicates with the incommunicable,” as Han claims, and in so doing, “takes leave of the prevailing system” and “abandons intelligence.”<sup>312</sup> Psychedelic science, meanwhile, is not a science of “intelligence” in the sense that intelligence is contingent upon epistemic criteria for legitimation. With no preset criteria for proof of efficacy, psychedelic science may not so much constitute a “science” as a practice of art. It perhaps only becomes a science by virtue of its implementation in medical practice. This is, to be sure, the capacity in which it faces the data episteme.

The coming years will in all likelihood see an expansion in psychedelic drug research.<sup>313</sup> But they will probably not see the retraction of the data episteme. The epistemic problems I have outlined may very well manifest themselves across various instances of theoretical and empirical psychedelic research programs. These problems should not disqualify psychedelic science, but rather speak to its capacity to indicate the hazards of overdetermined epistemic principles.

I have not stated that psychedelic science provides the only challenge to the data episteme, but rather that the critique it permits is uniquely salient. I will suggest that any other critique of the data episteme would have to acknowledge the role of the unobservable in practices of knowledge production. Such a critique, in other words, would defend and promote the virtue of the idiosyncratic.

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<sup>311</sup> Han, *Psychopolitics*, 83-84.

<sup>312</sup> Han, *Psychopolitics*, 83-84.

<sup>313</sup> See, for example, Rick Doblin et al.: “The Past and Future of Psychedelic Science,” 2019.

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## **Epilogue: “If It Doesn’t Exist on the Internet...”**

The World Economic Forum reports that in the year 2020, the global quantity of data is expected to reach forty-four zettabytes, or  $1,000^7$  bytes.<sup>1</sup> This amount is forty times greater than the number of stars in the known universe.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, the two wealthiest individuals on the planet serve as chief executive officers for corporations who traffic in digital data. At the time of writing, Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon.com, Inc., holds a net worth of approximately 118 billion dollars.<sup>3</sup> He is succeeded by Bill Gates, CEO of the Microsoft Corporation, whose net worth is valued at 108 billion dollars.<sup>4</sup> While Amazon.com sells material goods, its could not exist without the networked digital infrastructure which permits its rapid and global exchange of goods and services, and which also serves as one of its most profitable wares.<sup>5</sup> Microsoft, on the other hand, was among the first corporations to benefit from the marginal input cost of digital production. By patenting and selling its flagship product — the Microsoft Windows operating system — at a cost that is much higher than that of the total inputs required to produce each copy, Microsoft prototyped a model of production fully distinct from that described by Karl Marx.<sup>6</sup>

To revisit the summation provided in chapter three, Marx’s economic analysis posits a dependent and directly causal relationship between human labor and material components, which resolves in the price of a good or service.<sup>7</sup> Because human labor and material resources are finite, so too is economic value. By denying intellectual authority to non-digital objects, the data episteme supports the dominance of a form of economic value which, in contrast with Marx, theoretically permits the infinite accumulation of capital — that is, Baudrillard’s sign

value form.<sup>8</sup> The data episteme facilitates the economic hegemony of the sign value form by naturalizing the possibility that all phenomena, including the most arcane depths of human consciousness, may be rendered digital. If the recent acceleration of both digital data and wealth borne by digital rentiers serve as any proof, it would appear that the data episteme has made significant steps towards this totalizing goal.

As contemporary scholars attempt to grasp the implications of Big Data, some have turned to the historical canon of technology research. John Cheney-Lippold opens his 2017 book *We Are Data: Algorithms and the Making of Our Digital Selves* by declaring that today's networked citizens are “well-filled with data.”<sup>314</sup> This is a nod to the influential media theorist Marshall McLuhan, who in 1964 coined the term “high definition” to describe technological media which are “well-filled with data,” or rich with information.<sup>315</sup>

*We Are Data* describes the human digital condition in rich detail. Cheney-Lippold tells the reader that, if they do not believe themselves to be “well-filled with data,” they should “roam the web for five minutes.” In those five minutes, he claims,

you will have generated, through your web activity, an identity that is likely separate from the person you thought you were. In a database far, far away, you have been assigned a gender, ethnicity, class, education level, and potentially the status of parent with x number of children. Maybe you were labeled a U.S. citizen or a foreigner. There's

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<sup>314</sup> John Cheney-Lippold, *We Are Data: Algorithms and the Making of Our Digital Selves*. (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2017), 3.

