

# Black Masks, Rainbow Bodies: Psychedelics and Race

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LAST TIME I SANG THE national anthem, I was on ecstasy. We huddled in the street. No one knew each other. We passed a joint, a woman waved the flag and it blew the smoke to where cops stood, holding an orange net.

Hours before, I was in a TV studio when news came that America elected its first Black president. Instead of saying something witty, I held my head and felt a shaking inside. Walking outside, I felt the whole city shook as if some invisible wall had broken. Truck drivers honked horns. Hipsters and workers, the homeless and students, wealthy business men and cops all danced and hugged, hi-fived, kissed and shared beers.

I went to my friend Brad's apartment, he smiled like the Cheshire Cat and took out two huge pills of ecstasy. They looked like UFOs in his hand. "Ready to beam up," he asked. "Yes," I whispered, "Yes."

Soon, my head felt like was a balloon floating away. We walked to the Lower East Side and followed a woman, who waved an American flag. At the end of the block was Tompkins Square Park. Cops formed a line with orange netting to stop us from going in. We stood face to face, moments pulsed like an alarm. Our eyes struck their eyes like matches. Then music came on. We danced. We sang the National Anthem and partied, happy and free as the police stood, trapped inside their own net.

I open with that story because it's where two freedom movements, briefly meet in my life. The Black Freedom Movement, a living force of millions of people, whose ancestors were kidnapped from Africa. Chained together on slave ships, they fought for freedom from the plantation to the White House. The Psychedelic Movement began with Albert Hofmann on his bicycle tripping on LSD. Decades later, he was followed by hippies, musicians, and mystics exploring visions. Next were LSD soaked 90's underground raves. Now, 21st century doctors and activists inch psychedelics closer to legalization for medical use.

Here are two freedom movements, two separate worlds, and both go toward the same goal of a common humanity but never meet in mass, never share stories or organize together. It was as if a wall stood between them.

It's a wall built with a story; never use drugs or trust anyone who does. In the 60's and 70's, my mother was a young Puerto Rican staring at skyscrapers. Her high school friends were drafted into the Vietnam War and came home hollow-eyed and on the needle. Angry, she grew an afro that rose from her head like a black fist. She marched. She organized. It seemed that they were going to change the world until one by one, her comrades, stumbled from the Movement in a chemical fog. "The government let the drugs in to destroy us," she said, "I saw dealers a block away from a police station."

Inside her warning was the echo of ancestral voices warning us about your drugs. In Frederick Douglass' personal narrative, he wrote:

The holidays are a gross fraud... Their object seems to be, to disgust their slaves with freedom, by plunging them into the lowest depths. Slaveholders... make bets on their slaves, as to who can drink the most whisky and

in this way they get whole multitudes to drink to excess. We felt, and very properly too, that we had almost as well be slaves to man as to rum. So, when the holidays ended, we staggered up from the filth of our wallowing, took a long breath, and marched to the field.

—Frederick Douglass, *A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845)

When my mom was alive, Malcolm X was also alive. He said this to an audience in Harlem:

We allow ourselves to be used by the white overlords downtown to bring their dope back here in Harlem to push it on our poor, unsuspecting people. Why we let the white man use to make drug addicts out of children, to make drug addicts out of babies, drug addicts out of mothers. We let the white man use us to bring that poison back here in Harlem and stick it into the veins of our people.

—Malcolm X, “Crime In Harlem”

And Assata Shakur, who is nearly the same age as my mom, who lived in New York when my mom did, wrote this about drugs.

In my tongue-tied, confused state of marijuana intoxication I was trying to communicate. I was feeling guilty and stupid, silly and politically backward. I was embarrassed to be bumbling down the street...too high to deal with reality much less change it. I had heard somebody say that revolutionaries get high on the revolution and that it was the best high in the world. “I’m gonna check out that high,” I said.

—Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (1987)

White supremacy using drugs to control us is etched into our history. In the Black radical tradition, you grow up seeing drugs as a trap. And whiteness itself is a drug we need to purge from ourselves. Purge the straight hair. Purge the skin-lightening cream. Purge the seeking of approval of whites.

In the Black Freedom Movement, drugs are a plot to destroy us, and pushers are chemical overseers. After the 70’s activists were shot down by COINTEL and drugs flooded the hood, some saw dealers as entrepreneurs. Yet whether you were an activist or not, everyone saved their worst scorn for addicts, “crackheads,” who were the living symbols of a new slavery.

