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# An application of Ricoeur's hermeneutic theory: Configurations of the shamanic in contemporary ayahuasca narratives

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

An Application of Ricoeur's Hermeneutic Theory: Configurations of the Shamanic in  
Contemporary Ayahuasca Narratives

By

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## **Abstract**

The past decade has witnessed a surge of popular interest in the *mestizo* tradition of *ayahuasca*, variously referred to as *curanderismo*, *vegetalismo*, and/or ‘shamanism’. This interest in *Ayahuasca*, a psychotropic plant brew, is evidenced by the thriving industry of *ayahuasca* tourism that exists in Peru. Such *ayahuasca* ‘tours’ are predominantly attended by European, and North American neo-shamanists who are seeking personal healing and/or knowledge of indigenous traditions.

This thesis will analyze, by way of Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutical theory, the newly emergent genre of neo-shamanic literature which I have named “*ayahuasca* narratives” in order to ascertain the manner in which the authors configure their *ayahuasca* experiences into narrative accounts. This will elucidate the manner in which *mestizo* religious practices are represented as shamanic. The importance of this exercise is found in the ways by which the act of reading narrative accounts can shape the lived experiences of the reader.

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The task of undertaking a thesis can be both exhilarating, and daunting, often oscillating between the two in the course of any given day. Frequently all that is needed to clarify an idea, or sharpen an insight, is the opportunity to share it with another. I am deeply grateful to my family and friends for their support, and readiness to lend an open ear, during the course of my graduate work. This is particularly true of my parents, David and Susanna, whose love and support has influenced me beyond the ability of words to convey. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) for providing generous financial support.

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## Introduction: Personal Motivation and General Trajectory

Despite a leftist revolution being undertaken by the Government of Peru, a New York Times article published in 1973 notes that in the Amazon city of Iquitos, with its ‘exuberant frontier atmosphere’, business is booming (Kandell: 3). While this sentiment is mostly related to the influx of investments being made in the Amazon by foreign and national petroleum corporations, the article additionally observes the various way that the region’s ‘mostly Indian inhabitants’ are as well embodying the spirit of ‘good old-fashioned capitalism’ (3). As the journalist notes, “a few witchdoctors have carved out an economic niche by drawing tourists to séances at which *ayahuasca*, a mildly hallucinogenic liqueur, is served” (April 26, 1973: 3). While little more than a cursory survey of the relevant literature is needed to reveal that the article’s depiction of *ayahuasca*’s effects as ‘mild’ is inaccurate, this newspaper article is noteworthy in its particular use of language to describe *ayahuasca* practitioners.

I would like to contrast this first article, published in 1973, with a more recent article published by the *Washington Post* in 2010, titled: “Peruvian Hallucinogen Ayahuasca Draws Tourists Seeking Transforming Experience.” The article observes that in Iquitos, “the ayahuasca devotees are flowing in, searching for insight from a flock of local and foreign shamans, or medicine men” (Forero, 2010). Both articles feature similar themes, however, the terminology they deploy in developing the context of this phenomenon, which can be referred to as *ayahuasca* tourism, differs significantly. In the first article indigenous practitioners of *ayahuasca* are witchdoctors, while in the later article we are introduced to shamans and medicine men. This change in terminology can

be attributed to a similar shift, which has been occurring over the previous fifty years, in the manner in which indigenous religions are represented within the western cultural imagination,

Foremost, this is related to the increasing prevalence with which the term shamanism has been deployed in order to categorize certain indigenous cultures and religious practices. Indeed, there is a certain semantic ambiguity that characterizes the use of these terms. This is seen most evidently in the figure of the shaman, and the concept of shamanism with which it is associated. Originating within the cultures of the Tungus region of Siberia, the term “shaman” is commonly deployed in both academic and popular contexts. As such, shamanism has become a term utilized to designate certain indigenous religious systems in which the term does not historically appear, such as the *Vegetalismo* of Peruvian *mestizos*.

This semantic slippage is further compounded by the growing phenomenon of neo-shamanism, which is most predominant in Europe and North America. Here academic concepts, specifically related to the academic concept of shamanism, have become emic concepts around which neo-shamanic practitioner build their world-views (Buzekova, 2010). These representations of indigenous religions as shamanic are, in turn, mediated via popular literature to the interested public.

This thesis will analyze, by way of Paul Ricoeur’s narrative theory, the newly emergent genre of neo-shamanic literature referred to as “*ayahuasca* narratives” in order to ascertain the manner in which the authors configure their *ayahuasca* experiences into narrative accounts. As well, this will elucidate the manner in which indigenous traditions of *ayahuasca* usage are represented as shamanic. The importance of this exercise is found



in the ways by which the act of reading narrative accounts can shape the lived experiences of the reader.

As my ultimate ‘purpose’ for writing this project is to better understand the accounts of neo-shamanic *ayahuasca* usage described in popular written accounts, I feel that it is important to include a note on my context as it serves to clarify my overall intention. To further disclose my position as a scholar, it is important to include a methodological component of auto-ethnography. This represents a stance that embraces self-reflexivity while resisting the insider-outsider dichotomy that has come to characterize traditional religious studies research. All scholarship is carried out from the vantage point of each scholar’s particular perspective, and is accompanied by implicit religious and socio-cultural presuppositions. In recognizing this, it quickly becomes apparent that a truly objective view of religious phenomena from ‘outside’ is all but impossible.

Wallis, in his study of neo-shamanism highlights the importance of such an approach through Queer Theory (2000). In this context, ‘auto’ ethnography represents an “anthropology carried out in the social context that produced it” (Wallis, 253). As such it seeks to draw attention to the manner in which neo-shamanism research, as with shamanic studies, has been systematically marginalized within western academia (253). While I agree with the latter statement, a cursory auto-ethnographic sketch will suffice for my purposes at present. This is not to wax eloquently in a self-aggrandizing fashion, but instead to provide the reader with a wider window into my own contextual horizon.

As a young white male, fortunate to have access to post-secondary education, I find myself situated in a location of privilege. My nominal protestant up-bringing

combined with my personal demography place me within what could be considered main-stream Canadian culture. Although I have never possessed strong theological commitments or religious associations, I have harboured a growing, though not uncritical interest, in religion with a particular interest in indigenous spirituality. More especially my curiosity has been drawn to the form of religious practice commonly referred to as ‘shamanism’. This interest has motivated me to travel abroad and immerse myself in other cultures and ‘ways of being’. To this end, my trip to Peru (2009-2010) has been most eventful. As part of these travels, my intention was to engage in informal research into *ayahuasca* neo-shamanism and indigenous Peruvian religion more generally. I spent six months in the Northern Peruvian Amazon, both participating in and helping to facilitate cross-cultural tutelage about *ayahuasca* and plant-medicine from numerous indigenous and *mestizo* Amazonian healers known as *curanderos* or *vegetalistas*. This experience was very informative from an educational perspective in that it gave me a first hand view of my area of research interest. It was as well, on a personal level, a very transformative experience. The occurrence of such experiences can only serve to alter the world-view of the scholar participating in them and dissolve the boundary of the insider/outsider dichotomy. As such, they can carry very tangible implications for one’s methodology in conducting religious studies.

Scholarship, I argue, is always approached with specific, though often unconscious, intentions and motivations that drive the scholar into their specific fields of inquiry. It would seem naive to assume that one is able to dislocate his/her self from the particular foreknowledge of the world that he/she possesses and obtain a ‘location-less’ location of scholarly objectivity. Indeed, this ‘worm of suspicion’ regarding one’s

conscious motivations is an inheritance of the ‘masters of suspicion,’ Freud, Marx and Nietzsche, and acts to complicate and problematize ‘un-self-reflexive’ assertions. While Freud was concerned primarily with unconscious desire as the shaping force of the psyche, socio-cultural values, norms and other forms of cultural grammar also exert a defined influence on an individual’s consciousness. When one extends this understanding into the realm of methodological consideration, particularly as regards shamanism studies where inter-cultural dialogue is so important, it becomes very apparent that cultural grammar acts as a lens which tints the manner in which the world is observed.

In surveying numerous cross-cultural historical accounts written by European explorers as they encountered the indigenous people of Greenland during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Jakobsen clearly shows how the interpretation ascribed to the Greenlandic religious system changed in step with the motivations of the explorer, and the dominant socio-cultural world-view of Europe (Jakobsen, 2003: 17-23). Hans Egede, for example, arrived on the West Coast of Greenland in 1722. While he was an explorer commissioned by the Danish King, he was foremost a Christian missionary who saw his task to “convert the ‘savages’” (17), and in his words, “make a Christian out of a mere savage and wild man” (18). In contrast, Knud Rasmussen, the son of a Danish vicar born in the late eighteenth century in Greenland, was open to the possibility of a spirit-world and became a true participant in the rituals of the Greenlandic *angakkoq* (20). Due to the popularity of Romanticism in Europe, Rasmussen’s writings, which included vivid first-person descriptions of the rituals he participated in, found a very receptive audience whose “imagination he captured” (22) with his accounts of the exotic ‘other’.

In this way, there can be seen an inextricable link between the researcher's socio-cultural location and the character of gaze they cast upon the objects of their research. Such a realization allows the reader to read against the grain certain assertions that the author may have supplied in light of their socio-cultural context. This is not to propose the necessity of a quest to disclose the actual intention of the author or research, but it is effective at shedding light on the cultural prejudices<sup>1</sup> of the author and helping the reader come to a fuller understanding of the phenomenon being researched. It is with this in mind that I have offered a measure of auto-ethnography in this essay, and why I plan to include more thorough sketches in my future research. By recognizing that I am a socio-political being and providing knowledge of my distinct location as such, I convey the context and life-experiences which have led to my methodological preferences and areas of interest.

The primary methodology employed in this thesis will consist of the application of a theoretical framework that combines the basic historical context of philosophical hermeneutics, Paul Ricoeur's narrative theory, and Enrique Dussel's post-colonial theory. By exploring this topic, by means of a philosophical hermeneutic rather than an anthropological one, I intend to investigate how the narrative accounts of neo-shamanic practitioners operating in the context of Amazonian *ayahuasca* 'shamanism' can be interpreted. To accomplish this I will not be engaging in fieldwork but will be conducting a textual analysis of neo-shamanic *ayahuasca* narratives.

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<sup>1</sup> Here I do not mean prejudice in its common usage as to denote an unjustified or erroneous belief. Instead, prejudice here denotes what Gadamer refers to as the sum of "biases for our openness to the world" (Gadamer: 183). It is comprised of the totality of our past experiences, and forms the expectations that we carry when encountering new phenomena.

In this analysis, I will utilize the work of Ricoeur and, in so doing, attempt to integrate his hermeneutic approach of both understanding and explanation within an act of interpretation. This will allow for a reading of neo-shamanic narrative literature as it relates to the concept of shamanism, through Ricoeur's theory of narrative. In order to expand upon and further refine this hermeneutic, I will incorporate an analysis of the phenomenon of Amazonian neo-shamanism as it relates to Dussel's post-colonial theory. In addition, elements from experiential anthropology will be incorporated into my methodology to ensure that my thesis is self-reflexive and my socio-cultural position as a scholar is disclosed. While the aforementioned element of self-reflexivity is important to my methodology, it will be located at the periphery of my analysis and appear in my introduction and conclusion.

This thesis endeavours to ask: What is the relation of *ayahuasca* neo-shamanism to the constructed concept of shamanism found in current scholarship and primary source material? My intention in answering this question will be to outline what is considered to be neo-shamanism, and then to situate it as an emergent concept in the history of shamanic studies. The use of *ayahuasca* (a psychoactive brew comprised of different Amazonian flora) among neo-shamanists and the treatment of this subject within scholarly and discursive literature has been closely studied. Personal accounts of neo-shamanic *ayahuasca* usage are presented in an emerging genre of neo-shamanic literature termed '*ayahuasca* narratives'. Texts such as these may be labelled 'tales of power,' a term which is further developed by Znamenski (2007). By way of surveying prominent texts in the neo-shamanic literary tradition, I will clarify the place of *ayahuasca* narratives within the neo-shamanic literary genre. The philosophical hermeneutic of Paul

Ricoeur's narrative theory, as well as Enrique Dussel's post-colonial theory will then be applied to these texts in order to elucidate the experiences the authors convey through their published narrative accounts. This will include an analysis of their conceptions of shamanism so as to bring to light any pretensions or distortions that they may present. Additionally, I will examine how such narrative literature can both shape the experiences of the reader, as well as foster the transmission of certain conceptions of shamanism. These components of my analysis will be presented as follows.

Chapter One will provide a background necessary for understanding the state of contemporary shamanism studies, a discussion that will follow its presentation as a cross-cultural category. For this, I will develop the history of shamanism studies, highlighting its most influential scholars, beginning with Eliade (1961; and, 1964), and Hultkrantz (1978). Additionally, this chapter will introduce the reader to recent developments that have occurred within the discipline of shamanic studies, including work by Kehoe (1998; and, 2000), Sidky (2010), and Pharo (2011), which will be presented and assessed. This is important as it will provide an overview of the development of shamanism studies in the twentieth century and describe the context in which neo-shamanism has developed as a new religious movement.

Chapter Two will consist of a thorough analysis of both academic and popular literature that has emerged regarding neo-shamanism. A pertinent critique of these concepts, and how they apply to the development of neo-shamanism, will be guided by the work of Noel (1997), Kehoe (2000), Mayer (2008), and Buzekova (2010). This will show neo-shamanism as a constructed tradition that has been synthesized in the Western imagination through the practices of adoption, adaptation and appropriation. I will also

provide a short overview of neo-shamanic literature, focusing upon the impact that authors such as Castaneda, and Harner have had in developing the movement of neo-shamanism. In this way, I will show that these texts exhibit the specific qualities indicative of neo-shamanic literature. I will then locate them within the neo-shamanic literary genre. To conclude this chapter, I will assess Noel's assertion that shamanism literature acts as "a kind of semantic driv[er] ... that induces an imagination that [cultural outsiders] cannot necessarily access" (1997: 39), in order to show how such narrative literature can shape lived experience.

In Chapter Three, I will develop the context in which Amazonian *mestizo* and indigenous practitioners utilize *ayahuasca*. To help develop an understanding of this practice, I will turn to the work of Luna (1986; 2011), Dobkin de Rios (1972), and Beyer (2009). Additionally, I will describe how *ayahuasca*'s burgeoning popularity among westerners has produced a thriving industry of *ayahuasca* tourism, specifically within the region of Iquitos, Peru. After framing my research topic in this specific locality, I will locate this phenomenon as part of the new religious movement, neo-shamanism. I will then introduce newly emergent literature pertaining to *ayahuasca* neo-shamanism, which I will name 'ayahuasca narratives'. These will be situated in relation to the boarder neo-shamanic literary tradition. After providing an historical overview of such writings, I will focus my discussion on recently published *ayahuasca* narrative accounts. A sample of these narratives will be introduced from which my data set will then be drawn.

In Chapter Four I will develop my methodological framework, which, as mentioned, will primarily be drawn from Ricoeur's theory of narrative. I will outline my methodological intention as an attempt to understand the author's narrative construction

through “the operation of emplotment as the synthesis of heterogeneous elements” (1991: 21). To accomplish this I will draw heavily on primary and secondary literature pertaining to Ricoeur’s philosophical hermeneutics and narrative theory. For particular insight into Ricoeur’s theory of narratives, I will turn to his essay titled “Life in Quest of Narrative” which outlines what he terms to be “a first-order understanding of narrative” (24). This will show that narrative accounts are formed through a process of configuration, whereby the lived experiences of the author are emploted into a unified whole. For Ricoeur, while an author configures his/her experiences into a narrative through emplotment, the reader refigures narratives into their own “horizon of experience in imagination” (26). This process of refiguration occurs in the mind of the reader, and operates through emplotment, which allows them to synthesize the elements found in the read narrative with their own lived experiences. In developing this concept, I will demonstrate that Ricoeur’s narrative theory is not only relevant to understanding the experiences of a text’s author, but is also useful in understanding how narrative texts act to mediate meaning between the author, the reader, and the world.

I will then integrate this analysis with contemporary post-colonial theory, which can be viewed as a hermeneutic of suspicion, in the manner of Ricoeur. Dussel’s work outlining the Eurocentric biases inherent in the concept of modernity (1998; 2000; 2002) will be adapted in order to provide a hermeneutic of suspicion in the interpretation of the *ayahuasca* narratives in my data set. The concept of modernity, as such, will be deployed in both a post-colonial and a philosophical sense. This will allow me to position my critique of these neo-shamanic *ayahuasca* narratives within the western tradition of



colonialism and identify any distortions in the descriptions of indigenous religion as ‘shamanic’.

Chapter Five will contain an analysis of select *ayahuasca* narratives in order to apply the theoretical framework that was developed in the previous chapter. I will assess how each author configures their narratives, in order to show how this configuring act is the operation of emplotment. Through this act of emplotment, the author’s heterogeneous events and experiences are synthesized into an intelligible narrative configuration. In addition, I will identify the author’s emplotment of *mestizo* religion into narrative, with a particular interest in those thematic and/or conceptual elements that pertain to the concept of shamanism. Ricoeur has stated that “the significance of narrative stems from *the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the reader*” (1991: 26). As such, I will also seek to identify how an *ayahuasca* narrative can work to refigure the lived experience of the reader. This will involve appealing to examples of how an author acts to recount their actions in the narrative through utilizing the signs, rules and norms which are culturally articulated and symbolically mediated (Ricoeur: 28). Following this, I will apply what I term, following Ricoeur, a post-colonial hermeneutic of suspicion. I do this in order to isolate those culturally specific meanings that symbolically mediate popular western conceptions of shamanism by means of recourse to the concept of modernity, whether it is conscious or not.

By means of a post-colonial interpretation, I will illuminate the value-laden conceptions of shamanism. In so doing, I plan to distinguish any explicitly distorted interpretations of shamanism from those that are subtler in nature and may remain hidden from the gaze of the reader. This will help me to ascertain if the author’s interpretation of

a neo-shamanic system of belief and practice, in the context of the Peruvian Amazon, involves a simplification or distortion of indigenous peoples' cultural and religious systems. Thus I will endeavour to make clear any presuppositions of the authors whose *ayahuasca* narrative I have presented.

