

A Hidden History of Women and Psychedelics

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THERE IS PLENTY OF WRITING about women and drugs, but the discourse around psychedelics has historically been dominated by men. The drug experiences of women have been both sensationalized for their scandalous aspects and sterilized in clinical reports, but the role of women in the investigation of psychedelics prior to criminalization is obscure, and the identities of early women experimenters are often unknown.

Discourse, in critical analytic terms, is larger, more complex and more formal than conversation. It includes complex systems of rules, roles, rituals, goals, professional credentials, customs, habits, combinations of words, and patterns of thought. These complex systems were described as “games” by Timothy Leary, and were what his famous (or infamous) slogan “Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out” urged people to leave behind in seeking new forms of consciousness. In medicine, law, teaching, and the ministry, professional language and restrictive credentialing processes continue to shape candidates into recognizable members of these elite groups, legitimating their ideas and opinions and delegitimizing those of outsiders.

The discourse around psychedelics has tended to neglect the contributions of women, but courageous and determined female scholars, artists, and therapists have earned and demanded full participation in programs of research, professional forums, and educational efforts, and are now changing this field. Philanthropy is a bit further behind, but has always been a bastion of relative conservatism. As a consequence of historic gender imbalance, there are a number of women whose significant role in the exploration and employment of psychedelics for spiritual development, personal discovery, and therapeutic impact has not been well recorded or reported. Three representatives of this group are discussed in this article.

MABEL LUHAN

In 1914, Mabel Evans Dodge Sterne Luhan, who was a wealthy American patron of the arts, and member of the Greenwich Village *avant garde*, became interested in peyote. Her four volumes of memoirs describe her several marriages, her many affairs with both men and women, and her ultimate feeling of “being nobody in [her]self,” despite years of psychoanalysis and a luxurious lifestyle on two continents among the leading literary, art, political and intellectual personalities of the day (Palmer & Horowitz 2000). In *Movers and Shakers* (Luhan 1936), she describes her life in Greenwich Village at the beginning of the 20th century, and the many scholars, artists, and radicals who frequented her social salons, including John Reed, Walter Lippman, Isadora Duncan, Emma Goldman, and Margaret Sanger. She also gives the first account of a peyote experience in white America.

Luhan persuaded a friend, the ethnographer Raymond Harrington, who had lived in Oklahoma and was familiar with the rudiments of Native American ceremonies, to help Luhan and several friends to try to replicate a peyote ceremony in her apartment on West 9th Street in New York. Harrington had described the benefits of the peyote religion for his Native contacts, whom he pronounced were sober, industrious, and inspired to produce more beautiful craft work due to their recovery of inspired designs under the influence of peyote. His description, that peyote conferred the ability “to pass beyond ordinary consciousness and see things as they are in Reality,” excited Mabel’s adventurous spirit, and when she discovered that Harrington actually had a supply of peyote she was determined to try it. Harrington warned her that peyote was not to be taken lightly and insisted that there was a correct procedure for its use. Mabel and her friends agreed to take it according to his instructions. She and her friends fasted (for

one meal) and then set up her drawing room with a simulated fire and a folded sheet standing in for the peyote altar. Luhan later wrote about this event.

Her trip, with nine friends, was not a pleasant experience for Luhan, who became frightened that the police would be called after one of the participants left the apartment in a frenzy (Elcock 2018). She was reluctant to use peyote again, but in 1917, bored with her society life and weary of the focus on military mobilization and of the propaganda related to the world war, she moved to Taos, New Mexico. Luhan found her home and her mate in Taos. She described her simple life there in *Winter in Taos* (Luhan 1935). She married Tony Lujan, a Taos Pueblo man, who was a peyote leader in the pueblo. He gave his wife (who changed her spelling of their name to make it easier for her Anglo friends to pronounce) peyote medicine when she was very ill, and she had a classic transformative vision (Allen 2016). She wrote a poetic and evocative account of her experience, in which she said that the whole universe fell into place for her (Luhan 1937). Mabel Luhan used the term “expansion of consciousness” long before it was to become idiomatic some 40 years later (Palmer & Horowitz 2000).

Peyote, however, became a contentious issue in her marriage to Tony Lujan. Although she had directly experienced healing and deep insight under its influence, she insisted the Lujan give up the use of peyote, and opposed the inclusion of peyote leaders in the pueblo government. Along with other instances of meddling in pueblo affairs, Mabel Luhan encouraged religious persecution of peyote users, whom she described as “drug addicts,” and supported the enactment of a federal law prohibiting peyote use. A wealth of expert knowledge from both anthropologists and peyote users from Oklahoma to Montana opposed this legislation, and it was quietly dropped (Stewart 1987).