My mom saw the addicts. She lived poor. Which meant that I lived poor. She sent me to a boarding school, which helped get me into a private college. She got me out. The deeper I entered the majority white world, I saw quirky, odd, fun, individuals. I did not see a puppet master. Some I loved. Some I hated. Yet when I entered a room where no one knew me, I saw that I wasn’t seen; instead, between us was a warped stereotype. W.E.B. Du Bois wrote about this more than a century ago,

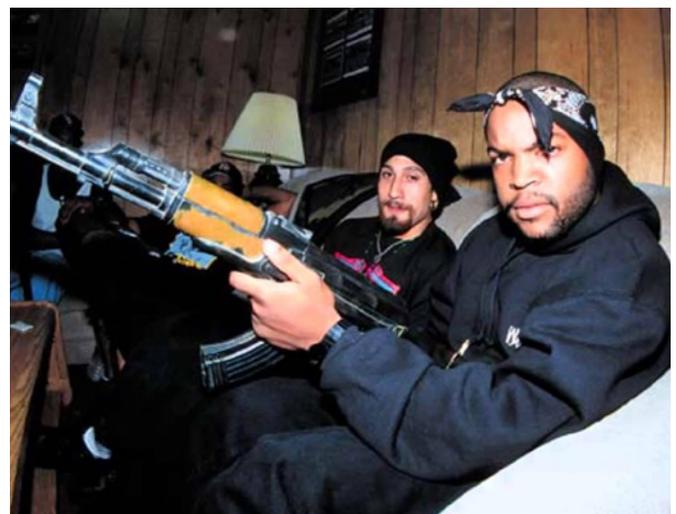
It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

—W.E.B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* (1903)

When my high school friend took me to visit his family and his sister’s boyfriend, he shot me a look and said, “You know the only reason I can’t get a job is because my skin is the wrong color and there’s something between my legs.” I knew he didn’t see me. He saw a lazy coon who mooched off the system.



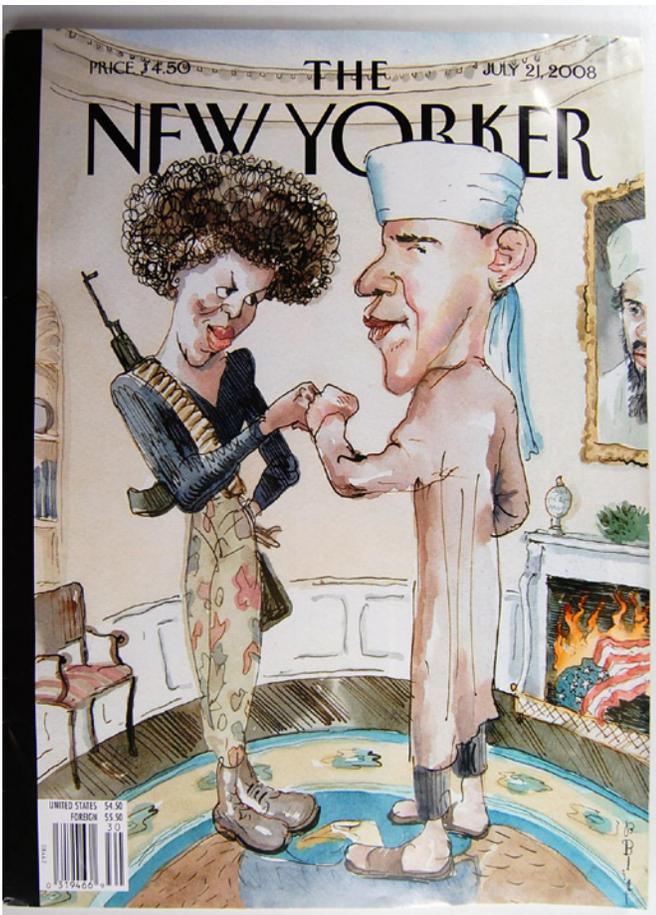
Or when I wanted to be left alone, I tied a bandana around my head to scare away people, even if came at the cost of reinforcing that racial fear.



I knew I was seen as a threat. And that's why, decades later, when Obama ran for office I knew I saw one image,



while racists saw another.