In my concluding chapter I will present my findings and position them within the discursive fields of shamanism and neo-shamanism studies. By surveying the approaches that exist within anthropology and the history of religions in regards to the study of neo-shamanism, I will explain that new insights can be gleaned through the utilization of approaches informed by hermeneutics and post-colonial theory. My hope in undertaking such a study is that I will identify new theoretical approaches that may be constructively applied to the study of neo-shamanism.

## Chapter One - An Overview of Contemporary Shamanism Studies

There can be no doubt that an attempt at conveying a history of shamanism studies is a complicated endeavour. A survey of the terrain that contemporary shamanism studies has traversed will inevitably yield an encounter with Geertz's declaration that shamanism is among those "insipid categories by means of which ethnographers of religion devitalize their data" (1973:122). That this oft quoted passage, dismissing the academic integrity of the category of shamanism, is found frequently, indicates much about the history of shamanism studies, specifically the presence of a hazy ambiguity that swirls about the meaning of its object of study.

The study of 'shamanism' is inextricably linked to the prevalent cultural norms and outlooks of those scholars engaged in its study. A foray into the history of shamanism studies quickly reveals that it is replete with instances of essentialism, implicit biases, and presuppositions. Identifying and dislodging the aforementioned traits from the entire history of shamanism studies, while not an unworthy task, is far from possible in this thesis. While many early accounts recording European encounters with 'shamanic' indigenous peoples exist, particularly those pertaining to Siberian *shamans*, the present chapter will focus on the methodological approaches that have developed following the publication of Mircea Eliade's seminal work, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, in 1951.

This truncation of material relating to shamanism studies is not intended to diminish the insights of those, such as Znamenski (2003), who have shown the way early Europeans conceptualized the shaman, and indigenous peoples more generally, was

affected by European intellectual culture and religious belief. This is an important finding, one that as well applies to Eliade's engagement with the concept of shamanism. Although, the academic study of shamanism predates Eliade's scholarship, the scope of this chapter will be limited to providing a thorough treatment of Eliade's *Shamanism* and the secondary source material that follows. My rationale is that in studying neo-shamanism, a central topic of this thesis, it is vital to focus upon certain key scholars of shamanism and their methodologies as this source material has given rise to the construction of neo-shamanic practices. As many contemporary scholars have shown (see Kehoe, 1996, 2000; Noel, 1999; Znamenski 2007; Buzekova, 2010), Eliade's construction of a universal, cross-cultural, shamanism has been central to the rise of neo-shamanic practices witnessed in recent history, and, as such, warrants particular attention.

As stated, I will begin with an evaluation of Eliade's scholarship, notably his emphasis on concepts such as ecstatic practice and shamanic cosmology, for a definition of shamanism. Additionally, I will highlight the work of subsequent scholars who have contributed to the field of shamanism studies. This overview will focus on the work of Åke Hultkrantz, who can be seen to operate in a similar theoretical framework as Eliade, while making novel contributions to the field. Further, the critiques levelled against such Eliade-esque methodological approaches (Kehoe, 1999; 2000) will be deployed in an effort to uproot the presuppositions at their core. Following this, I will assess more contemporary anthropological studies of shamanism (Sidky, 2009), as well as examine the methodology that has been developed by Lars Kirkhusmo Pharo (2011) within religious studies.

## **The Rise of the Shaman: Eliade and Hultkrantz as Exemplars in the Construction of a Tradition**

The field of shamanism studies took a decisive turn in 1951 when the Romanian historian of religion Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) published *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. First appearing in French, the book was published in English in 1964. Prior to Eliade's *Shamanism*, the study of shamans was focused primarily on the cultural practices of the Evenki people found in the Tungus region of Siberian where the word *shaman* originated. In this cultural context, the title of *shaman* refers to specific individuals who fulfil a role within their communities through their actions as spiritual specialists. While, the term *shaman* is commonly used by those who speak Tungus, there is now, just as when *shamans* were first encountered by Europeans, considerable variation in their particular practices and cultural manifestations (Kehoe, 2000, 14). Thus, it is a difficult task to fashion a definition of the *shaman* that would remain definitive when applied to all of the contexts in which the word is found. Before showing how Eliade attempts this undertaking, it is necessary to first provide a brief overview of the approaches utilized in the study of indigenous cultures prior to Eliade's scholarship.

In the 1600's a steady stream of literature began to appear in Europe recounting the experiences of explorers in Siberia, and their encounters with indigenous healers: *shamans*. These early experiences were at first viewed through the lens of Christian normativity and featured captioned depictions of shamans explaining them as "priests of the Devil," a form of religious reductionism which was typical of pre-Enlightenment

thought (Znamenski, 2007: 6)<sup>2</sup>. The European age of Enlightenment (seventeenth to eighteenth century) produced a different interpretation of the shaman, wherein the primacy of rational explanation led to a standpoint that was “naturally sceptical of indigenous spiritual ‘delusions’” (7). Scholars and intellectuals of this era considered themselves as objective and detached from their topics of study, and thus supposedly able to explain phenomena accurately. The Western intellectual tradition emerged from this tendency in European thought, and developed with it areas of both specialization and comparative studies.

Early anthropologists, the so-called arm-chair anthropologists such as Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917) and James Frazer (1854-1941), applied the framework of cultural Darwinism to the study of religions by classifying and comparing different religions within a developmental schema. Tylor, and later his disciple Frazer, set out to prove that human culture progresses through evolutionary means. According to Tylor and Frazer, this occurs as lower forms of supernatural explanation are gradually shed in order that a higher plateau of scientific reasoning and rational explanation can be achieved. For both Tylor and Frazer, indigenous cultures represent a lower rung on the evolutionary ladder of cultures and are thus viewed negatively, and as ‘primitive’ in contrast to European civilization and its dominant mode of scientific explanation. Evident in this model is a certain European ethnocentrism, which favours, above all else, the notion of rationality developed in European philosophy. Subsequent anthropologists considered this characteristic problematic, leading them to overturn Tylor and Frazer’s theories.

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<sup>2</sup> See Chapters 1-2 of Znamenski (2007) for a compressive survey of literature pertaining to the early encounters between Europeans and the *shamans* of the Evneski.

Contesting Tylor and Frazer's emphasis on rational explanation, new approaches to the study of indigenous peoples soon emerged. An example of this is the four-field approach heralded by Franz Boas (1858-1942) that led to a distinctively new American methodology in anthropology. In contrast to the evolutionary frameworks developed by the likes of both Tylor and Frazer, an approach which sought an objective explanation of cultures, Boas insisted on understanding cultures within their own context. Boas's approach thus grounded the study of culture in the more definite particulars of language, ethnography, physical anthropology and archaeology. Well versed in arctic cultures as a result of his fieldwork, Boas headed the Jesup North Pacific Expedition (1897-1902). It dispatched ethnographers to indigenous communities and held as one of its goals to "explore the links between the indigenous cultures of northeastern Siberia and the northwestern coast of North America" (Znamenski, 2007:65). The expedition's field research resulted in the publication of books that introduced the idiom of shamanism into American anthropology (65-66). In addition, it led to the establishment of museum exhibits that sought to "show that the natives of these areas practiced shamanism" (66).

As a result, scholars began to shift their use of the term 'shaman' outside of the Siberian context and apply it to North American indigenous cultures. The term shaman became more elastic in its application: Its meaning was generalized and detached from the original cultural and geographic context within which it was found in order to describe similar cultural phenomena found in North America. This led to the use of the term 'shaman' in a plethora of North American cultural contexts to denote varying types of indigenous figures, a situation that did not exist prior to 1900 (63). This trend

continued, and, as we will see in the work of Eliade, the term shamanism soon took on a global cross-cultural significance.

While Eliade was indeed interested in the *Shamans* of the Tungus, he was also fascinated by the parallels that he observed in the cultures of other indigenous peoples where the existence of behaviours deemed similar to that of the *shaman* had been reported. As Eliade never conducted actual fieldwork within these cultures, he relied exclusively upon second-hand ethnographic literature, which became the data that was distilled into his book *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. In it, Eliade proposes to clarify the definition given to the figure of the shaman and, in doing so, sought to establish the existence of a generalized form of shamanism (Eliade, 1964: 1).

According to Eliade, a theory of shamanism was needed in order to differentiate the shaman from other magical practitioners found in various cultures – such as medicine men, sorcerers, magicians (2). He posits that a preliminary definition be “shamanism = *techniques of ecstasy*” (4). Eliade regards this description as a way of differentiating shamanism from other forms of magic and religion that it co-exists with (5). As such, the shaman is one that “specializes in a trance during which the soul is believed to leave [the shaman’s] body and ascend or descend to the underworld” (5). Magical flight and ecstasy denote an experience where-by the soul of the shaman leaves his/her body; ecstasy is derived from the Greek word *ekstasis* meaning “to be outside on one’s self”. Eliade identified this as the central feature of the shamanic phenomenon, but highlighted other characteristics associated with shamanism as well. These were an initiatory illness (33), the ability to journey to an upper world and lower world in order to encounter ‘spirits’, and the control of the spirits encountered (6). This tripartite division was regarded by



Eliade as a shamanic cosmology, and served to provide a map of the terrain traversed by ‘shamans’ on their ecstatic flights.

With his cross-cultural definition of a ‘shaman’, Eliade amalgamates the separate religious systems of many of the world’s present-day and historical indigenous peoples under one title. After establishing his morphology, Eliade conducts a cross-cultural survey by fitting excerpts and details from ethnographic literature into his theories in such a way that they support his definition. Each example of ecstatic experience then denotes the presence of a shaman in the cultural context in which they appear. As a result of Eliade’s methodology, shamans appear to abound around the globe in the majority of indigenous cultures.

Eliade’s approach is radically different from previous anthropological considerations of shamanism, which are primarily concerned with the psychological characteristics of the shaman, and often associate them with mental disorders and particular forms of neurosis, such as arctic hysteria (Znamenski, 2007: 81). Eliade, however, casts the shaman in a strongly positive light. According to him, ecstatic experience is “an integral part of the human condition ... [and] is a primordial phenomenon in the sense that it is co-extensive with human nature” (Eliade, 1964: 154). In Eliade’s view the shaman stands apart from their own particular community’s cultural practices, mythos, or worldview. They are connected to other shamans around the world by virtue of their ability to induce ecstasy; an ‘archaic technique’ that roots them into the soil of a primordial world. While Eliade posits his approach to the study of shamanism within the context of the history of religions, his theory is deeply influenced by his own personal aspirations and goals.

As Jakobsen observes, “the researcher is sometimes also the searcher of a shamanic concept of the world” (2003: 27); this is indeed the case with Eliade’s shamanism. In an article appearing in the journal *Shaman*, Znamenski provides insight into Eliade’s background that helps to illuminate the motivations and personal beliefs that attracted him to the world of *Shamanism*. According to Znamenski, Eliade was steeped in the cultural discourse of traditionalism, popular in early twentieth century Europe, and as such much of his scholarship can be read as anti-modernist (Znamenski, 2007: 184). At the core of traditionalism was a deep mistrust in the “legacy of western civilization, particularly Enlightenment [philosophy], capitalism and materialism” (184). Its roots were laid in European Romanticism and sustained by a yearning for esoteric knowledge thought to be long forgotten. Contrary to the grand narratives presented by modernity, traditionalists saw technological innovation and the reign of rationality not as signs of progress, but rather as indicative of regression. For Eliade, it represented a turn away from the sacred towards the profanity of history.

As a remedy to this perceived denigration of civilization, traditionalists sought “to go beyond Europe” (184) in search of indigenous roots that had not yet been profaned by the spread of Enlightenment culture or “spoiled by the Judeo-Christian tradition” (184). Eliade himself “saw his own mission as one of uncovering common ancient patterns hidden under the thick layer of civilization” (187) and thus turned his attention towards what he envisioned as the primordial world of the shaman. Hitherto, when applied to indigenous peoples, ‘primitive’ had been a derogatory term, one that connoted a position of inferiority vis-à-vis the civilized nations of Europe. For Eliade, though, this meaning

was inverted. The primitive became associated with the archaic, “synonymous with the ancient or the primordial” (188), and was viewed with nostalgia and reverence.

From this brief overview, it is possible to state in some detail the characteristics of the shaman that Eliade had sought to emphasize. The shaman is distinguished by the attainment of an ecstatic experience or magical soul flight, which denotes an altered psychological state. The shaman becomes a hero figure, one in possession of a primordial knowledge needed to reorient western civilization towards the sacred. This knowledge pertains to the inducement of ecstatic experiences, as well as a general orientation of the topography of the spirit world. Eliade distils his notion of the spirit world into a tripartite shamanic cosmology. Such an approach can be seen as an attempt to essentialize the shaman into a discrete category totally divorced from the multiplicity of cultural contexts from which he or she is drawn.

If, as we have seen, Eliade set the scope of shamanism research in the mid-twentieth century, then the Swedish scholar Åke Hultkrantz (1920-2006) is responsible for providing an additional layer of sophistication to the examination of shamanism. Counting among his research interests Native North American religions and the religious cultures of the Saami peoples indigenous to Northern Scandinavia, Hultkrantz was an impressive scholar of prestigious breadth. During the late 1940's, while Eliade was conducting his global study of shamanism, Hultkrantz was conducting field research among the Saami of northern Scandinavia and studying comparative ethnography for his PhD. He was awarded a second PhD in 1948 for his fieldwork with Native North Americans, particularly the Wind River Shoshoni, which culminated in the publication of his second dissertation, titled *Conceptions of the Soul among North American Indians: A Study in Religious Ethnology* (1953). Hultkrantz's earliest scholarship is characterized by

his meticulous attention to ethnographic detail and an intense interest in the religions of both the Saami and Native North Americans. Discussion of the variants of shamanism he observed in both cultural contexts would eventually lead him to author numerous books and articles in which he further developed his own stance regarding the definition of a cross-cultural shamanism.

An essay appearing in his *Studies of Lapp Shamanism*, entitled “Ecological and Phenomenological Aspects of Shamanism”, represents Hultkrantz’s enduring contribution to the field of Shamanism Studies. In it, he sets forth a reformulation of the definition of shamanism that includes the important social functions of the shaman, which historians of religion had been inclined to omit in favour of emphasizing ecstatic experience (Hultkrantz, 1978: 10). Tending towards neither approach exclusively, Hultkrantz expounds a taxonomy of shamanism that synthesizes both view points.

Hultkrantz also reassessed the term ‘shamanism’ and its lack of clear meaning (10). This led him to present shamanism as a structured concept, one that he contends resembles a cultural complex or configuration (10). This allows for the concept of shamanism to be treated as an analytical or descriptive category without the theoretical baggage entailed in attempting to divine the essence of shamanism. Shamanism, for Hultkrantz is “no religion in its own right” (11), but is a configuration or cultural complex which is expressed through “central ideas and a series of symbols” (11). Hultkrantz envisions the shamanic complex as possessing four constituent elements, with the emphasis of each element varying relative to the specific history of the culture being described. These four elements are: “the ideological premise, or the supernatural world and the contacts with it; the shaman as the actor on behalf of a human group; the

inspiration granted to him by his helping spirits, and; the extraordinary ecstatic experiences of the shaman” (11). This combined a multi-disciplinary approach which included sociology, psychology, and in addition grounded shamanism in its own cultural worldview. While he implicitly omits the role that psychotropic plants may play in the shamanic complex in this earlier scholarship, near the end of his career he acknowledges their use. He states that psychotropic plants, or ‘drugs’ in his vernacular, can act as a valid means to provoke shamanic trance, especially in ecological settings such as South America where an abundance of such plants is found (Hultkrantz, 2003: 9).

In such a way, Hultkrantz merges the different conceptualizations of the shaman so that it is possible to discuss shamanism as a “religious interest”, and points to Siberia as an example of where it is dominant (12). The diversity of cultures that exhibited such a shamanic configuration was the result of cultural and historical processes given shape by ecological variables, he argues. The vast array of different ecologies, each with their distinctive geography and biology, provide the inspiration for each distinctive configuration of shamanism that manifests. Hultkrantz states that “shamanism must be regarded as a continuous historical complex” (27) and while he speculates that its origins lay in Siberia, he asserts that it is a worldwide phenomenon (27). Shamanic cultures are therefore not homogenous but rather denote a spectrum of tendencies towards a selected array of characteristics; shamanism is thus not a singular noun, i.e. a shamanism. It encompasses variegated individual shamanisms.

Although he posits an added level of sophistication to the analysis of shamanism, Hultkrantz diverges very little from Eliade. While Hultkrantz can be seen to distinguish himself from Eliade through acknowledging indigenous cultural diversity and

constructing his analytical category of the shamanic complex, “like Eliade, he refused to reduce religion to its social and cultural context” (Znamenski, 2007: 226). In a manner, his preoccupation with further outlining the conceptual boundaries of shamanism, within a grand narrative typical of the old European academic tradition (226), renders his methodology typologically consonant with Eliade’s<sup>3</sup>.

In the colloquial terms of the social sciences, Hultkrantz – as well as Eliade – can be seen as ‘lumpers’. As such, they group data into categories according to their similarities while resisting the critiques of ‘splitters’, most notably of Geertz, who objects claiming that ethnographers of religion who tend towards this practice of lumping devitalized their data (Geertz, 1967: 122-123). From this perspective, lumping phenomena into concepts is seen to not correspond to empirical fact and is therefore an imposition on the part of the scholar. The concept of shamanism was one such category that drew the ire of Geertz. What was required according to Geertz, was thick description. This works as a means of illuminating the emic perspectives of those who were being studied, complete in their “idiosyncratic character” (122). Generalized categories, such as shamanism, tend to obscure the particularities experienced by practitioners within their own cultural system and, instead, lean towards “general assessments of the value of religion in either moral or functional terms” (122). Such statements challenge the socio-cultural assumptions upon which generalized categories, such as shamanism, are constructed.

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<sup>3</sup> Eliade, and to a lesser extent Hultkrantz, both placed an emphasis on the psychological characteristics that they associated with shamanism. They focused on specifically ecstasy and the shaman’s ability to elicit ecstatic experiences through particular techniques. Various scholars, such as Winkelman (2006), have also placed emphasis on the psychological aspects of shamanism, highlighting the importance of ‘altered states of consciousness’ as a universal of shamanic practice.