<sup>315</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 22.

even a slight chance you were identified as a terrorist by the U.S. National Security Agency.<sup>316</sup>

In this passage, Cheney-Lippold implies that there is something sinister about the production of personal data by digital networks. His remarks align with Sun-Ha Hong's theorization of "data's intimacy," or the idea that data "may come to know us better than we know ourselves."<sup>317</sup> Hong and Cheney-Lippold both reflect fears of alienation and estrangement by digital technology. If data are gaining epistemic authority over human life, or if our identity in a database is "separate" from the person that we think we are, the potential for self-determination would appear to be under siege.

Then again, the person we think we are may not be very different from the identity produced by our online activities. Cheney-Lippold names "gender, ethnicity, class, education level, and potentially the status of parent with x number of children" as pre-established groups into which one might be algorithmically sorted.<sup>318</sup> These categories are not "separate" from human life as conventionally understood. Gender, ethnicity, class, and parental status are personal attributes. And although few might identify with the normative, politically-coded label "terrorist," it is at least true that "terrorism" entails activities which one might consider central to one's identity. Who, then, does Cheney-Lippold think that we think we are?

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<sup>316</sup> Cheney-Lippold, *We Are Data*, 3.

<sup>317</sup> Sun-Ha Hong, "Data's Intimacy: Machinic Sensibility and the Quantified Self," *communication +1*: Vol. 5, Article 3 (Fall 2016), 2.

<sup>318</sup> Cheney-Lippold, *We Are Data*, 3.

Throughout my project, I have shown that data are impervious to formal boundaries and categorical divisions. Data do not recognize any difference between human beings and the qualities which define their digital selves. These features, however, are not outside of us. Across various digital devices, users willingly identify themselves with markers which define their interests, professional endeavors, and personal relationships. If these technologies provoke feelings of estrangement and powerlessness, it is not because they produce unrecognizable versions of ourselves. The sense of separation described by Cheney-Lippold and the epistemic threat described by Hong may be connected data's hostility to the idiosyncratic.

The wager of psychedelic science is that the idiosyncratic plays a role in mental health. As I wrote in chapter five, psychedelic scientists face the task of affirming the idiosyncratic in their practice, despite the fact that it is not considered to be a legitimate source of scientific knowledge by the terms of normative scientific epistemologies. The idiosyncratic also distinguishes individuals from what Gilles Deleuze calls "dividuals," or human beings rendered as non-individuated "masses, samples, data, markets or 'banks.'"<sup>319</sup> Deleuze's dividuals are "well-filled with data" — they are "high definition" in McLuhan's sense. The idiosyncratic lies beyond the ambit of dividual life.

Michel Foucault provides a salient account of the idiosyncratic in the age of data. In the preface to his book *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, he claims that the text was inspired by the essay "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins" by Jorge Luis

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<sup>319</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control." *October* 59 (1992), 5.

Borges, best known as an author of short stories.<sup>320</sup> Foucault writes that this essay contains a passage which quotes a certain “Chinese encyclopaedia.” He continues to cite Borges directly:

[In the encyclopaedia] it is written that “animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.”<sup>321</sup>

He then points out that the taxonomy is riven with internal contradictions and thus stands on unstable epistemological grounds. “The thing we apprehend in one great leap,” he says, “the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*.”<sup>322</sup> In other words, the list of animals presents a way of thinking that challenges all notions of logical coherence.

Foucault then explains the list’s central paradox:

The monstrous quality that runs through Borges’s enumeration consists...in the fact that the common ground on which such meetings are possible has itself been destroyed. What is impossible is not the propinquity of the things listed, but the very site on which their propinquity would be possible. The animals “(i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush” — where could they ever meet, except in the immaterial

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<sup>320</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Other Inquisitions: 1937-1952* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press), 103.

<sup>321</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2002), xvi.