Mabel Luhan at her home in Taos, New Mexico.

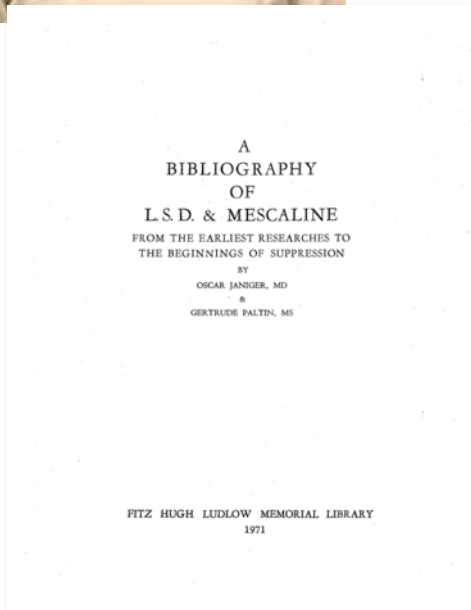
GERTRUDE PALTIN

A scholar who knew Gertrude Paltin’s daughter Sharon found a rare 1971 reference book, co-authored by her mother and Oscar Janiger, and brought it to her attention in 2005. Sharon Paltin, M.D., had not previously known of her mother’s contribution to psychedelic research, although she knew that Gertrude Paltin had had some kind of professional link to Janiger. Sharon Paltin distributed the book, *A Bibliography of LSD & Mescaline: From the Earliest Researches to the Beginnings of Suppression* by Oscar Janiger, M.D., & Gertrude Paltin, M.S., to researchers and libraries, who discovered that it includes reference entries previously unfamiliar to most scholars (Janiger & Paltin 1971).

Janiger is a well-known figure in early psychedelic therapy, but Gertrude Paltin, is almost completely unknown. Ms. Paltin was trained as a biochemist, and encountered Dr. Janiger when he lectured to the osteopathic college that her husband attended. She became one of his clients, and later an assistant and the co-author of this work. This extensive annotated bibliography includes works in Italian, German, and French as well as in English, and subdivides these into 18 major areas of focus, including publications on Administration-Dosage-Tolerance, Psychological Studies, Behavioral Studies, and Popular and Creative works, among others. The bibliography also provides the first names of the cited authors, making it possible to glimpse the genders of papers’ authors,

which is interesting to consider for that era of research (Sylvia Thyssen, private communication, 2009). The references compiled by Ms. Paltin and Janiger, although not focused on therapeutic applications and complete only to 1963, provide recoverable links to otherwise unrecorded parts of the early body of knowledge and research which might otherwise be forgotten (Passie 1997).

A short biography of Gertrude Paltin is found in the Vaults of Erowid (Erowid Crew 2009). She was daughter of Jewish Russian immigrants, who received her M.S. in biochemistry from Temple University. Her first husband, a physician who was an early Janiger LSD subject, reports that Gertrude Paltin worked closely with Janiger as his executive secretary and participated in his early work with LSD (Samuel Paltin, private communication, 1998). Samuel Paltin's own LSD experiences took place during a normal clinic day, with Janiger seeing other patients while the LSD user sat out on the porch under an oak tree, unaccompanied except for periodic checks by Janiger. Samuel Paltin believes that the bibliography was completed some years prior its 1971 date, and the most recent reference cited is almost a decade older. Ms. Paltin, who was raising small children during the preparation of the bibliography, later died of a cerebral hemorrhage at an early age. Acknowledged in this publication as the co-author, Ms. Paltin's contribution to Dr. Janiger's work is otherwise unknown (Sharon Paltin, private communication, 2019). She is emblematic of the hidden history of women in psychedelic research who often supported the work of their male partners and colleagues, provided comfort to participants, were involved as sitters in psychedelic sessions and helped write up reports, but were very rarely identified as co-equal participants in published work (Dyck 2018).



Gertrude Paltin (above); title page from Paltin's book *A Bibliography of LSD & Mescaline*, co-authored with Oscar Janiger.