Hultkrantz brushes aside the “repudiatory” and “negativistic pronouncements” (1999:6) of “isolationist Americanists” (5), including those of Geertz. In an article titled “The Specific Character of North American Shamanism”, Hultkrantz states that the “efforts to erase an accepted religious pattern such as shamanism have been unsuccessful” (6). In support of this, Hultkrantz salutes Eliade’s *Shamanism* as having heralded in a “new era of shamanism research” (7). While this proclamation may be accurate, Eliade’s text is far from unanimously “venerated as the classic book of shamanism ...[or regarded as the] bible of shamanism” (7), as Hultkrantz would have us believe.

Eliade and Hultkrantz have no doubt made contributions to the field of shamanism studies that have been of paramount importance in shaping the discipline into its current state. Both scholars can be seen to open up the category of shamanism to cross-cultural application through their own interpretations of the concept. Eliade’s exultation of the shaman as one who possessed a link to the sacred lost to the profane history of the West, and Hultkrantz’s elaboration on shamanism as a cultural configuration constricted the diversity of indigenous spiritual beliefs into ‘shamanism(s)’. This became a category which grounded itself in the imagination of western audiences. Further, it endowed the shaman figure with a set of tropes, primarily relating to ecstatic experience and the notion that shamans are the bearers of a primordial knowledge. By challenging Eliade’s tradition of shamanism and introducing studies, more recent scholars have brought their criticisms of shamanism studies to the fore of academic debate. While this critical direction has become vogue, it has contributed a valuable self-reflexivity to the academic discussion of shamanism.

## **Critical Perspectives in Shamanism Studies**

Alice Kehoe (b. 1934), an anthropologist specializing in Native American anthropology, is perhaps one of the most outspoken critics of Eliade's approach to shamanism studies. Her book, *Shamans and Religion: An Anthropological Exploration in Critical Thinking* (2000) is a *tour de force*. In it, she brings to light the manner in which the majority of shamanism research carries presuppositions that "dehumanizes non-western nations, [making them] people without a history" (Kehoe, 2000: 2). In addition, Kehoe highlights how terms such as shaman and shamanism have come to be employed so loosely by academics and the general public that they "convey confusion far more than knowledge" (2). These uses range from denoting characteristics of the Siberian religious complex to any individuals who engage in ecstatic states, such as medicine men, as well as the supposed primordial religion of Palaeolithic hunter-gatherers (1996: 377-378).

For Kehoe, the myriad of senses in which the term shaman is utilized are both very problematic and a cause for concern. In the case of Eliade, she calls into question his implicit metaphysics that sees shamanism as a "timeless phenomenon at once mysticism, magic and 'religion'" (383). This results in contemporary or existent cultures, when viewed as shamanic, as being labelled as archaic. In the work of Hultkrantz, Kehoe identifies his propensity to utilize terms within his comparative religious studies approach that premises "the universality of European categories [of religion and the divine that are] firmly rooted in the imperial ideology of the European Age of Exploration" (385). For Kehoe, the contemporary academic cross-cultural usage of the term shaman connotes "a stereotypical idea (found in nineteenth century European thought) of distant primitive savages preserving a pure primordial religion lost to alienated educated civilized men"



(2000: 5). These critiques are incisive, and contribute greatly to an alternative approach that is self-reflexive. They are also cognizant of the manner in which the self-understandings of indigenous peoples have been over-written by the theories of enterprising scholars such as Eliade.

Kehoe thus advocates for a methodology that grounds indigenous spiritual systems in the particular. In this way the term ‘shaman’ should only be applied when speaking of the Siberian version where the term is used emically. This stance represents one pole in the distinction between the particular and the general, whereas Eliade’s shamanism falls squarely in the later. Kehoe’s criticism implicates those scholars who have followed Eliade’s methodology in reifying the notions of the shaman. This critical assessment of Eliade’s cross-cultural shamanism provides an awareness of its thorough embeddedness within both the contemporary discourses of shamanism studies as well as popular culture.

In a similar mode of criticism as Kehoe, Hodayun Sidky has challenged the current usage of the terms shaman and shamanism. His critique, however, falls short of the more hard-line views of Kehoe that shamanism is without value as a cross-cultural analytical category. Speaking from his experiences conducting field work with Nepalese ‘shamans’ known as *jharkis*, Sidky systematically problematizes the various stances regarding shamanism that are held by scholars. Included are the assertions that ancient cave art and petroglyphs prove the existence of an ancient shamanic practice, and that shamanism represents a universal means to achieve ecstatic states. These presuppositions, Sidky alleges, originated with Eliade (2010: 74) and have been carried forward in a “body of scholarship engendered by Eliade’s unsubstantiated assertions” (74). Sidky does

not suggest, as Kehoe does, that shamanism is an intractable illusion and an artefact best left buried in the history of anthropology (86). Instead he cautions against the “uncritical acceptance of the fantasy that Eliade and his followers have built” (86) and its influence upon the interpretation of ethnographic data.

As Sidky states, the “dimensions of shamanism are important topics that require critical empirical investigation” (86), though he fails to suggest how such an investigation might proceed. Instead, he posits his own “criteria for identifying shamanism cross-culturally ...[along a line which] delimits the scope of the phenomenon primarily to North and Central Asia and northern North America” (2010b: 231), by emphasizing that the category of a cross-cultural shamanism is a geographically bound phenomenon. Sidky seems content to construct a shamanic category that would include Nepalese *jharkis*, but not the majority of religio-cultural practitioners included under a more universalized definition of the ‘shaman’, such as Eliade’s. While defining shamanism through the context of his own ethnographic interests does little more than perpetuate the same dichotomous debate, Sidky is notable insofar as he insinuates the possibility of conducting a methodical and self-reflexive re-construction of a cross-cultural shamanism.

### **The Reflexive Turn: Reconstructing Shamanism**

Working within the discipline of history of religions, Lars Kirkhusmo Pharo argues that merely critiquing notions of the shaman and proceeding blindly with uncritical definitions does not satisfactorily address the problem of shamanism’s semantic ambiguity. For Pharo, this involves clearly stating his own intention to reconstruct an analytic concept of shamanism for use in his disciplinary context of the history of

religions (2011: 8). The need for a clear procedure in this regard speaks to the reality that “no neutral words exist in language” (7). While criticism can strip away the presuppositions that supply words with unexamined meaning, leaving them bare is akin to throwing one’s arms in the air and decrying that “language constitutes a meaningless tool for describing reality” (7).

As a point of departure for his methodology, Pharo sets out to construct his concept of shamanism as a Weberian ideal type, which as he describes are “general concepts which [do] not have an actual empirical realization” (15). As such, they do not describe reality as it is but, as Weber states, they aim to “give an unambiguous means of expression to such a description” (quoted by Pharo, 15). Ideal types are thus “typological categories [that] enable scholars to outline similarities, connections and differences among individual objects” (15). As such, they can be seen to outline phenomena in a precise manner. According to Pharo, in order to reconstruct an ideal type of the term ‘shaman’ there are three questions that must be answered. Each question is focused on a particular aspect of the term’s usage and seeks to “deconstruct” (17) it as a category. They investigate: 1) the etymology of the word shaman in its original context; 2) the historiography of the term’s usage within the various academic disciplines; and, 3) the identification of key similarities that distinguish the shaman from alternative ideal types (17). For Pharo such a methodology makes it possible to establish an ideal type of shaman, from which cross-cultural analysis can proceed.

This procedure leads to a thorough methodology in which the position of the scholar is clarified. In addition, both the etic and emic dimensions of the term being constructed, as well as the history that it has inherited, are recognized. Such an ideal type

or category, when constructed within the bounds of sufficient self-reflection, allows one to designate religious specialists, known by other names within their respective cultures, as shamans (63). Through utilizing this methodology, Pharo arrives at a definition of the shaman as “a religious specialist who masters various culturally determined religious techniques that make it possible for him / her to communicate with supernatural beings ... [thus becoming] a mediator between the gods, spirits and ancestors and human beings ... [in order to] obtain favours from them” (62). Borrowing from Hultkrantz, Pharo sees shamanism as a religious configuration (61), and insists that shamanism is not a religion in its own right but rather describes it as a cultural expression of a religious system in analytical terms. The specifics of this definition are not novel, or even important in themselves; the innovation in Pharo’s approach rests in the thorough etymological and historiographic scrutiny he uses in its re-construction.

Pharo’s work can be seen as an attempt to balance the divergent viewpoints of shamanism, so that etically constructed categories, such as shamanism, may be spared outright excision. This requires, as a minimum condition, that terms describing the conceptual components of religio-cultural systems consider the emic spheres in which they are embedded. Of importance in respecting the integrity of the holistic religio-cultural systems of the communities under consideration is the recognition that their ritual practices and worldviews reside within their particular cultural context. In this way, an indigenous healer’s practices, or a group’s myths have meaning in relation to the contexts in which they are found. In contrast to Eliade’s shamanism, Pharo’s ideal type of the shaman category does not purport to override the emic understandings associated with ‘shaman’ figures. Instead, Pharo’s methodology seeks to incorporate emic cultural

particularities into the construction of etic concepts. While Pharo does not proceed in this direction to the full extent that Geertz's thick description would prescribe, he strives to avoid the inclusion of latent linguistic and theological presuppositions of the manner that mars the construct of 'shamanism' assembled by Eliade.

Although Kehoe contends that the concept of shamanism can largely be seen to be a western construction and the product of academic scholarship, the practices and beliefs to which they refer are no less 'real' in the lives of the indigenous peoples to whom they belong. In order to engage the scholarly discussion of any phenomenon, a specialized vocabulary is often required. For example, the concept of praxis refers to the ritual practices conducted by religious adherents and while it is not a term employed by individual religious practitioners, it can be useful in an analytic context.

Pharo's charge that no instance of language is neutral is a useful reminder that scholars must take heed – particularly when conducting cross-cultural comparisons. In this way, Pharo's methodology for reconstructing cultural categories represents a sort of dialogical arrangement made between the various methodological trends within shamanism studies that have been discussed. The rigorous critique of shamanism voiced by Kehoe engages with the propensity to conduct cross-cultural analysis characteristic of Eliade and Hultkrantz. This guards against the inclusion of grandiose ontological claims of the sort that draw their inspiration from Eliade's tradition of defining shamanism. This also allows for an ideal type of shamanism that attempts to fulfil a useful function as a heuristic tool in scholarship. Shamanism, in the mode of Pharo, escapes becoming an ontological category or *mélange* of overlapping generalized meanings. As an ideal type,

shamanism assumes the form of a precise descriptor arising from thoughtful etymological and ethnographic examinations.

### **Potential for Further Dialogue**

This observation, however, does not signify ‘the end’ of the debate regarding the methodological approaches to shamanism studies. To claim otherwise would be to declare that no further contributions can be made, and would thus posit that shamanism possesses an ontology grounded in empirical reality. Continuous refinements and rigorous debate can assist in bringing about an additional awareness of biases and lend themselves to the construction of more sophisticated methods and definitions. As such, further dialogue between scholars regarding their approaches will no doubt be incorporated into on-going reflection about the usefulness of an ‘ideal’ type of shamanism.

One such engagement with Pharo’s methodology that could be helpful is the additional element of self-reflexivity on the part of the scholar. This would require one to take stock of their own location within the particular socio-cultural structures that they occupy and, also to disclose their preconceived notions and presuppositions. It is not enough to account for the embedded quality of the phenomenon being described without as well making clear that any methodology, no matter how rigorous, is embedded in its own context of meaning. This is informed by both a scholar’s personal and socio-cultural context. There is a dialogical quality at work that has not been accounted for in the task of reconstructing the shamanism type, such as the relationship between post-modern discourse and the plural ‘shamanisms’ alluded to by Buzekova (2010:127-128).

As the worldview that comprises a scholar's own context intersects with the historical, theoretical and/or ethnographic accounts from which an ideal type is constructed, a dialogue is undertaken from which a scholar's interpretation emerges. Hence, it can be said that different interpretations exhibit certain characteristics from the various cultural backdrops of which they were made. While one should certainly criticize the work of previous scholars (such as Znamenski's or Kehoe's criticisms regarding Eliade), it is no substitute for an insightful self-reflexivity on the part of scholars themselves.

Nonetheless, the task of contributing to the discourse's future methodology is best left to those more concerned with positing a further refinement, or rejection of the traditional shamanism type casting. While I do see strengths in Pharo's methodology as a means of clarifying the ambiguous meaning of shamanism in the discourse, attempting to salvage an analytical category of shamanism is not one of my objectives. My interest, in relaying an outline of the various methodologies employed within shamanism studies, has been to draw attention to its major historical tropes and trends.

As has been shown, the academic use of a categorical shamanism, whether cast as a universal or an ideal type, is a construction of particular scholars. The representations they convey have acted to reify the concept of the 'shaman' not only within academic discourse but as well within popular understandings of shamanism, especially in the West. These popular understandings or folk beliefs have worked to mediate both western conceptualizations of shamanism and individual engagement with the worlds they describe. Thus, previous to any discussion of neo-shamanism, a topic to which I will

proceed, it has been necessary to relate certain key junctures in the history and development of shamanism studies.



## **Chapter Two - Neo-Shamanisms: Western Constructs and Representations of the Shaman**

Neo-shamanic practice is at once both an imitation of and an innovation upon the concept of shamanism. It denotes the practice whereby cultural outsiders adopt facets of the belief systems and ritual practices found in the world's indigenous cultures and then adapt them to their own specific socio-cultural context. Through the act of appropriation, neo-shamanists thus create a new worldview through the re-description of their prior world. It is important to bear in mind that, notwithstanding the development of specific systems of neo-shamanic techniques, neo-shamanic practice is highly heterogeneous and non-hierarchical in its configuration. Additionally, neo-shamanism can be described as an individualist new religious movement (Townsend, 2005). Predominantly a western phenomenon, it began gain popularity in the later half of the twentieth century, and its roots are often traced to the counter-cultural movements of the 1960's (Buzekova, 2010: 116).

What concerns neo-shamanists are the specific religio-cultural beliefs and practices that can be described as shamanic – those which entail the use of altered states of consciousness to contact other-than-human entities for reasons of community healing and/or guidance. As shown in the previous chapter, any attempt to formulate an agreed-upon definition of what constitutes shamanism has been rightly controversial, suffering from an incisive lack of unanimity amongst scholars. Nonetheless, the plethora of academic and popular notions of 'shamanism' has established themselves within neo-shamanic discourse and their transfer to the emic realm by neo-shamanic practitioners has

resulted in their further reification. In this chapter, I will describe the phenomenon of neo-shamanism, detail its emergence within western culture, outline the main texts and figures that have influenced its development (Castaneda, 1968; and, Harner, 1980), and discuss contemporary academic theories that have been issued in an attempt to understand the production of emic understandings of the ‘shamanic’ by contemporary neo-shamanists.

As is the case with shamanism, the matter of nomenclature as it pertains to neo-shamanism is much contested. Some scholars, often with a pejorative tone, categorize neo-shamanism into specific variants in opposition to traditional ‘shamanism’. Townsend exemplifies such an attitude in her distinction between traditionalist, modernist and eclectic approaches to neo-shamanism and traditional shamanic beliefs (2005: 4). By proposing that traditional shamanic practice is distinct from neo-shamanic practice, Townsend insinuates that neo-shamanism is somehow inauthentic. Although her paring of the phenomenon of neo-shamanism into discreet categories does render it more easily comprehensible, the highly individualistic and heterogeneous character of neo-shamanic practice that evades simple categorization challenges the accuracy of Townsend’s assertions. Furthermore, to label an individual as a neo-shaman would seem inappropriate if they themselves have not and/or have no intention of declaring themselves a shaman. One must ask if individuals who adopt facets of ‘shamanic’ typed indigenous religions must necessarily rely on etic terms, such as shamanism, in order to qualify for the designation of neo-shamanic practitioner.

Wallis (2003) has posited that it is more accurate to speak of neo-shamanisms, as this pluralistic term connotes the individualistic and heterogeneous quality of neo-

shamanic practice. The prefixes of “western”, “contemporary”, ‘urban’, oft attached to the term “shamanism” are further attempts at labelling neo-shamanism. While each prefix illuminates a possible configuration of neo-shamanic practice, they are each constrained by specific temporal or geographic boundaries. As an example, the term ‘urban shamanism’ overlooks those neo-shamanic practitioners who live outside of North American or European urban centres. As such, my preference and the term that I will employ when referring to neo-shamanic practitioners is neo-shamanist. My use of the term neo-shamanism will denote the broader discourse with which neo-shamanists are associated<sup>4</sup>.

What should be noted is that it is the adoption, adaptation, and appropriation of what are considered to be ‘shamanic’ practices and beliefs that form the foundation of neo-shamanic practice. There are many aspects of neo-shamanic practice that diverge and differ greatly from the practices and world-views that characterize the indigenous cultures from which they were inspired or transmitted. Neo-shamanic outlooks are also marked by a tolerance towards non-‘shamanic’ practices or beliefs, such as traditional religions or New Age practices, with which they may be incorporated. The eclecticism that characterizes neo-shamanic outlooks results in a situation whereby symbolic elements from heterogeneous systems are held simultaneously in a manner that is unified in terms of its meaning, and unique to each individual.

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<sup>4</sup> Even still, its designation as a noun, neo-shamanism, is perhaps misleading. It conveys the sense that neo-shamanism is an institutionalized system or possesses a unified textual base, which is not the case. As an individualist religious movement it would be more appropriate to speak only of neo-shamanists, which would focus attention to their practices, their literature and their world-views. Nonetheless neo-shamanism, despite its insinuation of institutional cohesion remains a convenient designation when referencing the discursive field.

Despite its individualist formation, it is still possible to ascertain common threads that run throughout neo-shamanisms. In his book, *An Introduction to Shamanism*, Thomas DuBois (2009) identifies these main characteristics, and juxtaposes them against the characteristics he observes in traditional ‘shamanic’ cultures as a means of clarification. One of the most striking elements, he notes, is the emphasis neo-shamanic practitioners place on personal volition (272). In contrast to an initiatory illness or the hereditary and lineage-based transmission of practices witnessed in indigenous cultures, neo-shamanists “often describe their embrace of shamanic activities as a conscious choice” (272). This can be mediated, for example, through the discovery of books that relate neo-shamanic subject matter, or through a long-standing attraction to topics of alternative spirituality. It is nonetheless an individual choice, one made through personal volition, and is often lacking the same social context in which indigenous practitioners may be called to their vocation.