<sup>322</sup> Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xvi.

sound of the voice pronouncing their enumeration, or on the page transcribing it? Where else could they be juxtaposed except in the non-place of language? Yet, though language can spread them before us, it can do so only in an unthinkable space.<sup>323</sup>

What is problematic, in other words, is that the animals can no longer “meet” one another, because the word “meet” suggests an assembly between multiple mutually distinct entities. But as Foucault points out, this taxonomy denies the possibility of any such distinction. It instead undermines the logic by which such divisions are actually distinct.

The problem is that the list’s constitutive categories overlap with and encompass one another. For example, it’s for an animal to simultaneously “belong to the Emperor” and “be drawn with a very fine camelhair brush.” The taxonomy thus violates its own internal order. It also nullifies any distinction between internal and external properties, where “external properties” describe the relationship of the animal to its encompassing category. For example, the term “et cetera” means “miscellaneous” and “innumerable,” and might be rephrased as “infinite” or “indefinite.” it evokes the nonspecific. “Et cetera” is not an inherent property of any animal, and a group of animals can only be considered “innumerable” as relative to an external measure or standard. Thus the terms “et cetera” and “innumerable” reflexively refer to the relationship between the animals and the list to which they belong. On the other hand, “frenzied” and “embalmed” are inherent properties: an animal may be embalmed even if the condition of being “embalmed” is not determined by its categorical identity.

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<sup>323</sup> Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xviii.

The categories listed above are ontologically separate at the most fundamental level. Nevertheless, the Chinese encyclopedia renders them equivalent by making them perform precisely the same taxonomical function. Foucault writes that one category in particular exemplifies this contradiction. As he writes,

The central category of animals “included in the present classification,” with its explicit reference to paradoxes we are familiar with, is indication enough that we shall never succeed in defining a stable relation of contained to container between each of these categories and that which includes them all: if all the animals divided up here can be placed without exception in one of the divisions of this list, then aren’t all the other divisions to be found in that one division too? And then again, in what space would that single, inclusive division have *its* existence? Absurdity destroys the *and* of the enumeration by making impossible the *in* where the things enumerated would be divided up.<sup>324</sup>

Here, Foucault emphasizes that all animals qualify as “contained within the present classification” so long as they are placed there. Meanwhile, there are no barriers to entry, insofar as the label “contained within the present classification” only refers to itself. Because it does not describe any particular or intrinsic qualities of the entities it might contain, all potential inhabitants may in fact be classified as “within the present classification.” Perhaps they do not even have to be animals.

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<sup>324</sup> Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xviii.

The purpose of a taxonomy is to mark a system of distinctions between phenomena which share a common feature, as in a botanical taxonomy which identifies different species of the plant kingdom. The Borgesian taxonomy is “monstrous” because it destroys the basis for any such distinctions. In a way, it operates much like Jean Baudrillard’s ecstasy of communication, or Byung-Chul Han’s inferno of the same. As I wrote in chapter five, this is also the signature function of digitization. Upon admission to the ontic category of “data,” objects become qualitatively like all other digital phenomena.

The inferno of the same is “monstrous” in theory. It does not, however, exist in practice. In his essay “If It Doesn’t Exist on the Internet, It Doesn’t Exist,” the poet Kenneth Goldsmith claims that he used to make the titular observation “hyperbolically,” as something of a cynical joke.<sup>325</sup> “But as time has gone on,” he continues, “it’s proved to be a truism, perhaps the paradigmatic truism of our times.”<sup>326</sup> For this reason, he writes, he was inspired to develop the website UbuWeb, which archives avant-garde poetry and visual art. UbuWeb’s mission is to ensure the existence of obscure cultural artifacts even after their analog counterparts have long vanished.<sup>327</sup>

Goldsmith admits that he uses the word “existence” in a very limited sense. “By exist,” he writes, “I mean something exists when it can be shared, altered and re-circulated.”<sup>328</sup> His “existence,” in other words, is wholly positive. It aligns with a worldview which only recognizes

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<sup>325</sup> Kenneth Goldsmith. “If It Doesn’t Exist on the Internet, It Doesn’t Exist.” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2007/03/if-it-doesnt-exist-on-the-internet-it-doesnt-exist>

<sup>326</sup> Goldsmith, “If It Doesn’t Exist on the Internet, It Doesn’t Exist.”