Stereotypes warp reality. Images become a wall between people. Du Bois also wrote:

Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house? The shades of the prison house closed round about us all: walls... relentlessly narrow, tall, and un-scalable to sons of night who must plod darkly on in resignation, or beat unavailing palms against the stone, or steadily, half hopelessly, watch the streak of blue above.

—W.E.B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* (1903)

The Wall creates shadow. Its darkness is the body being eclipsed by image. It feels heavy, as if we're at the bottom of a toxic ocean. We hear off-color jokes at work. Our bodies are tense alarms. We fear sabotaging ourselves. We use smiles like crowbars to pry open stereotypes. We also, sometimes, don't think about race very often until Michael Brown. Until Sandra Bland. Until Eric Garner. Until someone like us is shot down in public and even if one never think about race, we feel a part of us die with them.



## PART II

In college, I wore the mask of militancy. I had a Malcolm X poster on my wall. I sold weed. Pounds of it. I sold mushrooms and LSD. I sold so many drugs that I should have worn a lab coat.

I made enough money that I almost didn't care. But I did. I was falling into the trap my mom had warned me against. One afternoon I smoked a joint with my friend Dina and told her how ashamed I was at being a stereotype. She said, "You're selling weed to white kids, not that big of a deal. Think of it as reparations."

We laughed but it faded behind my smile. I grew dreadlocks to anchor myself. I went to Nation of Islam meetings and converted to Islam. I learned to be anti-Semitic. I was

homophobic. The mask of militancy shielded me from looking in the mirror.

And then came Brad. Gay. Jewish. From Long Island. He had no chill. He wanted weed and I was selling. He looked like a handsome owl. An intelligent light radiated from his face. Have you ever fallen in love, when you didn't want to? On paper, we were enemies. In real life, I felt brother-love. We smoked together. Debated. Prayed together. One night, we took LSD and read the Koran, wept over its poetry. I was so proud at feeling the Prophet's words, I told my Muslim friends and they yelled, "You don't read the Koran on acid!" I said, "I'm sorry. I didn't know. Okay, no LSD and Allah."

Brad had come of the closet in high school. He was helping me take off my mask. He didn't know it but I admired how brave he was to be openly gay. I wanted to be open, too. And one night I took mushrooms and went to the dock by the river. I sat there. The psilocybin lit my brain up like a starry night. Faces moved between the constellations. The sound of waves washed my ego away. Closing my eyes, in the receding tides of sound and memory, I saw Mom. She was young again, staring at me sternly and shaving off her afro. When she cut the last puff off, she vanished and I picked up the hair. I tried putting the afro back together, but a light made it hard to find. When I opened my eyes, the sun was rising over the river.

mushrooms and walked in.

Rows of buildings sat like giant coffins. Bare trees hung low. I touched the walls and fence and ovens. What if I had been here? Every rough brick was molded by a story. A racist story about us—I was saying "us" now. I wasn't inside myself but bobbing in a common humanity. The ego had dissolved into the silence where shadows of invisible bodies clawed at the walls. A cold hate blew from the past. A hate frozen into eternity by the last breath of the dead. I inhaled it and breathed it out.

Outside the crematorium, I thought of Brad. What if he'd been born in an earlier time? No. No. No. Not you. But I couldn't stop imagining him being shoved into the oven and I punched the wall. I punched it again. And again. And again. I punched and punched, bloody fists against the wall.

### PART III

Psychedelics healed me. They healed my double consciousness. They healed my bigotry and homophobia. They gave me a transcendent vantage point. I saw how hatred began as fear and grew into stories like interlocking walls in a vast maze that we were lost in, searching for each other.

Every year, we come here [to the Horizons: Perspectives on Psychedelics Conference] to celebrate our escape from that maze. To ask a question: Can they heal the world? At Horizons,

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The light lifted me to a wordless, voiceless place. Thought dissolved into colors. All I saw was sacredness, sacredness, sacredness. I can't say it was a conversion. I can't say everything changed, but a heavy weight shifted inside me. I wasn't off balance.

The second psychedelic racial turning point for me came when I was in Europe. Train pass in hand, I zigzagged through nations. France here. Spain there. Part of our tour was going to Dachau, a former Nazi concentration camp. My girlfriend was coming to visit. Hmm, make love? Or go on a death tour? I spent the weekend with her. When I came back to campus, the staff was furious and told me to go to Dachau and give a report, so I took the train to Germany.