As such, neo-shamanists are more likely to pursue their spiritual agenda for matters of personal enlightenment, curiosity, or healing: their paths are focused on self-benefit and actualization. Whereas, in their original cultural context ‘shamanic’ vocations “shift the shaman’s focus from self to a broader embrace of community and cosmos” (273), neo-shamanists maintain their practice for individual betterment, even if they share their insights or techniques with the wider neo-shamanic community. This search for self-betterment acts to influence neo-shamanic cosmologies which tend to view the spirit world as benevolent and utilitarian (275). The measure of correctness in one’s cosmological view, and indeed in one’s practice, is thus determined by the individual neo-shamanist. They become their own monitors of progress, often not relying on a

human teacher for legitimization, nor proceeding on their spiritual journey on blind faith (275). A premium is placed on experiential learning in this neo-shamanic context, which may entail an element of scepticism in regards to claims of authority (274).

A neo-shamanic view is highly relativistic and geared towards the individual's attainment of specific goals. The components of a neo-shamanist's praxis or cosmology may therefore contain elements which appear to be in contradiction or conflict, but which are in fact pragmatically harmonized into a consistent worldview. In this way, "a Western view of the physical universe may coexist in practitioner's minds with an openness to possible other ways of understanding the cosmos" (273). This alludes to "a certain playfulness regarding once sacrosanct boundaries such as *true/false, belief/disbelief* [and] can permit a hybridity of viewpoints" (274). DuBois, in referencing the work of Beckford, states that such a phenomenon is characteristic of a post-modern shift in "understandings of religion within contemporary societies" (274). The resistance to strict true / false dichotomies exhibited by neo-shamanists in the arrangement of their worldviews leads to a harmonization of beliefs and practices that are highly eclectic and adopted from diverse sources, both indigenous and non-indigenous.

Entrance into the cultures of those indigenous peoples deemed to be 'shamanic' is mediated by profuse sources. Popular books and workshops comprise a major source of knowledge for neo-shamanists and are often the first encounter an individual may have with notions of the 'shamanic'. These sources are produced by neo-shamanists themselves who are familiar with traditional shamanic cultures, such as the workshops and literature by Michael Harner. They provide secondary, neo-shamanic, interpretations of indigenous cultural practices and beliefs, often distilling them into specific

methodologies, as is the case with Harner's core shamanism. Transmission may also occur through direct contact with indigenous practitioners through fieldwork, travel, or shamanic tours and retreats – an example of which are those *ayahuasca* retreats with which this thesis is concerned. Yet another method, and possibly the most foundational in terms of influencing western notions of the shaman, is through access to the corpus of academic material that exists attempting to describe and explain shamanism.

According to Buzekova, emic understandings of the neo-shamanic are derived from etic notions of the shaman, i.e. those notions posited by scholars. As such, shamanism studies and anthropological scholarship are of primary importance to neo-shamanic notions of the 'shaman' and, as such, are viable avenues of inspiration for those pursuing a neo-shamanist spiritual agenda. The diffusion of these ethnographic and theoretical details has come to generally define neo-shamanism's conceptual contours. Information and communication technologies, such as the internet, have globally transmitted this information thus enabling neo-shamanism's development as a new religious movement. Indeed, globalization has brought with it unparalleled access to information about the beliefs and practices of other cultures. This is particularly true with regards to those, notably Euro-American, individuals of privilege who have near guaranteed access to information technologies, and for whom international travel is possible without substantial personal cost.

Contact with indigenous communities and their spiritual practitioners cannot help but be interpreted through the lens of a 'shamanism' which Euro-American culture has inherited from previous scholars and producers of popular neo-shamanic literature. As an individual's worldview is steeped in the intellectual tradition in which they were raised,

it is hardly surprising that neo-shamanists often reproduce understandings of indigenous communities and their spiritual practitioners that are reminiscent of this shamanistic lens. As such, the operation of this interpretative framework is particularly pronounced for neo-shamanists, as they have been drawn to representations of the ‘shamanic’ generally prior to their experiential interaction with indigenous peoples. The source of many of these representations can be found within the discourse of shamanism studies outlined in the previous chapter, especially in the work of Eliade.

While representations of the shamanic are adapted and stylized by individual neo-shamanists in their practices and beliefs, as Dubois notes, “there are several figures that loom large” (266) in shaping neo-shamanic beliefs. Eliade’s influence on popular notions of the shamanic is substantial; however, Eliade is not alone in this regard and, as such, our attention must turn toward subsequent authors that are prominently viewed as sources of knowledge for neo-shamanic practitioners. These figures not only construct additional ‘shamanic’ representations, but have become guiding figures in the neo-shamanic movement, as well.

### **Guiding Figures**

It is impossible to state with certainty that Eliade, and the concept of the shaman that he conjured, is the exclusive cause for the rise of neo-shamanism. Such a proposition would require that we overlook the presence of conditions that allowed for his theories to gain such predominance. Znamenski highlights this fact, stating that at the time of its publication, Eliade’s *Shamanism* was largely overlooked by the scholarly community and threatened to disappear into obscurity (Znamenski, 2007: 181).

In fact, the celebrity status Eliade obtained was in large part due to the counter-revolt against modernity initiated by the left-liberal of the political spectrum in the 1960's and 1970's that sought alternative epistemological models than those offered by modernist discourse (185). The public's<sup>5</sup> interest in Eliade's *Shamanism* increased sharply in the late 1960's when "Westerners became troubled about their own Judeo-Christian civilization" (185). Those searching for an alternative view of society and spirituality discovered Eliade's scholarship in amongst the various authors describing non-western religious traditions and in doing so acquired from his *Shamanism* a reference to a seemingly novel mode of existence.

The popular appeal of the shaman figure was increased further with the publication of the works of Carlos Castaneda. A controversial figure within the history of Anthropology, Carlos Castaneda and his fictitious ethnographies, quickly became foundational texts for those interested in 'shamanism'. Castaneda authored numerous works of narrative-based and supposedly legitimate, if not fantastical, ethnography outlining his apprenticeship under the Yaqui Sorcerer Don Juan Matus. In his first book, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (1968), Castaneda narrates his experiences in the Sonora desert in search of indigenous knowledge regarding the use of psychotropic plants, in particular peyote and hallucinogenic mushrooms. What follows is Castaneda's induction into the 'path of knowledge' that sees his assumptions regarding reason and rationality continuously challenged by Don Juan and the botanical teachers and allies he encounters. As DuBois notes, Castaneda recasts altered states of consciousness, not as supernatural experiences, but as glimpses of non-ordinary reality,

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<sup>5</sup> Znamenski documents Eliade's declaration later in life that his work on shamanism was not solely intended for an academic audience, but indeed for wide distribution among the interested public (2007: 196).



emphasizing the importance of both experiential learning during such encounters, and subjectivity in describing them (2009: 197). These principles would come to be foundational concepts in neo-shamanic practice.

Castaneda's influence on the development of neo-shamanism is uncontested; however the status of his work as fact is indeed speculative if not strongly doubtful. While much research has been devoted to debunking Castaneda's work as a total fabrication, or at best as creative-‘non-fiction’<sup>6</sup>, he nonetheless contributed to the popularization of academic knowledge as a source of information for neo-shamanists (von Stuckhard, 2002). His notoriety was no doubt bolstered by the public's fascination with the topics he presented; the use of psychotropic substances to induce experiences of non-ordinary reality likely resonated with a sub-culture eager to ‘turn on, tune in, and drop out’ of mainstream notions of spirituality and sociality. Moreover, Castaneda's books represented a new genre which was more accessible than traditional academic literature – that of narrative and experiential ethnography. As the controversy regarding the veracity of his accounts deepened, Castaneda distanced himself from the academic community, though he continued to author books, as well as, offer workshops. Castaneda was not only the pioneer of a particular brand of neo-shamanic literature referred to as ‘tales of power’, but his work also raised questions about the treatment of extraordinary experiences within ethnography.

Castaneda's works is emblematic of the methodological avenues for ethnographers that began to emerge in the late 1960's which challenged the dualism inherent in previous observation-based ethnographic accounts. The methodological

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<sup>6</sup> See Chapter two of Noel (1997); and, Chapter six of Znamenski (2007) for a detailed account of this controversy.

inadequacies of participant observation, such as its postulation of a supposed objectivity, were seen to be subdued by participation in the experiences of a culture or group. This was seen to produce more information as the trust shared between ethnographers and informants deepened. Such an approach is participatory and is termed experiential anthropology.

In the concluding essay of their edited book, *Being Changed by Cross-Cultural Encounters*, Young and Goulet discuss the development of experiential anthropology and the methodological as well as theoretical issues that have surfaced within it. It emerged in the 1970's when "anthropologists [began to] participate more willingly in rituals designed to induce extraordinary experience ... [experiential anthropology is an attempt] to gain first-hand experiences of the range of phenomena reported by their informant" (Young and Goulet, 303). This desire for first-hand experience requires that the scholar continually seek to set aside their theoretical presuppositions, while "taking ... informants seriously" (329) whose claims are ultimately not disprovable by scientific methods. According to Marton, Castaneda can be seen as a pioneer, if a flawed one, in initiating and evoking the participatory approach" (Marton, 286). Experiential approaches to ethnography heralded the start of an era that saw anthropologists pursue participation in rituals that had the affect of producing extraordinary experiences.

The result of this approach in the context of shamanism studies resulted in some anthropologists making the choice to shed their academic laurels altogether, and envision projects that lay outside the realm of academia. They developed their own brand of (neo)shamanic practice and promoted it to the interested public, becoming what Noel has termed 'Shamanthropologists' (Noel, 63). This occurred with charges of 'going native'

as, to borrow a phrase from Dubois, the “once sacrosanct line between ethnographer and object of study” (Dubois: 266) was transgressed.

Such is the case with former anthropologist Michael Harner who conducted extensive fieldwork, particularly among the Amazonian Jivaro of South America. He made considerable contributions to the academic study of shamanism – perhaps most notably through the publication of *Hallucinogens and Shamanism* (1973), an edited compilation featuring much of his own work. Harner’s fieldwork with the Jivaro was marked by participation in their cultures and rituals including those ‘shamanic’ ceremonies in which the use of psychotropic plants, such as *ayahuasca*, figured prominently. In this way Harner’s work, with its descriptions of his personal insights and extraordinary visions, displays the characteristics of an experiential approach to fieldwork.

In 1980, however, Harner published *The Way of the Shaman*, a book outlining a series of techniques that he states represent his “own personal distillation and interpretation of some of the millennia-old shamanic methods” (xxi). What Harner presents is a set of exercises that are stripped of all (non-western) cultural components, leaving a set of practices intent upon arousing altered states of consciousness in a practitioner, or as he states facilitating: “Shamanic States of Consciousness (SSC)” (xix). He has termed this methodology ‘core-shamanism’, explicit in which is the assumption that a universal methodology of shamanism exists independent of the cultural context in which it is practiced. For example, he declares that anybody can be a shaman, or at the very least practice shamanic techniques, as an “opportunity to acquire shamanic power” and help oneself and others (xviii). Primary among these techniques is the use of

rhythmic drumming to bring about Shamanic States of Consciousness in order to journey to upper and lower worlds in search of animal spirit allies and shamanic power.

Harner's system of core shamanism has gained much popularity in the United States (Johnson, 2003), Norway (Selberg, 2001), England (Jakobsen, 1999), the Netherlands (Minkjan, 2008) and Denmark (Jakobsen, 1999). As Jakobsen notes in the context of her fieldwork in Denmark and England, core shamanism is practiced within a broader milieu of New Age beliefs by participants who are commonly middle aged and educated, and "with a high representation from the caring professions" (1999: 167). Harner has since established the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, through which he offers training and workshops in shamanic techniques. While core shamanism is not the focus of this thesis, its importance as a particular formation of neo-shamanism in reifying specific notions of the shaman should not be understated.

Both Castaneda and Harner, in a manner similar to Eliade, accentuate the psychological aspects of the shamanic. Castaneda's experience of non-ordinary reality and Harner's use of SSC both implicate Eliade's tradition of viewing the shaman as a specialist in techniques of ecstasy. In taking their vision of the shaman outside of the halls of academia both scholars popularized notions of the shaman by directly appealing to the interested public. The popular appeal of these notions of shamanism, in their tangible and seemingly universal nature, lay in that they represent an interpretation of shamanism for a western audience, an interpretation that is not dependent upon direct transmission from an existent indigenous practitioner. As noted above, the discourses found in this emergent neo-shamanism are not without influences from inherited traditions of thought, such as those of Eliade, as well as other scholars of shamanism. As

popular interest in neo-shamanism continues to grow, important criticisms have emerged which examine the construction of the popular and academic notions of shamanism thus shaping neo-shamanic practice.

### **Critical Perspectives on Neo-Shamanism**

While many critiques have been issued against the manner in which neo-shamanic practices are premised upon uncritical popular conceptualizations of shamanism, the critiques of Kehoe are among the most concise and impassioned. Kehoe's criticism of the place of shamanism within neo-shamanism specifically flows from her critique of the constructed nature of the concept of 'shamanism' discussed previously. In the closing chapters of *Shamans and Religion* (2000), Kehoe brings to bear a pointed assessment of the motivations and practices of neo-shamanists.

Kehoe points-out that today "selling shamanic journeys is a multimillion dollar business." (81). Profiling Harner's core shamanism, she highlights how neo-shamanism is constructed from within the Western cultural tradition through universalizing the 'shamanic' practices of indigenous peoples "just as scientific medicine does" (82). She states that Harner's "method workshops are relatively prosaic compared to ... neo-shamanism" which is, she believes, better termed "eclectic spiritualism (83). Neo-shamanists, as such, are individuals hailing from a middle-class socio-economic background who have become disillusioned with traditional religious institutions, and mainstream Western society more generally (85). They commonly hold the belief that society must forge a new age – hence their New Age moniker – and either appropriate the practices of other cultures, or purchase the knowledge of practices or techniques from

‘plastic shamans’ (86). Neo-shamanists, seeped in the consumeristic milieu characteristic of western capitalist societies, are thus seen to assemble their practices through “a trip to the Nonordinary Mall filled with spirits as eager as salesclerks to assist all comers” (2000: 87). Implicit in Kehoe’s comments is a questioning of the authenticity of neo-shamanic practice.

For Kehoe, neo-shamanism greatly differs from the practices of both the “the real shamans of Siberian communities” (86) as well as, those indigenous peoples described as shamanic. Neo-shamanism is seen to differ from traditional Siberian ‘shamanism’, most pointedly in the tendency of neo-shamanic practitioners to “actively work on their own personal enlightenment and growth” (86), and in their understating of the existence of malevolent spirits (87). According to Kehoe, actual shamans, such as those in Siberia, in addition to other indigenous healers, are idolized and represented “as living fossils” (95) and, by corollary, regarded as a source of timeless wisdom. This conjures notions of racism and neo-colonialism that speak to Western society’s inheritance of a cultural tradition that possesses “a stereotype of the shaman as the essence of otherness” (101). In this way neo-shamanism becomes a western construct, one that owes its contours to the work of “arrogant cultural imperiali[sts]” (1996: 377) such as Hultkrantz and Eliade. The insinuation is again that neo-shamanic practice, as such, is inauthentic and at best amounts to little more than a “stealing [of] practices out of context” (89).

While Kehoe’s critical assessment may hold in select instances, her discussion of neo-shamanism is overly general. In contrast to her insistence that ethnography and particularism be the guiding light of scholarship in the anthropology of religion and without the same ethnographic rigor, Kehoe imposes her broad generalization of neo-

shamanism on neo-shamanic practitioners. It is not my intention to totally dismiss the criticisms of neo-shamanism that she identifies, but it is to say that neo-shamanic practice is much more varied than what Kehoe states. Kehoe implicitly links neo-shamanists with New Age (eclectic) spiritualism, and the 'brand' of neo-shamanism promoted by Harner without considering that other forms of neo-shamanism may exist. Specifically, she fails to acknowledge the fact that the source of 'shamanic' techniques or indigenous knowledge for neo-shamanists may indeed be the indigenous practitioners themselves. While the transfer of indigenous knowledge to western cultural outsiders may be coerced through asymmetrical power relations or facilitated by capitalist economic structures, to assume as much outright robs indigenous peoples and neo-shamanic spiritual practitioners of their agency. Economic exploitation no doubt does occur in neo-shamanic contexts, though so too may deliberate engagement with westerners and capitalist economic systems as an act of subversion, or because of friendship and mutual respect.

Just as Kehoe asserts that the category of shaman created by Eliade has led scholars to see "shamans everywhere" (57), her narrow view of neo-shamanism leads her to negatively appraise any westerner who adopts facets of indigenous spirituality. In addition, Kehoe fails to entertain the idea that said indigenous spiritual beliefs and practices could be shared voluntarily, and without regard for remuneration. Disregarding the perspective of neo-shamanists predetermines the outcome of any study of neo-shamanism. A more productive approach would seek to elucidate the manner in which 'shamanic' representations are reproduced within neo-shamanic practice. This requires an understanding of neo-shamanism as a dynamic and complex phenomenon not reducible to singular formations, as representations of the 'shamanic' are mediated both culturally,

and individually. Kehoe's criticisms of shamanism do, however, illustrate the cultural dimensions of its mediation. As such, our discussion now turns towards developing an understanding of the ways that neo-shamanism is mediated at an individual level.

### **Paths Forward in the Study of Neo-shamanism**

Cultural systems and individual religious views are far from static entities. Indeed, indigenous religious worldviews are dynamic and subject to the syncretism and cultural blending that results from the cross-cultural interactions experienced by individual actors. While these interactions are framed by their own socio-cultural contexts, it is possible to distinguish the ways in which they are mediated individually. In the context of neo-shamanism studies, such an approach discloses the mechanisms through which representations of the 'shamanic' are negotiated by both indigenous peoples and neo-shamanists themselves. As this thesis is primarily concerned with the representations constructed by neo-shamanists, my proceeding discussion will survey the scholarship pertaining to the mediation of the 'shamanic' by neo-shamanists in a contemporary North American and European context.