MARY BARNARD

The poet Mary Barnard (1909–2001) is the author of an elegantly written and perceptive essay about magical and sacred plants, which appeared in *The American Scholar*, the magazine of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. Barnard was a student of the origins of myth. In 1958, she published a “clear and elegant” translation of the poems of Sappho that has never been out of print, and permanently changed the way that scholars approached the poetic forms of Sappho's verse. Her research on Sappho sparked an interest in folklore, and in 1963 Barnard published “The God in the Flowerpot” with the assistance of R. Gordon Wasson. In 1966 this essay was reprinted in a collection of essays about the origins of myth entitled *The Mythmakers*. In it, Barnard discusses the relationship between folklore and sacred mind-changing plants including peyote, varieties of *Datura*, Texas mountain laurel “mescal beans,” South American lianas, kava, soma, haoma, coca, opium poppies, mushrooms, marijuana and hashish, the Delphic oracle's chewing of laurel leaves, bufotenine, and Taoist hermits' use of the “divine fungus” lingchih.

According to Barnard: “Half a dozen important mythological themes—the shaman's journey, the food of immortal life, the food of occult knowledge, the fate of the disembodied soul, the communication with the dead, plant-deities—all converge on this point: on some actual food, (usually a drug plant) ritually consumed, not symbolically, but for the experience it confers” (Barnard 1966).

Barnard believed that the magic plants in many myths are not imaginary, and that the food of occult knowledge is not a fiction. She pointed out that the characteristic descriptions of the disembodied soul in many shamanic narratives are not just a cultural or psychological phenomenon. In many of these narratives, and in first hand descriptions of shamanic performances, we are told that the shaman “takes something” to encourage or facilitate healing, divination or prophecy, but we are not told not what it is that s/he takes. Barnard suggests that this gap in understanding is due to a mixture of the shaman's reluctance to reveal sacred and secret knowledge; and to early observ-

ers' tendencies to see shamanic practice as satanic if they were religious people, and as theatrical hokum if they were skeptics. On the contrary, she says the mythological golden apples and other elixirs, barks, root, leaves, and ambrosias have their origins in real plants, and that "talking" plants really do impart occult knowledge.

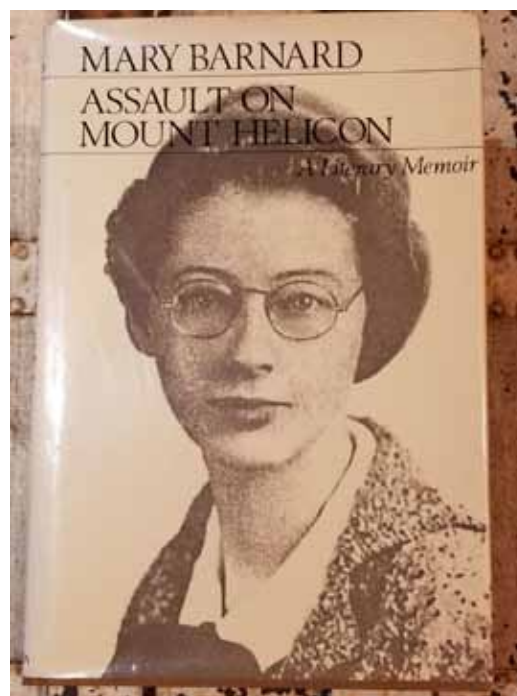
Barnard was prescient and accurate. When she published her essay about peyote, she imagined the development of a field which she called "theo-botany," which would be the study of magic plants as "vehicles for a special kind of experience adaptable to the use of most religions that acknowledge an otherworld and permit its exploration." At the end of her essay, Barnard makes a prophecy: "that theo-botanists working for fifty years would make the then-current theories of the origins of mythology and religion as out of date as pre-Copernican astronomy." That was 1963. She has not been proved wrong.

The lives and achievements of the remarkable women discussed here represent only a tiny fraction of the many women researchers, healers, artists, scholars and visionaries whose contributions to the history of psychedelics remain to be explored and revealed. 🌀

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Mariavittoria Mangini, Ph.D., FNP has written extensively on the impact of psychedelic experiences in shaping the lives of her contemporaries, and has worked closely with many of the most distinguished investigators in this field. She is one of the founders of the Women's Visionary Council, a nonprofit organization that supports investigations into non-ordinary forms of consciousness and organizes gatherings of researchers, healers, artists, and activists whose work explores these states. Her current project is the development of a Thanatology program for the study of death and dying.



Mary Barnard on the cover of her literary memoir, *Assault on Mount Helicon*.