<sup>327</sup> See [www.ubuweb.com](http://www.ubuweb.com).

<sup>328</sup> Goldsmith, “If It Doesn’t Exist on the Internet, It Doesn’t Exist.”

that which can be externally verified, as in Auguste Comte's original formulation of positivism.<sup>329</sup> Goldsmith is aware that the general concept of "existence" supersedes the capacity to be shared, altered, and circulated. "If It Doesn't Exist on the Internet" redefines "existence" as "existence on the Internet," which in turn denies the existence of all offline phenomena. Thus Goldsmith not only signals the marginalization of the offline world, but also suggests that non-networked spaces are anterior in the literal sense of having no existence at all. As he writes, "the new radicalism is paper. Publish it on a printed page and no one will ever know about it."<sup>330</sup> He additionally tells the reader that if they do not want something to exist — because, as he says, "there are many reasons to want to keep things private" — that they should "keep it off the web."<sup>331</sup> The essay concludes on this pithy word of advice.

The data episteme will become total when all non-digital phenomena cease to have any epistemic significance — that is, when they cease to exist as informants to knowledge. In reality, this will not come to pass, but as a theoretical possibility it represents the terminus of the epistemic problems presented by Big Data. As I wrote in chapter one, Alan Liu has warned about an imminent epistemic horizon, or a situation where the hierarchical measures normally used to validate knowledge disintegrate amid digital epistemic acceleration.<sup>332</sup> These measures constitute Foucault's "common ground," or the site which makes possible the thinking of difference and

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<sup>329</sup> Auguste Comte, *A General View of Positivism*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1848), 26.

<sup>330</sup> Goldsmith, "If It Doesn't Exist on the Internet, It Doesn't Exist."

<sup>331</sup> Goldsmith, "If It Doesn't Exist on the Internet, It Doesn't Exist."

<sup>332</sup> Alan Liu, "Theses on the Epistemology of the Digital: Advice for the Centre for Digital Studies," 2014

alterity. Bodies of knowledge lose their points of distinction when they are perpetually open to epistemic permeation. Digitization renders knowledge so capacious.

Foucault likens the common ground that has been lost to a certain “famous” operating table.<sup>333</sup> This is a reference to *The Songs of Maldoror* (*Les Chants de Maldoror*) by the Comte de Lautréamont, an early prototype of surrealist literature. The novel contains Lautréamont’s famous description of a young boy who is as “beautiful” as “the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella.”<sup>334</sup> Here, he imagines the assembly of two objects which bear no obvious relation to one another in a context that is unrelated to either one. In comparing the lost common ground to Lautréamont’s operating table, Foucault highlights the operating table as the category or container which permits the “and” of the enumeration of these items. The table provides the basis for a conceptual link between two very different things; this link in turn accentuates the difference between the two. The unique character of the sewing machine is thrown into high relief by its juxtaposition with the umbrella and the table upon which both rest.

It is not possible to articulate the logic which links the sewing machine to the umbrella. There is no logic to be found; the scene is meant to be absurd. The connective structure of the operating table is unintelligible and inscrutable to all measures of thought. This is why Lautréamont’s narrator describes the chance meeting as “beautiful.”

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<sup>333</sup> Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xviii

<sup>334</sup> Comte de Lautréamont, *Maldoror & the Complete Works of the Comte De Lautréamont* (Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 2011), 193.

The operating table plays the part of Deleuze and Guattari's idiosyncratic idiot, or he who "wills the absurd."<sup>335</sup> I have suggested that the therapeutic mechanisms of psychedelics also advance a sort of thought which defies positive logic. Psychedelics might be said to function like Lautréamont's operating table. Certainly, the sewing machine cannot meet the umbrella in the space of data, or the inferno of the same. The task for those who would seek alternatives is to recognize what is not the inferno, make it endure, and give it space.<sup>336</sup>

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<sup>335</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "What is Philosophy?," qtd. in Han *Psychopolitics*, 81.

<sup>336</sup> See Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, p. 165: "The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space" — it may seem a bit out of place here, but this whole quote will begin the project, which will give some context for this last line.

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