According to Buzekova, different concepts of shamanism, do not explain a facet of objective reality, but rather are "people's representations" which require explanation themselves (2010: 117). She contends that shamanism as an analytical category "influences the very manner of social analysis of neo-shamanism" (117) and as such states that analytic concepts of shamanism should not be used as a means of understanding the phenomenon of neo-shamanism (128). Instead, in order to understand neo-shamanism, "we must consider it as a complex set of representations and explain



why [as well as how, I would add] they are successfully transmitted” (128). Such a move adjusts the focus of neo-shamanism studies from critiques pertaining to its authenticity to providing a description of the multifaceted manner in which neo-shamanists produce and reproduce their own emic understandings from “elastic” (123) representations of shamanism. This exercise does not preclude criticism, but rather emerges from it. Buzekova endorses an approach that utilizes cognitive psychology to describe the “cognitive processes and social inputs” that contribute to emic understandings of the etic concept of shamanism. Her study is innovative and highlights the benefit of a multi-disciplinary approach when studying neo-shamanism. As such, I wish to highlight two additional scholars that draw their theoretical frameworks from literary theory and continental philosophy.

Daniel C. Noel’s major contribution to the study of neo-shamanism is found in his book: *The Spirit of Shamanism: Western Fantasies, Imagined Realities* (1999). He begins his thoroughly self-reflexive study of contemporary western shamanism with a deconstruction and critique of Eliade’s concept of shamanism. Through the utilization of his training as a literary critic, Noel positions his criticism beyond conventional misgivings about Eliade’s methodology of armchair anthropology to assess the impact of his presuppositions upon the reader. Noel shows how Eliade’s assumption of shamanism as a conceptually “solid” (38) narrative phenomenon, interacts with the reader through “a kind of semantic driving ... that induces an imagination that we cannot necessarily access in the sense of easily finding a fixed body of information” (39). Literary representations of shamanism then, be they Eliade’s or from those that followed him, work through actively engaging the imagination of the intrigued western reader in novel ways. In the

context of literature pertaining to notions of shamanism, the reader is propelled into the world of the shaman. According to Noel, this induces an experience that he describes, through a play on words, as its own manner of “shamanic flight” (40).

For Noel, shamanic literature entails the invitation to proceed with a critical reading, one that acknowledges the sense of “shamanic flight” such narratives already initiate in the reader. Taking this injunctive to heart, Noel makes his own reading of the shamanic narrative as a “mindfully interactive experience,” (40) reconfiguring its trajectory in order to imagine a western shamanism that he projects through the myth of Merlin. As a result of his unconventional views, Noel has been the target of fierce criticism – most notably from Ripinsky-Naxon, who takes issue with Noel for ignoring “much serious research on shamanism by established Western scholars” (1999: 84) and for failing to acknowledge the “anthropological perspective that places shamanism squarely within the realm of culture” (85). Although Noel does lack sufficient consideration of the ethnographic records pertaining to non-western ‘shamanic’ cultures, Ripinsky-Naxon fails to acknowledge the point that Noel is raising.

Scholars of shamanism cannot escape from creating their own representations of the shamanic which, as has been shown, shift between etic and emic spheres. Acknowledging this does not automatically overwrite the insights of aforementioned scholars nor does it overwrite the religio-cultural realities experienced by indigenous peoples, but it does expose the very concept being applied to them, that of the shaman, to be an interpretation unique to each scholar. By engaging with these ‘imagined realities,’ neo-shamanists take-on the etic concepts proposed by scholars as emic understandings and identities. Interestingly, Noel’s thesis is very similar to Buzeková’s upon first glance,

but then departs substantially from her analysis by crossing into the emic sphere, and forwarding his own ‘mindful imagining’ of shamanism as a possible shamanic narrative. Additionally, Noel’s analysis of neo-shamanism as a predominately literary phenomenon largely ignores the influence of direct cross-cultural interaction, such as ‘shamanic tours’ and apprenticeships, as a source of knowledge for neo-shamanists.

The second scholar whom I wish to highlight is Gerhard Mayer. In his article “The Figure of the Shaman as a Modern Myth: Some Reflections on the Attractiveness of the Shaman Figure in Modern Societies” (2008), he applies insights found within continental philosophy to the study of neo-shamanism. He posits that the concept of shamanism has taken on a new significance in contemporary western culture. Historically, representations of the shaman found in European intellectual culture have been divided between those that demonize or medicalize the shaman and those that romanticize the shaman as a “noble savage who stands in primal contact with nature” (71). Moreover, these representations reified the powerful imagery associated with the shaman figure as the ‘other’ which was then held in contradistinction to European ‘civilization’ (71).

With regards to the reception of shamanic representations by individuals in contemporary western culture, this aforementioned “situation has fundamentally changed” (71). According to Mayer, “with an act of identifying, appropriation has taken the place of the former demarcation, and thus the character of the shaman has been implanted into the cultural perspectives of many subcultures” (71). The contemporary West’s fascination with the shaman figure has resulted in “manifold possibilities of interpretation” (75). Most notably these include: Neo-shamanism as oriented towards

aspects of the healer and spiritual teacher (75); Urban shaman as cultural critic, rebel, and anarchist (77); Technoshamanism and cybershamanism (80), and; Actors and artists as shamans (85). In this way, representations of the shaman are elastic as they become expressed through the interpretations given to them by individuals in distinct sub-cultural contexts.

What makes the concept of shamanism elastic is the way in which the figure of the shaman fits “exceptionally well into contemporary structures of need and motivation which are beyond the religious-spiritual field” (95). The “mythic charging” of the shamanic representations change them into modern myths of our own making (96). The shaman thus becomes a lens individuals use to ascribe a unique meaning to their individual context. As such, Mayer posits that the shaman figure has acquired a cultural existence detached from the concept of shamanism altogether and has thus become a powerful cipher (96).

Mayer further develops his concept of cipher by drawing from the work of German Philosopher Karl Jaspers, in particular his writings regarding transcendence. Of importance to Jaspers’ view of transcendence is the ability of liminal situations to forge new realms of self-consciousness by allowing “the human mind to abandon the securities of its limitedness” (Jaspers, qtd. by Mayer, 96). By means of the liminal the individual overcomes the perceived limits of their existence. To experience the liminal is to “exist in terms of Existenz” (96). In contrast to existence, which denotes the individual “in relation to other beings in the world” (96), Existenz signifies a sense of being, wherein the individual is a “non-objectifiable self” (96). Liminal situations and the experience of Existenz become the doorways to a transcendent mode of reality which, while remaining

wholly unobtainable, impinges itself upon human consciousness. This transcendent mode of reality is mediated by the “cipher-script of transcendence” (Jaspers, qtd. by Mayer, 97), which “has to be seen in an intermediate position between Existenz and transcendence” (Mayer, 97). As such, ciphers act to mediate the glimpses of transcendence that are shown to Existenz in liminal situations where the individual confronts their own limitations.

Mayer proposes that the shaman figure can be conceived of as a cipher that operates by making experiences meaningful in light of an individual’s own context. The openness to interpret the shaman figure, exhibited by its inclusion in the various sub-cultural contexts shown above, “with its iridescent and diffuse character can be understood as part of the language of transcendence” (98). With its rich configurations of symbols and myths ascribed to it in western contexts, representations of the shaman are an “attempt to convey experiences of transcendence” (98). Those tropes abundantly found circulating in representations of the shaman (as a manifestation of living ecstatically, evoking supernatural forces, and intensifying life’s experiences) show the shaman to be a symbol pointing towards transcendence, allowing it to become a cipher itself (98). Thus, while the shaman figure has become detached from the empirical reality of indigenous cultures, it is firmly embedded in the culture of the West and continues to act as a powerful medium in the lives of many westerners. Although Mayer falls well short of providing an awareness of the post-colonial critique of the shaman figure’s appropriation by the sub-sets of western culture he discusses, he does illuminate new avenues through which the attractiveness of shamanism in modern western societies may be investigated. Specifically, his extension of neo-shamanism studies into the field of

continental philosophy highlights hitherto unrealized opportunities that such a pursuit may produce for the discipline.

As has been shown, the category of shamanism found within the discourse of neo-shamanism is a construction of Euro-American scholarship. The representations it conveys have acted to influence not only academic discourse but popular understandings of shamanism in western culture as well. These popular understandings, or folk beliefs, are largely influenced by western conceptualizations of shamanism and work to mediate individual engagement with the worlds they describe.

This chapter has consisted primarily of a description of neo-shamanism and the influence that literature, produced through experiential anthropology, has had on its development as a new religious movement. In addition, an engagement with dominant critiques of neo-shamanic practice, and a summarization of theories employed in neo-shamanism studies have shown it to be a culturally, as well as individually mediated phenomenon. My treatment of neo-shamanism has oscillated between these two approaches in an attempt to display its complexity as a movement, not only embedded in the western tradition, but simultaneously transmitted through literature related to the concept of shamanism. Moving from this broader perspective towards a sub-genre of neo-shamanic literature pertaining to *ayahuasca* and the contact between western individuals and indigenous Amazonian cultures, neo-shamanic practice and its transmission will be particularized in the context of a specific geographic locality and literary genre.

### **Chapter Three - *Mestizo Vegetalismo*, *Ayahuasca* Tourism and Neo-shamanic Literature Revisited**

The ‘history’ of indigenous Peruvian religious practices, as is the case in colonized lands, begins with their ‘discovery’ by Europeans. This is because history, in its proper academic sense, relies most heavily on written accounts for veracity. History in the context of Peru is no different. Reports from Spanish *Conquistadores* in the sixteenth century are the earliest European accounts of the religio-cultural systems being practiced among the people that they encountered and would eventually colonize. Writings such as *Crónicas del Perú* by Pedero de Cieza de Leon, a chronicler of the Spanish Conquest and a *Conquistador* himself, describe the diversity of religious traditions being practiced by the indigenous populations of what is present day Columbia, Ecuador and Peru (Cieza de Leon, 1883).

As with all early accounts of the New World, these descriptions were projected through a lens of Catholic normativity and unquestioningly served imperial ends by casting the beliefs and practices of those encountered as demonic, primitive and inferior. The brutal subjugation of South America’s Indigenous peoples was indeed exploitative and drew motivation from the attitudes of imperialism and religious zeal entrenched in the ideals of discovery and possibility synonymous with popular notions of a “New World”. Far from novel discoveries, instances of contact, such as that led by Francisco Pizarro (1471-1541) as part of the Spanish conquest of much of South America beginning in 1530, mark the first of a continuing series of interactions shared between the peoples

of the West and South American indigenous populations whose ancestral lands were thusly incorporated into maps of the Empire.<sup>7</sup>

European colonial enterprises in South America have resulted in a blending of cultures, as elements of culture were exchanged at a local level between Europeans and indigenous populations. Though reciprocal, this relationship has been pronouncedly asymmetrical as evidenced by the strength with which colonial worldviews have infiltrated the lives of conquered peoples. In the modern era, attitudes of colonialism have been augmented by the processes of globalization and pluralism, which have shaped modern identities and worldviews. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the context of the Amazon jungles, where indigenous peoples, their cultures and lands, have long been the subject of Western interests.

The previous chapters have highlighted the manner in which the colonial gaze has given rise to a fascination with indigenous religious systems, specifically with those etically labelled 'shamanic'. These etic concepts have become emic understandings for neo-shamanic practitioners, thus mediating their construction of worldviews and religious practices. In the present chapter, focus will shift from the aforementioned broad context to a more specific case study, one which concerns the central topic of this thesis: neo-shamanic practice as it relates to the use of *ayahuasca*. I will describe the character of contemporary neo-shamanic interest in indigenous Amazonian religious traditions, and trace its origins in academic as well as popular literature. Such literature has continued to fuel western fascination with shamanism, enticing many to travel to the Amazon in order

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<sup>7</sup> In many ways, these processes of colonization have begun to be reversed. Political autonomy has been obtained by previously colonial states allowing for their self-determination. The topic of further decolonization, however, is still resonant in post-colonial discourse, particularly in the areas of political-economics and the epistemological primacy of imperialist worldviews.



to gain first-hand knowledge of shamanic techniques. This has resulted in the development of a shamanic tourism industry which serves to promote the use of *ayahuasca*, for the purposes of therapeutic healing and shamanic experience, by non-indigenous practitioners. I will argue that this phenomenon is more complex and varied than what has been characterized by some scholars (Dobkin de Rios and Rumrill, 2005).

As stated in the previous chapters, neo-shamanic culture – of which *ayahuasca* tourism can be regarded as a distinct example – is highly reliant on literature for knowledge transmission and inspiration. The popularity of *ayahuasca* as a topic of interest has precipitated a new literary genre, the first-person *ayahuasca* narrative, which works to both reify and further shape representations of shamanism in western popular culture. While numerous books of this type have been published over recent years, *Ayahuasca In My Blood: 25 Years of Medicine Dreaming*, by Peter Gorman (2010) and *Fishers of Men: The Gospel of an Ayahuasca Vision Quest*, by Adam Elenbass (2010) serve as emblematic examples. The different discourses applied to the topic of *ayahuasca* shamanism in such narrative accounts are reflective of the discernible range of motivations that westerners possess for seeking out *ayahuasca* and South American “shamanic” cultures.

The importance of academic literature in influencing the character of shamanic representations presented in popular literature, such as the narrative accounts above, cannot be understated. In the context of Amazonian shamanism, and *ayahuasca* shamanism more specifically, the relationship between neo-shamanic practice and scholarship is no different. This linkage will be explored and expanded upon to include a survey of ethnographic fragments ascertained within literature chronicling the early

exploration of the Amazon. In so doing, common themes associated with the Amazon jungle, its indigenous populations, and their use of *ayahuasca* will be highlighted, such that their possible presence within the popular, neo-shamanic, *ayahuasca* narrative literature may be made apparent.

In order to develop an appreciation of the rich tapestry of religious practices found in the Amazon region from which neo-shamanic practitioners draw inspiration and knowledge, I will also incorporate the work of contemporary anthropologists in this field (La Luna; Dobkin de Rios; and, Beyer). As this thesis endeavours to better understand the construction of neo-shamanic representations as found specifically within narrative-based *ayahuasca* literature, an exhaustive ethnographic survey of Amazonian cultures is not possible. It is worth noting, however, that religious and cultural hybridity are hallmarks of shamanic-type cultures in general and Amazonian life in particular. In order to convey this fact a cursory knowledge of the many forms of religious practice found in the Amazon is required.

In addition, the requirement of such brevity raises the question of geographic scope. While the existent political borders of South America were drawn with little regard for the socio-cultural systems of its indigenous peoples, the Amazon jungle is vast in its reach, spanning more than 5.5 million square kilometres and numerous countries. As such, my present considerations will be focused, more-or-less, to major urban centres in the Peruvian Amazon and the religious forms found therein, with particular attention being paid to what has been labelled as ‘urban *mestizo* shamanism’.

The term *Mestizo* is a commonly used means of identification, denoting individuals who come from a mixed (European and indigenous) ancestry. It may also

refer to a blending of indigenous and European cultural views, as is found in the major urban centres of the Amazon. While individual and cultural aspects of the term are necessarily intertwined, it is the cultural component of the term that is most germane to the present discussion.

The jungle-bound urban centres where *mestizo* culture thrives, such as Pucallpa and Iquitos in Peru, have become zones of contact; a setting where *mestizo* and western culture are exchanged. Here a veritable cottage industry of retreat centres and jungle lodges has sprung up over the past 10 years, wherein participation and training in Amazonian “shamanism” is offered to interested individuals. The vast majority of these eager tourists come equipped not with knowledge of the indigenous cultures in which they want to participate, but with expectations shaped by western constructs of shamanism. The systems of ritual practices transmitted at these retreat centres are most often characterized by the use of tobacco and other psychoactive plants, most notably the brew *ayahuasca*. As will be detailed herein, such *ayahuasca* retreats are generally attended on the basis of monetary payment and are largely frequented by Westerners.

While many individuals may claim to have greatly benefited from their experiences drinking *ayahuasca*, there are aspects of the *ayahuasca* tourism industry in which they participate that can be viewed as problematic: they drink a traditional indigenous brew in a setting largely contrived and divorced from its original context. Often those presiding over these ceremonies have not undergone the training traditionally required in order to administer *ayahuasca*. As well, knowledge pertaining to its traditional use may not be provided to *ayahuasca* tourists, or if it is, may be delivered by non-indigenous practitioners with little regard for indigenous traditions of *ayahuasca*

usage. Of particular concern here is the appropriation of indigenous culture for the purpose of monetary profit, a formula that has its antecedents in the region's history of colonialism. While some tourists may have a genuine desire to learn about the religious lives of indigenous Amazonians, many are looking for little more than an encounter with the 'exotic', an image reflected in the neo-colonial gaze.

### ***Mestizo Vegetalismo and the Use of Ayahuasca***

Prior to European incursion into the Amazon, trade among the region's different ethnic groups occurred via the river systems that streak through the region carrying water from the Andes mountain range to the Pacific Ocean. Religious ideas and practices no doubt accompanied the exchange of plants and other goods that were historically transported via canoe along these rivers. These processes of cultural exchange that occurred in tandem with trade were hastened with the arrival of Europeans. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries, for example, European missionary work in the Amazon, led by both Franciscans and Jesuits, resulted in the consolidation of ethnic groups through the establishment of larger villages, called *reducciones*. Essentially missions, *reducciones* were setup at various points along the shores of prominent rivers in order proselytize (Taylor, 1996). They existed alongside jungle outposts called *ecomienzas*, which were financed by wealthy colonialists who hoped to fortify the frontier and establish relations with different indigenous groups sometimes through trade, but also by force.

Further consolidations of ethnic groups occurred during the rubber boom (1880-1914). Raiding parties, led by *Caucheros* (rubber barons) forced indigenous peoples from their local villages, herding them into labour camps which functioned as a system of

indebted peonage. All too often, the failure of indigenous workers to meet the required quotas of rubber was met with unspeakable brutality at the hands of the *caucheros*.<sup>8</sup>

In the current era, urbanization reforms enacted in Lima by the Peruvian government have sought to concentrate indigenous populations in urban centres. This has served as a means of integrating local indigenous populations into the system of the Peruvian economy. In addition, this move attempts to anaesthetize opposition to increasing natural resource extraction and the environmental degradation that is wrought as its consequence. Increased industrial development in Amazonia, whether by national, or foreign companies, is frequently met with opposition from those indigenous communities whose rivers systems and forests are polluted as a result. Indigenous discontent is often met with hostility as the interests of foreign and national corporations have taken precedence over the concerns of indigenous communities. The journalist Arno Kopecky has documented such a case in his book *Devil's Curve, The: A Journey into Power and Profit at the Amazon's Edge*, in which he investigates the apparent murder of Ajawun protestors blockading a major highway by the Peruvian military in 2009 (Kopecky, 2012).