It's as eerie as it sounds. Heavy rattling wheels. Lights flashing in the windows. I got to Dachau on an off day. No crowds. Grey sky. The color seemed have been washed out. I took mushrooms out of my pocket and looked at the entrance. I knew what we were supposed to feel a script of sadness and guilt. I thought it was more honest to listen to the spirits, so I ate the

doctors share new research on neurotransmitters, or how they gave MDMA and psilocybin to the terminally ill, to those with PTSD, and found success. I was invited to talk about race, so are we now asking, how can this medical model can be applied to racism? Can prejudice be treated with psychedelics as an institutional practice?

If so, we have to ask questions. Are MAPS or the Johns Hopkins Research Project or any of the other organizations going to hire minority staff and fund cultural outreach? Will they integrate the findings of those minority therapists into its methods and paradigms? Is it going to compile the testimony of the volunteers and create a case for social justice?

Is the white psychedelic medical movement going to turn to the world beyond these walls? Is it interested in expanding, beyond the pool of soldiers, firefighters, and the terminally ill to recruit from the criminal justice system? That revolving door of destroyed lives. Too many Black. Too many Latino. Too many white poor.

If so, it will have to go beyond my story, which is the

plight of a middle-class man of color. It must go into the spiritual depths of men and women of color, who are poor, who have been trapped in intergenerational trauma, who have been churned through prisons and joblessness and broken families. And whose pain has become their armor.

Are you going to challenge the narrative of psychedelics as party drugs, and of crack and meth as addictive, dirty, and criminal? Is the white psychedelic medical movement going to explore how implicit bias and hate show up in brain scans, and how LSD or MDMA or psilocybin can re-wire it? Will you work with Life After Hate, a group that rehabilitates former Nazis and white supremacists?

Imagine the lives that could be saved. On my street, in Bed-Stuy, NYC, a girl was shot and killed. Three neighbors, shot by accident. We patch up wounds with prayer but the fear never leaves. Imagine one of the shooters, a young black man, entering a psychedelic therapy session. He's nervous and hides it with bravado. He curses. He's surly. Slowly, he talks about his family and fears. The therapist says he's ready and he takes MDMA in a guided session. Memory floods him as immense waves of buried feeling burst through his inner wall. He's on the floor, cradled by the therapist. Imagine him, days later, going to his victims and asking forgiveness.

That's why we need you. The real world needs you. During your therapy sessions and private trips, you've glimpsed the rainbow body underneath the masks we wear. You drew up from the well of the body our unconscious history. You know the source-light that connects our thoughts to time itself.

We need your psychedelic wisdom to heal the victims of the system and the ones who built the system. Tell the wealthy and privileged few that they are the Prodigal Sons of history, who left the home of our common humanity. And like the Prodigal Son, they cast the world's money to the wind. Now they see how lost they've become as capitalism breaks down. They buy security guards and alarm systems and armored buildings. They are scared. Tell them to let go of it. Tell them that the whole world is their home. All of humanity is their family and there's a celebration for their return. The people will heal them with joy.

Recently, I visited Brad in LA and a group of friends went to Venice Beach. We heard distant drums, smiled at each other and jumped into the hot, dancing vortex of bodies. It reminded me of the election night in New York, when the city was united in joy. Here on the beach were African drummers. Mexican families. White surfers. Tourists. Everyone danced in the sand. Everyone sang and sweated and rejoiced. Everyone was home. 🌍

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Will any of this happen? So far, there's no evidence it will. In the many years of this conference, this talk is the first on race. I haven't read of any race-specific studies. So, if there's no real research being done, why am I here? Either today is the start of a new outreach or I am token, a presenter of color to give a veneer of diversity. Regardless of why, I came to give you a message.

People who are scared build walls. Recently, I was in Ohio for a journalism conference and one student drove me through a town devastated by opioids. Shirtless men walked in drugged stupor across the park. Homes of blistered paint. Trash on the lawns. Families pushing shopping carts. Towns like that were bruises on the state map. "If I lived here," I told the student driver, "I would have voted for Trump too."

The West is becoming a walled-off fortress. Le Pen in France wants a wall. The Golden Dawn in Greece want a wall. Britain, with Brexit, wants a wall. Trump wants a wall. Here, there, everywhere are walls. Each brick is cast by the same story: us versus them, native versus foreigner, moral versus pervert.

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