The forced migrations common throughout Amazonia's colonial and neo-colonial history have been aimed at both facilitating the functioning of an economy predicated upon western interests, as well as maintaining the colonial (now capitalist) frontier (Taylor, 1996). In addition to shaping the region's economic structures, Western involvement in the Amazon has influenced the socio-cultural systems of indigenous

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<sup>8</sup> See Taussig (1986), for an in-depth examination of how the project of colonialism opened "a space of death" in South America and imparted an ethos of terror upon its indigenous populations. Interestingly Taussig states that the phenomenon of shamanic healing "like the culture of terror, also develops its force from the colonially generated wildness of the epistemic murk of the space of death" (127).

peoples. In short, colonial incursion into the Amazonian foray has precipitated the imposition of a western worldview on Amazonian indigenous peoples. Not only has this resulted in elements of western culture, such as in the case of Catholicism, becoming gradually incorporated into indigenous worldviews, but it has also led to increased consolidation of, and cross-cultural exchange between, the ethnic groups indigenous to the region. The outcome of this process has been the creation of a highly syncretic urban religious milieu that is characterized by elements of folk Catholicism and indigenous religious systems.

*Mestizo* culture, with its Catholic influences and indigenous cosmo-vision, exemplifies this blending of traditions. Of importance within this hybrid religio-cultural system is the role played by the *Curandero* (healer) who administers remedies for various ailments, the causes of which often lay in the realm of what may be referred to as “cultural bound” illnesses. The practice of *curanderismo* is undertaken by a variety of different practitioners, including *vegetalistas*, *oracionistas* and *espiritistas* (Chaumeil, 1992: 104). Healing prayer and the practices of spiritism<sup>9</sup> are respectively the domains of the *oracionista* and *espiritista*. While these two categories represent systems of folk healing present in the Amazon region, they fall outside of the bounds of what is considered shamanism.

It is the *vegetalista*, the expert in plant-based healing, which most concerns us, as it is most reflective of the “shamanic” aspects of the *mestizo* religious sphere. The term is used autochthonously to denote an individual who has gained their knowledge directly from plant spirits, which, according to Chaumeil, are quite close in form to indigenous

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<sup>9</sup> Spiritism, also known as Kardecism, enshrines the belief that the spirit survives the death of its body and can be communicated with by the living. It is especially prevalent in Brazil. See: Engler (2012).

‘shamans’ (104). There are many subsequent classifications of *vegetalistas*,<sup>10</sup> with the *ayahuascono* - one who specialises specifically in *ayahuasca* - representing the least prestigious classification as their knowledge relates to only one variety of plant. To understand the use of the psychotropic plant brew *ayahuasca* in the context of the Amazon, as well as its burgeoning popularity amongst westerners, a brief ethnographic summary of its usage among the *mestizo* populations of the Peruvian Amazon is necessary.

The contemporary use of *ayahuasca* by the peoples of the Amazon for purposes of healing, divination and communication with spirits, or other-than-human entities, is a phenomenon not presently isolated to any one particular community, or geographic locality. As a specific form of religio-cultural praxis, *ayahuasca* use is diffused across thousands of kilometres of rainforest, and numerous distinct cultures and communities. While I do not intend to diminish the distinctive nature of indigenous religions or the individualistic character of *mestizo* religious practices, this section will present a ‘composite sketch’ of such practices as found in Peruvian *mestizo* culture. Such an approach, while lacking the intimate knowledge conveyed through individually focused ethnographies, helps to express the breadth and diversity of religious beliefs and practices present in the religious milieu found in the urban centres of the Peruvian Amazon.

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<sup>10</sup> In fact, as stated by Beyer, there are numerous specializations that exist in relation to *ayahuasca* shamanism. These take the forms of *paleros* (those who are expert in the uses of trees), *sanangueros* (specialists in the grouping of plants referred to as the sanangos) and *perfumeros* (those that utilize various fragrances) (2009: 192). While these categories may indeed overlap, they are all different forms of *vegetalismo*. The *paleros* are often regarded as the most powerful of *vegetalistas*.

As mentioned, the ritual use of *ayahuasca* is not isolated to the various indigenous groups that reside in the rural expanses of the Amazon jungle.<sup>11</sup> A central component of the systems of diagnosis and treatment that are employed by *mestizo vegetalistas* is the use of *ayahuasca*. Marlene Dobkin de Rios (1972), Luis Eduardo Luna (1986; and, 2011) and Steven Beyer (2009) have published studies that illuminate the tradition of *ayahuasca* usage by *mestizo* populations of the Upper Amazon. The studies completed by these noted scholars have been groundbreaking, providing a needed degree of coherency and clarity to the academic study of *mestizo* religions and their use of *ayahuasca*. Further, these studies have had the affect of bringing the previously obscure topic of *ayahuasca*, into popular culture.

The recently published book, *Signing to the Plants: Mestizo Shamanism in the Upper Amazon* (2009)<sup>12</sup>, by Stephen Beyer, presents a particularly excellent consolidation and expansion of material pertaining to the use of *ayahuasca* by *mestizo* populations. Its strength is in the detailed information it provides regarding the dynamics of *ayahuasca* ceremonies, the specifics of *mestizo* healing techniques, as well as its insights into the lives of contemporary indigenous and *mestizo* healers. This is exemplified by one particular quote Beyer includes from a Shipibo shaman, Guillermo Arevalo, who states: “Right now in the Amazon, we can’t say there’s any pure tradition. It’s mixed. Even the indigenous are fusing together different cultural traditions. This is not a bad thing, it’s natural. When it comes out of positive intentions, its good.” (281). Not only does this quote highlight the processes through which culture is negotiated, but

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<sup>11</sup> See Fotiou (2010: 10 – 11) for an extensive listing of ethnographic material related to the use of *ayahuasca* by indigenous groups in the greater Amazon region.

<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that, similar to Beyer, Luna, and Dobkin de Rios both use the term ‘shaman’ as a means of designating *vegetalistas* and similar *ayahuasca* specialists.



as well it alludes to the power that the complex interplay of forces mentioned above have had on creating new cultural and religious forms in the region.

Beyer's extensive study is testament to the complex nature of *mestizo vegetalismo*. It is nearly impossible to exhaustively convey the breadth and depth of knowledge that is possessed and the practices that are employed by *vegetalistas*. It is my intention, therefore, to convey information that will familiarise the reader with this topic and its study. In order to do so, I will present a short summary of the contemporary study of *mestizo* "shamanism" with particular focus on those scholars – Luna and Dobkin de Rios – who initiated a resurgence of interest in the topic. It may be of some use to begin with an explication of what exactly is denoted by *ayahuasca*.

The term *Ayahuasca*, itself, can refer both to a distinct jungle *liana* (vine), as well as the more commonly signified psychoactive brew in which the *liana* is a necessary ingredient. The brew itself is commonly produced by way of a ritual cooking process in which the vine, *banisteriopsis caapi* (*ayahuasca*), is combined with an additional plant in order to invest the brew with its visionary properties. Of these companion plants, the leaves of a small tree *psychotria viridis*, known as *chacrana*, are most often used (Schultes and Hoffman, 1992). Often additional plant constituents are combined – or substituted – within the brew during the cooking process, such as *toe* (*Datura suaveolens*), and a variant of tobacco native to the Amazon region known as *mapacho* (*Nicotiana tabacum*) to name only a select few plant admixtures<sup>13</sup>. By way of this procedure, a liquid, dark to light brown in colour, is produced which possesses a wide range of unique pharmacological attributes.

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<sup>13</sup> See Beyer (2009: 267-278) for a discussion of additional plants utilized.

The leaves of the *chacruna* plant, as is the case with many of the companion plants used in place of *chacruna*, contain high amounts of a powerful hallucinogenic substance called N, N-Dimethyltryptamine (DMT).<sup>14</sup> If ingested alone, the DMT will be broken down by the monoamine oxidase present in the gut and will have no affect; however, when combined with the *ayahuasca* vine, the tryptamines present in the *chacruna* are enhanced and rendered orally active due to the inhibiting effect upon MAO by the  $\beta$ -carboline alkaloids harmine, harmaline and tetrahydroharmine present in the *ayahuasca* vine (McKenna et al. 1983). This allows the DMT present in the *chacruna* to be absorbed into the bloodstream and become active. It is important to note that such an approach as previously undertaken in describing *ayahuasca* is what Beyer has referred to as pharmacological determinism (2009: 224) – the assumption being that it is only the active alkaloids of a psychotropic plant that have a bearing on their use. By regarding *ayahuasca*, or any other plant prominent in indigenous religious systems, only in this way, we are effectively disregarding the role of context in their use (225), and employing a “prejudiced considerations of whole plants” (224). This is the case, in relation to both their biochemistry and the importance ascribed to them in indigenous knowledge systems. The importance of avoiding this pitfall will become apparent as the importance

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<sup>14</sup> The question of terminology for such molecules is always a perennial aspect of discussion regarding psycho-active plants. The term psychedelic “mind-manifesting” has been used within western discourse to denote such substances, however, this term carries heavy cultural baggage due to its popularization by western subcultures, in particular the Hippie movement of the 1960’s. Wasson et al. (1986:30) have developed the term entheogen “God generated within” to refer to plants or substances used within a ritualistic context in order to emphasize their religious importance. In the context of indigenous cultures, my preference is for neither. Entheogen, with its inclusion of the Greek word *theo* denoting God, denotes too heavily a theological component, while Psychedelic is inappropriate for the aforementioned reason of its association with a specific North American subculture. Despite its short-comings, notably its accentuation of the psyche and insinuation of a mind/body dualism (problems also present in the construction of the term “psychedelic”), my preference in the context of discussions pertaining to biochemistry is for the term hallucinogenic, or psychoactive.

of the relationship shared between *vegetalistas* and the concept of plant teachers is developed.

This being said, the plants that are contained in *ayahuasca* can be considered to share a synergistic relationship. When consumed in this manner, they act to produce profound affects upon the human mind and body composite. Beyer has proposed a three phase model for viewing the phenomenology of the *ayahuasca* experience (229-230). In the first phase, the user experiences vivid visions, particularly of geometric designs and patterns. It is during the second phase that “what we may as well call, contact with the spirit world [occurs] often through interaction with other-than-human plant and animal spirits, sometimes through *visionary* information” (229, *italics* his). A lessening of visionary affects and physical symptoms is experienced in the third, and final, phase. The entire experience, however, is marked by varying degrees of intense alterations in perception, such as the experience of time and space, and the phenomenon of synesthesia (the blending of senses) (233). In addition, the brew exerts a powerful purgative affect on the body, with vomiting and diarrhoea being a common, and in fact a desired result. It is as well important to note that “*ayahuasca* does not affect lucidity or clarity of thought” (232). This description should serve as only an approximate detailing of the *ayahuasca* experience and not as an exhaustive explanation of its possible impact upon human consciousness.

While the origins of the *ayahuasca* brew are unclear from a historical perspective,<sup>15</sup> the *ayahuasca* preparation is prominent in the myths and worldviews of

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<sup>15</sup> Naranjo (1986) has speculated that archaeological evidence of *ayahuasca* consumption by Ecuadorian indigenous peoples can be ascertained from a small ornate cup currently housed in a Quito museum, which is dated to approximately 2600 B.C.E.. Beyer counters this claim in a 2012 blog entry titled “On the Origins of *Ayahuasca*” suggesting that its origins lay in the Jesuit *reducciones* of the more recent past.

those who utilize it in a ritualized manner (see Luna, 2011: 4-8, for examples). The term *ayahuasca*, meaning ‘vine of souls / the dead’, is drawn from the Quechua language. It is also known in local indigenous contexts by many different names – such as *yage* and *caapi* – the latter term being that from which its botanical title is derived. For my purposes I will continue to use the term *ayahuasca*, which is the name most commonly employed in the Peruvian context.

The *ayahuasca* vine was first botanically identified by the British Naturalist Richard Spruce (1817-1893) during his expedition up the Amazon River between 1849 and 1864 (Spruce, 1908). Well after the first wave of colonialism had occurred in South America, enterprising naturalists such as Spruce began to investigate first-hand the lives and landscapes of South America’s indigenous peoples. His published tales intrigued the imaginations of westerners – motivating some to undertake similar explorations fraught with the unfamiliar and seemingly dangerous. The pioneer of ethnobotany, Richard Evans Schultes (1915-2001), was one such individual. Spending much of his life exploring the vast Amazon region, Schultes documented indigenous Amazonian cultures. Schultes, who was deeply inspired by Spruce’s expedition (Davis, 1996), was particularly interested in the role that plants played in the cultural lives of the indigenous peoples he encountered. During his time working in the Amazon, Schultes took interest in indigenous uses of *ayahuasca*, compiling detailed notes on its component ingredients, and securing specimens for chemical analysis (Davis, 1996).

*Ayahuasca* has been a topic of interest among scholars of “shamanism” for a relatively short period of time. Prior to its induction into the field of shamanism studies, *ayahuasca*, obviously well known to the Amazon’s indigenous peoples, was an obscure

term outside of the Amazon region. Used within an indigenous Amazonian religious context, the psycho-physiological effects of *ayahuasca* are imbued with meaning, representing a gateway to an unseen spirit world. According to the anthropologist Luis Eduardo Luna, the main function of the ritual use of *ayahuasca* is to “enter into contact with the unseen side of reality” (2011: 9). Traditionally, within indigenous, non-*mestizo* ethnic groups, this is done in order to gain information and form relationships with helping spirits (2011:10), perhaps better termed ‘other-than-human entities’. The information sought from the entities of this otherwise unseen side of reality may pertain to preparing for a hunt, determining the cause of sickness, or locating enemies, who may be a neighbouring tribe or another *ayahuasca* specialist. Additional uses include telepathic communication and clairvoyance, which are reportedly enabled by the ingestion of *ayahuasca*.

For *mestizo vegetalistas*, the purpose of drinking *ayahuasca* is much the same, forming a continuity with traditional non-*mestizo* uses. Luna, who conducted extensive fieldwork in the region of Iquitos during the 1980’s for his doctoral dissertation, has written extensively on the phenomenon of *vegetalismo* (1983; 1983b; 1986; 2011). He identifies the forces that led to the emergence of *vegetalismo* as the “intense biological and cultural mixture of westerners and the indigenous peoples” (2011: 14) evident in the Amazon’s recent past. His main concern, however, is not in etching out a delineation of *vegetalismo*’s development, but instead in explicating *vegetalismo* and the ritual use of *ayahuasca* that he observed. Of central importance is the relationship shared between the individual practitioner and the spirits of certain plants (*vegetales*), which are the *vegetalista*’s teachers and the source of their knowledge (1986: 14). These plants are

regarded as teachers and doctors, of which *ayahuasca* is emphasized in its ability to facilitate communication between the spirit world and the human world.

For anthropologist Marlene Dobkin de Rios (1939 - 2012), the ingestion of *ayahuasca* is tied, in particular, to the socio-economics of *mestizo* life in urban centres. In this regard her ethnographic study (1970; 1972) of *mestizo* healing practices in the setting of Belen, an impoverished district of Iquitos, provides an excellent source of information on the socio-economic dimension of urban *vegetalismo*. According to Dobkin de Rios, the *vegetalista*, (or “drug healer” in her lexicon) through their use of *ayahuasca*, works to ameliorate stress and anxiety in the lives of their patients (1972: 140). Such anxiety is related to the stresses of everyday life as experienced by *mestizos* and may relate to financial or business success, and, matters of love and domestic affairs such as speculations of spousal infidelity. Physical ailments, with the exception of easily cured and non-persistent illnesses, such as colds which can be treated bio-medically, are as well under the purview of the *vegetalista* (78).

*Mestizo* healing methods, as such, are related to the overarching philosophy of causation that is found in *mestizo* culture. In the Peruvian Amazon, the etiology, diagnosis, and treatment of illness have “very definite supernatural components” (140). In fact, as states Dobkin de Rios: “cultural beliefs about illness are of paramount importance in understanding the use to which *ayahuasca* is put” (1970: 1420). Within the animistic worldview of *Mestizos*, spirits play an active role in the lives of humans. Powerful spirits, such as the *yacumama* (the spirit of the river), can take revenge on humans for breaking cultural taboos, which can result in sickness (1972: 79). Sorcery, or

*brujaria*, can also be the cause of sickness. It is in deed common for business competitors or jealous lovers to visit *brujos* in order to bring about a desired outcome.

In this way, many physical ailments, as well as what can be termed culture-bound illnesses such as *saladera* (consistent misfortune) are often attributed to *brujos* or other-than-human beings. As a result, they require the intervention of a *vegetalista* to identify the affliction's cause and cure. This process often requires that both the *vegetalista* and the patient (if deemed appropriate) ingest *ayahuasca* in a ritual setting, the character of which is informed by the *vegetalista*'s specific healing methodology. The visions received through this ceremonial administration of *ayahuasca* are then interpreted by the *vegetalista* in order to indicate "the personal or spiritual force responsible for illness" (140). In this way the use of *ayahuasca* is predominately revelatory in nature (1970: 1420) and relates directly to the socio-cultural sphere of *mestizo* life.

The *vegetalista* is socially empowered by their use of *ayahuasca* in this ritual setting, thus "entering into the realm of tenuous, uneasy interpersonal relations and acting as a restorer of equilibrium in difficult situations" (1972: 140). The importance of social relations emphasized by Dobkin de Rios in her analysis is valid, and moreover brings attention to a socio-economic dimension of *ayahuasca* usage that is too often ignored in favour of attentiveness towards its ritual components and the distinctive alterations in individual consciousness that its ingestion elicits.

Nonetheless, Dobkin de Rios has been criticised by Luna for what he sees as "serious gaps" (1986: 20) in her work such as her omission of information relevant to the study of shamanism and ethnobotany. For Luna, these 'gaps' pertain specifically to the acquisition of knowledge and power, as well as, the *vegetalista*'s methodologies for

healing. A particularly important example of such an oversight in Dobkin de Rios's work is, according to Luna, her failure to sufficiently stress the "pervasive role of magical chants or *icaros*, not only in *ayahuasca* sessions, but in all aspects of shamanic practice" (20). Indeed, Dobkin de Rios's ethnography severely glosses over the role of *icaros* in *vegetalismo*, stating only that they act as a means of assuring the patient that "no harm will befall him [*sic*]" (Dobkin de Rios, 1972: 130). A corollary of this is that Dobkin de Rios falls short in considering the important role played by spirits in a *vegetalista's* healing methodologies and religious practices sufficiently.

In two articles published in 1983 and 1984, which foreshadow his dissertation, Luna presents a series of ethnographic sketches of the *vegetalista* informants with whom he worked. In these, he describes the manner in which *vegetalistas* acquire their knowledge from plants. Towards this end, his informants all assign the utmost importance to conducting *dietas*: extended periods during which the *vegetalista*, or initiate, abstains from alcohol, sex, as well as, foods containing salt, sugar, oil, and spices. Additionally, the *vegetalista* often undergoes their *dieta* isolated in the jungle. When a *vegetalista* is learning from the plants their *dieta* can last for months or several years. In the case of healing specific illnesses, however, the *dieta* may last for a period of only several days, with the *dieta* being started before ingesting *ayahuasca* and lasting until the healing sessions are concluded (1984: 144). During a *dieta*, specific plants, those termed *vegetales*, will be consumed alongside or as part of a specific *ayahuasca* brew, in order that they should "teach medicine" (1984: 140) to the *vegetalista*. In this way the *vegetalista* works to form a relationship with those specific plants that are consumed, in such a way as that the plants themselves are regarded as other-than-human entities.



Through the diet, “the plants reveal themselves ... either in visions or in dreams” (144), showing the *vegetalista* “how to diagnose illness, what plants to use and how, the proper use of tobacco smoke, how to suck out the illness or restore the spirit of the patient [and], how to defend [themselves against attack by other *vegetalistas*]” (141). In the system of healing employed by *vegetalistas*, the concept of plants as teachers, is paramount.

A *Vegetalista*’s power is often expressed in terms of the number and duration of *dietas* they have completed. Another measurement used to convey power, is the number of *icaros* that a *vegetalista* possess. *Icaros* can be thought of loosely as medicine songs. They are taught to the *vegetalista* by those other-than-humans, popularly termed spirits, with whom a *vegetalista* has formed a relationship. This is especially the case with those plants, or *vegetales*, that have been included in the *vegetalista*’s *dietas*. As well, *icaros* can be transmitted to a *vegetalista* by a human teacher during a period of apprenticeship for use in different circumstances or to achieve specific purposes. *Icaros*, as such, allow the *vegetalista* to perform certain tasks such as “curing specific diseases, reinforcing the action of medicinal plants, calling special guardian spirits to assist him [*sic*] ... [and] increasing or decreasing the strength of hallucinations [visions]” (1983: 46). *Icaros* are typically sung during *ayahuasca* ceremonies,<sup>16</sup> and are often accompanied by whistling and the use of a leaf rattle called a *shacapa*. This not only provides a distinctive sort of musical accompaniment to the *mestizo* ritual ingestion of *ayahuasca*, but also is an integral component of the *vegetalista*’s ritual methodology. In this ritual context, the *shacapa* itself assumes healing properties, through its use being able to alternatively extricate illness, solidify the body against attacks by *brujos*, and bring on visions during

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<sup>16</sup> They may as well be sung outside of the context of an *ayahuasca* ceremony for specific purposes, such as healing or preparing medicinal plants.

*ayahuasca* rituals (Beyer, 2009: 77). This is but a short description of the ritual tools utilized by *vegetalistas*.

In terms of the methodologies for healing employed within *vegetalismo*, the use of a magical phlegm, called *yachay* or *mariri*, is particularly noteworthy (Luna, 1986). It is a substance given to a *vegetalista* by his/her spirit allies and is used to suck out illness from the body of a patient that has resulted from a spiritual intrusion. As such it is a tool for healing, though it can as well be used to cause harm in such cases where a *vegetalista* may act to inflict such an intrusion upon somebody. *Virotes*, or magical darts, are the mechanism through which this occurs and are often linked to instances of *brujaria*. Harner (1973) has detailed accounts of the use and treatment of *virotes* in the context of the Shuar people of Ecuador. That it is a phenomenon present within *vegetalismo* is evidence of its continuity with traditional indigenous practice. The use of this phlegm is part of a broader healing methodology that is characterized by various practices. These include a technique known as *chupar*, sucking various impediments, such as *virotes*, out of the body, as well as blowing air or tobacco smoke over the body, known as *soplar* (Beyer, 2009: 181). Taken together with the use of *icaros* and the *shacapa* these practices form what can be seen as the central performative aspects of *mestizo ayahuasca* rituals.

Much more could be said about *vegetalismo* and the place of *ayahuasca* ritual consumption within this dynamic and multi-faceted tradition. At present, however, it is necessary to leave the topic of *vegetalismo*, insofar as I will now proceed to the topics of shamanic tourism in Peru and the neo-shamanic interest in *ayahuasca* which has precipitated it.

## **The Phenomenon of *Ayahuasca* Tourism**

*Ayahuasca*, it has been shown, occupies a position of importance within *Mestizo* healing practices and culture. At this stage I will turn to what is my primary concern: *ayahuasca* tourism and the topic of neo-shamanism. With its continued study by academics, the topic of *ayahuasca*, much like the topic of shamanism with which it is associated, continues to be a subject of interest for neo-shamanic practitioners. This interest has also given rise to a phenomenon of *ayahuasca* tourism, as individuals eager to induct themselves into the world of *ayahuasca* have increasingly undertaken travel to the Amazon.

Luna has commented on the upsurge of popularity in *ayahuasca* by westerners. Upon arriving in Iquitos for a speaking engagement following a lengthy hiatus from the region, he states that he was “nearly shocked to see buses full of people from all around the world going to participate in [*ayahuasca*] ceremonies” (2011: 18). This was hardly the case when he had conducted his fieldwork in the region twenty-five years prior.

Iquitos it seems has become a pilgrimage site – of sorts – for those called to, or just curious about, *ayahuasca*. While the ingredients of the brew are commonly available for purchase over the Internet even though one of its active chemical constituents, DMT, is a scheduled substance in Canada, each year thousands of people make the journey by plane or boat to remote locations in the Peruvian Amazon in order to imbibe of the Amazonian brew and immerse themselves in its accompanying traditions. This has resulted in a thriving, though unregulated, industry composed of lodges, camps and retreats centres with names such as “Anaconda Cosmica” and “Blue Morpho”. While some camps are operated by indigenous or *mestizo* Peruvians, many others are under the

purview of westerners who have made investments in their construction. It is, however, impossible to generalize and paint all such centres with the same broad brush; their operations, methodologies and motivations are highly idiosyncratic. There are indeed many such tours that are currently being offered.

A typical *ayahuasca* tour package may cost several thousand dollars and will include a one to two week all-inclusive stay at a camp<sup>17</sup> usually situated in the jungle, as well as participation in three to five *ayahuasca* ceremonies with a particular indigenous or *mestizo* practitioner. While some tours may offer their participants little more than lodging and participation in *ayahuasca* ceremonies, others offer more comprehensive programs in eclectic new age and/or *vegetalismo* healing methodologies. The existence of such *ayahuasca* tour packages does not preclude the possibility that an experienced traveller may undertake their own investigation into the world of *ayahuasca*, independently seeking out *vegetalistas* without mediation by the brokers of pre-packaged tours. For the *ayahuasca* neophyte, however, the organized tour is an easy point of entry into what would be an unfamiliar, and possibly intimidating, geographic locale. In what follows I will provide two examples that will demonstrate the range of possible incarnations such tours may take.

Often *ayahuasca* tours are promoted on the Internet, complete with English websites designed to attract western interest. Holman (2011) has documented how the promotional website of one *ayahuasca* lodge, “Blue Morpho” utilizes a combination of Corporate, New Age, and exotic discourses in their attempt to appeal to western

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<sup>17</sup> That these packages are all inclusive may raise suspicions or criticism, though, in light of the remote locations at which lodges may be situated, such ‘pampering treatment’ may best be thought of as necessity. In addition, as Fotiou has stated Peru exists in a capitalist economy and as such the issue of payment does not necessarily in itself compromise authenticity (139).

audiences. While Holman found information pertaining to what one could expect from the *ayahuasca* experience, conspicuously little was included pertaining to indigenous traditions let alone indigenous peoples. According to Holman, *ayahuasca* tourism can be viewed as a form of post-modern tourism, “wherein the discourses of consumerism and individualism are coupled with a quest for the authentic, ethnic Other, situated in the current stage of economic and cultural globalization” (106). The *Ayahuasca* ‘experience’ as seen from this perspective thus becomes a commodity to be bought and sold in the spiritual marketplace.

Holman’s study, conducted in 2009, cites a mere seventeen websites devoted to *ayahuasca* tourism in the region of Peru. Today a simple Internet search yields upwards of hundreds of websites related to *ayahuasca* tours. Certainly many of these are devoted to testimonials or commentary, though it is not difficult to identify those that offer retreats and tours. The website of the “*Ayahuasca* Foundation,”<sup>18</sup> operated by a Westerner, takes a much different approach to advertising their *ayahuasca* tours. Their website places a great deal of emphasis on the biographies of the *vegetalistas* and *curanderos* that the Foundation works with. The exotic and New Age discourses prominent in the example of “Blue Morpho” are less pronounced. Instead, interactions with *mestizo* and indigenous healers are framed as opportunities for education. Additionally, great care is seemingly taken to display how the Foundation, a non-profit organization registered in Peru, is contributing to the indigenous communities in which they operate. As stated earlier, this is but one example drawn from a multitude of various websites that are in operation. The presence of such a vast network of information related

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.ayahuascaassociation.org>

to *ayahuasca* tours serves to not only feed curiosity about *ayahuasca* and increase potential demand for *ayahuasca* tours, but also to reify the particular representations they present.

Increased interest about *ayahuasca* by North Americans and Europeans has been assisted by the increased information flows and ease of international travel that have resulted from globalization. In his examination of the increasing usage of *ayahuasca* that is occurring outside of its traditional indigenous context, Tupper implicates communication and transportation technologies as being particularly important drivers (123) in the growth of what he refers to as cross-cultural *vegetalismo*. As one category of a three-fold typology of non-indigenous *ayahuasca* usage developed by Tupper, his discussion of the philosophical and ethical issues surrounding cross-cultural *vegetalismo* is most salient. For Tupper, *ayahuasca* usage that falls into this category is characterized by “indigenous-style *ayahuasca* healing ceremonies conducted in an often overtly commodified way for clients both in the Amazon and abroad” (119). Central to Tupper’s exploration are topics such as authenticity, cultural appropriation and bio-piracy. He concludes by speculating that *ayahuasca* itself may have a certain degree of agency in determining its future as an increasingly transnational phenomenon (131). Such a conjecture is not absent from the field of *ayahuasca* research, where seemingly human characteristics such as motivation and personality are ascribed to the spirits of plants, and as well to plants themselves. While this may seem bizarre from a western perspective, such speculation in fact honours indigenous epistemologies which do attribute agency to other-than-human entities. Such a move is commendable in that it genuinely incorporates

the views of indigenous and *mestizo vegetalists* into a discourse that threatens to be over-run by scientific positivism and sociological analysis.

While Tupper can be seen to avoid issuing a definitive judgment against *ayahuasca* tourism, other scholars have been less hesitant. In *A Hallucinogenic, Tea Laced with Controversy* (2008) Roger Rumrill<sup>19</sup> and Marlene Dobkin de Rios forward a highly critical sociological view of *ayahuasca* tourism and neo-shamanism, labelling it “drug tourism”. For these authors *ayahuasca* tourism represents “a dark side of globalization” (69), where the merchandising and commercialization of spiritual states of consciousness” (72) runs rampant. It has resulted in a situation where urban tourists “on a never-ending search for self-actualization and growth” (72) are given powerful psychedelic drugs by untrained charlatans, masquerading as shamans, without regard for their health and safety.

Often additional psychotropic plants such as *toe* are added to the *ayahuasca* brew with the intention of ensuring that tourists are satisfied with the visionary experiences they anticipate receiving (72). Such careless use of powerful psychotropic substances can have negative consequences, particularly if sufficient care is not taken in screening patients for pre-existing mental illnesses, or potential interaction with prescribed medications. For Dobkin de Rios and Rumrill, “the westerner is not involved in a native ritual of spiritual dimensions, as she has been led to expect, but is rather in a staged drama to turn her on and remove her cash” (85). It is in light of these criticisms that the authors have offered an over-whelming negative appraisal of *ayahuasca* tourism.

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<sup>19</sup> Rumrill, a native to the city of Iquitos, has worked extensively in the region as a journalist. He was a previous director of the Center for Indigenous Cultures of Peru, and is advisor to the Peruvian Congress on the issue of drugs in the Amazon.

In a section of their book titled, “The Anthropologist and Drug Tourism: Mea Culpa,” Dobkin de Rios and Rumrill draw attention to the manner in which ethnography, especially that pertaining to ‘exotic’ topics such as the use of hallucinogenic plants, may negatively impact the communities and cultures they consider. It may not be the intention of the academic that their presentations, articles and books find an audience in the “general drug seeking public” (78). By documenting the indigenous use of hallucinogenic plants anthropologists have contributed in a very real way to the popularization of *ayahuasca* tourism. The work of Dobkin de Rios among the *mestizo* populations of Iquitos, Peru and their use of *ayahuasca* in healing ceremonies (1972) is therefore implicated. For Dobkin de Rios and Rumrill this has had negative implications for both *ayahuasca* tourists and local Amazonians.

Although often seeming simplistic and overly cynical in their commentary, Dobkin de Rios and Rumrill do offer pertinent points concerning issues of public health in the *ayahuasca* tourism industry, as well as concern over how the impact of tourism is altering the tradition of *vegetalismo* more generally. However, to say that “there is little hope for dialogue between the drug tourists and the Amazonians whose tradition of *ayahuasca* use ... has little to do with the experiences and needs of people in industrialized societies” (71) in many ways predetermines the outcome. The issue of *ayahuasca* tourism is indeed complex and many-sided. What I suggest, moreover, is that continued dialogue between scholars in this field is paramount. I would contend that the “black and white” moralizing sentiments of Rios and Rumrill do not so easily correlate to such a “black and white” reality. Furthermore, it negates the possibility of addressing their concerns in a constructive manner. That *ayahuasca* tourism will continue is a more



than probable scenario, and, as such, any engagement with the topic must address the situation in a constructive manner. In this regard, Tupper's approach of exploring the ethical and philosophical dimensions of *ayahuasca* tourism is a template to be emulated.

Additional ethnographic work in the context of *ayahuasca* tourism can only help to further elucidate this phenomenon. Towards this end, Fotiou (2010) has conducted excellent work in the city of Iquitos. Her work on the topic of *ayahuasca* tourism problematizes Dobkin de Rios and Rumrill's condemnation of it, and presents her thoughtful analysis as "a study in contradiction, ambiguity and the liminal or transitional space between 'worlds', whether it be the Western and Amazonian worlds or conventional reality and the realm of spirits" (3). For the *ayahuasca* tourist, this entails a passage between "geographical, cultural [spaces] and even between realities ... [which] often stimulates self-discovery and self-reflection for the subject" (3). In this way the *ayahuasca* tourist experience is presented as being transformative, existing in "an intercultural space where westerners and locals engage in dialogue" (4). As Fotiou states, "the tourists' motives are far from naïve and there is a level of eclectic and often self-conscious selection of elements from native spirituality and combined with elements from other spiritual traditions, they create a unique and dynamic discourse" (241). This is a very different view than that posited by Dobkin de Rios and Rumrill, who characterize *ayahuasca* tourists as naïve drug-seekers who distort the culture and traditions of *mestizo vegetalistas*, by imposing on them their own expectations.

This being said, it is not strictly *ayahuasca* tourism, but more specifically the neo-shamanic aspects of *ayahuasca* tourism that are my principle concern. While *ayahuasca* tourists to a certain degree are participating in a neo-shamanic activity, many are merely

travellers seeking an exotic experience with only a minimal or passing interest in *vegetalismo*. To characterise all westerners who drink *ayahuasca* in such a flippant manner as do Dobkin de Rios and Rumrill, in effect dismisses the many neo-shamanists whose interest in *vegetalismo* may lead them to under-take genuine inquiries into the religious lives of *vegetalistas*. It is important here to make a distinction between *ayahuasca* tourists who may travel to the Amazon to drink *ayahuasca* in order to quench an ephemeral curiosity, and those neo-shamanists who undertake visits in order to continue working with specific *vegetalistas* as part of an apprenticeship. While many of the criticisms raised by Dobkin de Rios and Rumrill may still be applicable in both such cases, their approach in defining this population is far too general as to accurately capture all instances where westerners participate in *ayahuasca* ceremonies. In addition, their extreme position vis-à-vis the new-shamans overshadows the existence of *vegetalistas* who, working independently from westernized *ayahuasca* tourism lodges, may cater to westerners seeking healing or knowledge. In this regard, Dobkin de Rios and Rumrill fail to identify the possibility that certain *ayahuasca* tourists and *vegetalistas* may nonetheless take seriously apprenticeships and similar transmissions of knowledge. While money may still change hands, it is the motivations of the involved parties that act as the distinguishing characteristic. In the context of neo-shamanism studies, it is vital to make a distinction between the tourist seeking an experience with *ayahuasca* for the sake of curiosity and, what we may call, the neo-shamanic traveller who has invested time in learning about the use of *ayahuasca* in its cultural context.

As mentioned in the introduction, I have myself travelled to Iquitos and its surrounding region in order to make first-hand observations of this phenomenon. What I

encountered was a hodgepodge of unconnected individuals – indigenous, *mestizo* and western – running an assortment of differently organized tours. In some cases, the tour's *raison d'être* was quite obviously to deliver to the tourist the typical *ayahuasca* experience. *Ayahuasceros* were brought into the lodge only to preside over a ceremony, paid minimally and then sent away. In contrast, the focus of other groups was radically different, with many being hosted at the camps of *vegetalistas* themselves. Here, the purpose of such groups was not strictly to imbibe *ayahuasca*, but to learn the systems of knowledge that encompass *ayahuasca* usage from *vegetalistas* themselves.

While I am not proposing that my reports possess the authority of proper ethnography, I would contend that they at least suggest that the phenomenon of *ayahuasca* tourism can be viewed in terms of constituting a range of forms. In this regard, the context within which *ayahuasca* ceremonies occur can differ tremendously. My assertion is that itinerant *ayahuasca* tourism represents one pole of this spectrum and instances of actual neo-shamanic transmission are found at the opposite end. Constituting a middle ground between these two points would be the tourist who seeks out *ayahuasca* for the purposes of physical, emotional and spiritual healing and personal transformation. These categories are not absolute and may overlap, especially in cases where the tourist's contact with *vegetalistas* is lengthy.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Fatiou has preferred the term 'shamanic tourism' over *ayahuasca* or 'drug tourism,' stating that it denotes the milieu of Iquitos where "shamanism is reinvented as local shamanic practices with Western ideas of spirituality and healing and create a hybrid and highly dynamic practice" (2). Her motivation in this follows from the findings of her fieldwork which offer a positive prospective on neo-shamanic *ayahuasca* culture, but as well from the perceived need to offer an alternative term than that proposed by de Rios and Rumrill. I largely agree with Fatiou in this regard, though I do believe the term neo-shamanic tourist would be more appropriate as it would acknowledge the constructed character of the shamanic concept. Thus far, my own preference has been to utilize the label *ayahuasca* tourist, which I have taken to refer, in an undifferentiated fashion, to any westerner tourist who engages in the use of *ayahuasca*. This term will be further refined in the final chapter.

While much research has been focused on the use of *ayahuasca* by westerners for the purposes of healing and transformation, minimal attention has been paid exclusively to those neo-shamanic practitioners who endeavour to become properly initiated in the tradition. Of specific interest here is the manner in which knowledge is transferred between *vegetalista* and neo-shamanist, as well as through the relationship that the neo-shamanic practitioner forms with various plant teachers – *vegetales*. Equally as important, is the way in which that knowledge is made meaningful by the neo-shamanist and mediated vis-à-vis their own cultural perspective and the representations of the shamanic that accompany it. In particular, it is a study of *how* the content of these representations, the ‘substance’ of shamanism, is mediated that is most significant for the study of neo-shamanism. At the core of this line of thinking are questions pertaining to how the *ayahuasca* experience and the role of the *vegetalista* are interpreted by the neo-shamanist. This act of interpretation always takes place within a particular context which is shaped by a combination of an individual’s prior experiences, as well as the preconceived notions that an individual possesses regarding the subject matter. While ethnography can be constructive in describing the setting and subject of interpretation, i.e. the *ayahuasca* tourism industry and *vegetalismo*, it often fails to provide a sufficient disclosure of the preconceptions that are in operation, especially as they relate to the concept of the ‘shamanic’. One reason for this may be that the concept of the shaman is so pervasive in academic discourse that it is deployed without adequate consideration of what it signifies or does not signify. This serves only to unquestioningly reify the presuppositions underlying the concept of shamanism such as those that were uncovered in the first chapter. In order to discern what preconceived notions of the shamanic shape

the neo-shamanic *ayahuasca* experience, it is necessary to examine their production and reproduction.

The topic of *ayahuasca* has gradually begun to seep into popular western culture. Beyer (2012) has documented this, noting several instances where *ayahuasca* ceremonies figure prominently in episodes of television sitcoms such as *Weeds* and *Nip/Tuck* (2). This phenomenon is unsurprising given the interest in psychoactive plants and their use by indigenous peoples that has been growing steadily since the 1960's. While this fascination with powerful mind-altering substances continues to reproduce certain notions of Amazonian indigenous spirituality and the use of *ayahuasca* within western culture, they are often overly simplified and represent a poor facsimile of the phenomenon in question.

That the topic of *ayahuasca* 'shamanism' is treated within popular culture does serve to indicate its active presence within the western cultural imagination. Overall, however, investigation into these representations offers little insight into how an individual, already familiar with *ayahuasca* 'shamanism', may envisage the topic. In order to identify how *ayahuasca* and the concept of shamanism are represented within neo-shamanic culture and by neo-shamanic practitioners more specifically, it is necessary to identify a source of data, which deals primarily with the topic. Contemporary neo-shamanic literature fills this caveat and can serve as a productive field of inquiry for the task of better understanding how the topic of *ayahuasca* is represented in neo-shamanic culture.

## ***Ayahuasca* Literature and Neo-shamanism**

As one of the primary ways in which neo-shamanic knowledge is reproduced is through its literary culture, a short examination of past texts will yield insight into the form and function of more recently published popular accounts such as those that are my current focus. Such books in contemporary print culture commonly take a number of distinct forms. These include manuals outlining shamanic techniques, quasi-academic publications investigating shamanic subject matter, as well as narrative based tales of apprenticeships with shamans.<sup>21</sup> The emergence of popular literature explicitly promoting an ‘insider’ neo-shamanic perspective has been a fairly recent phenomenon. Prior to this wave of popular literature – with the publication of Harner’s *The Way of the Shaman* in 1980, standing out as a notable example – those in search of knowledge pertaining to ‘shamanism’ were left to consult scholarly literature. Many allegedly experientially-based academic publications were popularized in the media and within various sub-cultures, such as Castaneda’s *The Teachings of Don Juan*, which was published in 1968 as purportedly true ethnography.

Neo-shamanic literature is much the same in the context of neo-shamanic practice centred upon on *vegetalismo* and the use of *ayahuasca*. There are several popular texts that have been especially influential within neo-shamanic *ayahuasca* culture. Included in this category are *The Yaje Letters* (1963) by William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg and

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<sup>21</sup> At the fringes of this print culture are those books that may be loosely termed as New Age. These incorporate neo/shamanic themes into alternative spiritual frameworks and represent the application of a further level of interpretation to indigenous ‘shamanic’ teachings. Daniel Pinchbeck’s *2012: The Return of Quetzalcoatl* (2006) and Martin Ball’s *The Entheogenic Evolution* (2008) serve as examples of this type of literature

*True Hallucinations* (1994) by Terrence McKenna.<sup>22</sup> The burgeoning interest in *ayahuasca* among Westerners has resulted in an expansion of related neo-shamanic materials as is evidenced by the recent publication of multiple first-person narrative accounts relating the experiences of westerners who journey to the Amazon and drink *ayahuasca* with ‘shamans’ for purposes of initiation, transformation and healing. A general survey of recent popular narrative literature related to *ayahuasca* shows these patterns to be apparent in the following books: *Black Smoke: A Woman’s Journey of Healing, Wild Love and Transformation in the Amazon* (De Wys, 2009), *The Ayahuasca Diaries* (Greeff, 2009) *Fishers of Men: The Gospel of an Ayahuasca Vision Quest* (Elenbass, 2010), *Ayahuasca In My Blood: 25 Years of Medicine Dreaming* (Gorman, 2010), and *Shamans and Healers: The Untold Ayahuasca Story From A Shaman’s Apprentice* (Otsa, 2010).

As an emerging sub-genre of neo-shamanic literature, the *ayahuasca* travel narrative draws its inspiration from the tradition of literature initiated by Carlos Castaneda. Such books are always in the first-person narrative voice and share a common form. They detail extraordinary events, emphasize the primacy of subjective descriptions, and promote experiential learning in pursuit of specific goals which are not always ‘religious’. As Znamenski states, Castaneda’s books brought to life a spiritual apprenticeship genre that “lies somewhere in the middle ground between anthropology and fiction” (217). Books of this nature are ubiquitous on the shelves within the “New Age” section of bookstores, and cover a wide range of historical and cultural contexts.

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<sup>22</sup> Although McKenna, a self-styled ‘psychonaut’, was more prone to exploring the shamanic use of plants independent of tutelage from indigenous practitioners he reached an iconic status well before his death in 1999. As his books served as my first introduction to the topic of *ayahuasca*, I would be remiss not to include him.

For their readers they “stimulate the revival of imagination and the spiritual that had been so profaned in the Western world” (214), which can be seen to contribute to their current popularity.

Such works make indigenous religion, and, in particular, the concept of shamanism, accessible to individuals from a cultural domain where the opportunity to interact firsthand with shamanic practices and beliefs is a rarity. In this way they provide a literary template for such experiences to be shared by neo-shamanists with potential practitioners and the interested public. The accounts shared are similar in this regard. They present a positive narrative account of neo-shamanic experiences which invariably work to shape the imaginations of those readers attracted to it, whether this is the result of to curiosity or the need for spiritual edification.

The stimulation of the imagination, resulting from such neo-shamanic literature, is a process that occurs mediated by the particular representations of the shamanic that are described by the authors. Such representations reflect the assumptions that the author has made regarding the concept of shamanism. They are also evidence of specific ideas and/or biases in relation to the role of psychotropic plants within *mestizo* culture, as well as, in the practices of individual *vegetalistas*.

It is important to interrogate such popular narrative accounts because they will not only provide inspiration for fellow neo-shamanists to undertake a similar journey, but that they will act to solidify specific representations of the *vegetalista* within a neo-shamanic religious framework. In the following chapter I will develop a theoretical framework drawing from Paul Ricoeur’s narrative theory. This framework can aid in understanding how narrative functions to mediate the construction, and not simply, the



representations of the shamanic. It will take into account not only those representations that are found in certain author's written versions, but, also that are found in the lived experiences of neo-shamanic practitioners. Additionally, a post-colonial lens will be applied in order to discern the presuppositions at the core of representations of the shamanic operating within these accounts. This will be informed by an approach that is reticent to uncritically apply the label of neo-shamanism as a blanket term describing all instances of *ayahuasca* tourism. Instead, it seeks to differentiate the range of different forms that engagement between westerns and Peruvian *vegetalistas* may take.

Can every Western tourist that ingests *ayahuasca* in the Peruvian Amazon be considered a neo-shamanist? Many, no doubt, leave from their vacations with stories and formative memories of their experiences drinking *ayahuasca* but retain little more than a lingering interest in the spiritual traditions in which they participated. Others, however, confess a deep connection to the traditions of *vegetalismo* and their methodologies of healing, incorporating the knowledge they have gained from their meaningful experiences into their own religious worldviews. That *Iquitos* has developed its own milieu of dynamic spiritual practice, as attested by Fontiou (2010), of which neo-shamanic practice is a component, serves to complicate my earlier question.

The label of neo-shamanism in this sense becomes variable and individually situated, inviting further description. In singling out accounts authored by western individuals who have shared their experiences, it is possible to identify narratives that are representative of the topic of *ayahuasca* neo-shamanism within the broader neo-shamanic culture. The interrogation of such stories for their production of neo-shamanic concepts will demonstrate how the concept of 'narrative' functions to mediate the authors'

representations of the shamanic. The task of the next chapter will be directed towards developing a method for interpreting such stories as are represented in published neo-shamanic *ayahuasca* literature.

Neo-shamanic literature is a primary vehicle for representations of the shamanic and notions of identity within neo-shamanic culture. In the specific context of *ayahuasca* neo-shamanism, *ayahuasca* literature represents a more engaged form of *ayahuasca* encounter than that of the adventure seeking drug tourist described by Dobkin de Rios and Rumrill (2008). That this later characterization is not reflected in the narratives of popular *ayahuasca* literature is unsurprising. Such a story, while possibly being included in various venues of travel literature, would likely be viewed as displaying a cursory knowledge of the topic and not be embraced by experienced neo-shamanic practitioners.

The spirit of contemporary western engagement with the traditions of *mestizo vegetalistas*, as such, is varied, ranging from consumer transaction to apprenticeship. Of course such a dichotomy is much too simplified to hold true in all such instances. Therefore the descriptions of such engagements should not be viewed as a set of discrete categories, but as constituting the range of a spectrum composed of various positions. Regardless of the individual motivations of the western tourist, such descriptions are situated as they are within their own specific social and historical contexts. For the westerner, such contexts are informed by cultural forms of consumerism, secularism, and materialism, which predominate in the West. In addition, they are witness to a history replete with tenuous colonial and neo-colonial relations.

## Chapter Four - Constructing a Hermeneutic of Narrativity for the Interpretation of *Ayahuasca* Narratives

Religious Studies scholar, Morny Joy (2000; and, 2007) has convincingly argued that in order for Religious Studies to remain relevant in the face of growing post-colonial and post-modern criticisms, it must precede self-reflexively about its implication in a colonial past. It needs also to be aware of the stark social and economic realities experienced by marginalized peoples that resulted from colonial injustices.

It is my intention to proceed in the direction that Joy has thus indicated by applying a ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ that is informed by Enrique Dussel’s criticism of modernity with its accompanying Euro-centrism (1998; 2000; 2002; and, 2004). Following in the wake of his criticism, Dussel posits the emergence of a project of *trans-modernity*, “a ‘beyond’ that transcends Western modernity” (2002: 221). The integration of this lens into my theoretical framework is intended to bring to the fore an acknowledgement of the existence of perspectives that regard the phenomenon of *ayahuasca* neo-shamanism from various positions of ‘exteriority’ vis-à-vis modernity. As well, it will help to identify any Euro-centric distortions that may be presently being reproduced in published *ayahuasca* narrative accounts by indicating the history of colonial and neo-colonial relations embedded in their context.

These social and historical contexts undeniably influence any interaction that is shared between westerners and *vegetalistas* in proportions that are not always evident<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> Although this is the case for both parties as they are equally embedded in individual contexts and preconceptions, I do not intend to make a pronouncement about the specific individual contexts within which *vegetalistas* operate. This is a task best accomplished by listening to *vegetalistas* themselves, a process that could potentially be mediated by scholars situated in the field.

This is due to the embedded nature of the individual within their context, and the manner in which their experiences are mediated through interpretation. This is not to preclude the findings of Fotiou that many of the *ayahuasca* tourists whom she interviewed reported their experiences were highly positive, resulting in a transformation of their sense of self (2010). In the context of her fieldwork with *ayahuasca* tourists, Fotiou alludes to the operation of such a process of interpretation in how she observed her informants, whom meaningfully integrated their *ayahuasca* experiences. This influences “one’s life history in a variety of ways, and often occupies a pivotal position in it” (Fotiou: 241). By way of incorporating the insights they have gained through their work with *ayahuasca* into their worldviews, neo-shamanic tourists can often be transformed not just in terms of their identity going forward, but as well in relation to their retrospective understanding of their own personal histories.

In the context of neo-shamanic *ayahuasca* literature, we are presented with a text which represents a snapshot of the author’s individual experience, included in which is their self-understanding of that experience. While any act of reading these texts is an act of interpretation, revealing the individually situated character of the author’s narrative requires an approach that is both methodical and critical. To more fully appreciate how the authors understand neo-shamanic concepts in this regard, it is also necessary to investigate the underlying structures that are at work in their respective mediations. Following from these premises it is my intention to show that a methodical interpretation of such neo-shamanic *ayahuasca* texts can aid in understanding the dynamics involved in the construction of neo-shamanic worldviews. Here continental philosophy and, in particular, the theories pertaining to the subject of interpretation found in the field of

hermeneutics can be instructive. Of particular value will be Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of narrative and hermeneutic methodology. This will provide a model for the interpretation of neo-shamanic *ayahuasca* literature, as well as of lived neo-shamanic experiences.

### **Hermeneutics and Paul Ricoeur**

Hermeneutics is a distinct branch of continental philosophy that is primarily concerned with the interpretative dimension of human acts of knowing. The formation of the word itself points back to its origins in ancient Greek philosophy and religion, making reference to the Olympian god *Hermes* who is "associated with the function of transmuting what is beyond human understanding into a form that human intelligence can grasp" (Palmer, 1969: 12). In this way, hermeneutics represents a body of methodologies that have been historically applied to written texts as a means of discerning their meaning through interpretation. Prior to the eighteenth century hermeneutical questions such as these, that is, those pertaining to meaning and interpretation, were the domain of Christian theologians concerned with accurate, though faithful, exegesis of the Bible. A concern for proper philology and an attentiveness aimed at preserving the meaning of words in relation to the overall text, the Bible, was dominant during this period.

Hermeneutical theory took a markedly philosophical turn beginning in the early nineteenth century with the contributions made by the Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768 -1834) who is regarded as the founder of modern hermeneutics<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> Schleiermacher's approach proceeded from the assumption that "misunderstanding, not understanding, usually occurs" (Klemm, 56) in the act of interpretation. Schleiermacher proposed a procedure aimed at understanding a text through a process of applying, in equal measure, grammatical and divinatory, or what we might call psychological, methods to the analysis of a text. Divinatory here does not refer to the divine in a theological sense of the word, but to an act of divination which is aimed at intuitively guessing the author's intended meaning which can be aided by acquaintance with the author's style of writing and

While his interest in hermeneutics was likely a result of his theological studies, he famously introduced a methodical approach to discern meaning by an approach that did not rely solely on philology. Interpretation from this perspective is characterized as containing two components: a psychological or “divinatory” aspect which seeks to reconstruct the intentions of an author. He achieves this by delving “as deeply as possible into the author’s mind” (Schleiermacher, 68). In this way meaning may be discerned, or in Schleiermacher’s case “intuited”. He also accomplished this by a grammatical approach, which investigates the technical structure of a text to expose the referential meanings contained therein. Schleiermacher’s thinking on this subject would form the foundation from which subsequent scholars would engage the topic of interpretation.

Through the work of these scholars, hermeneutics developed from a method not just for the interpretation of texts, but also for the interpretation of human experience. We can trace this development through the works of Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), who sought to establish by means of hermeneutics “an epistemological foundation for the human sciences” (Thompson, 37). In doing this, Dilthey divided acts of knowing into two separate aims: understanding which forms the basis of the human sciences and explanation which is properly situated in the natural sciences.

The task of further refining and expanding these previous models of hermeneutic inquiry was taken up by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005). During his lengthy and prolific career, Ricoeur contributed extensively to the study of a range of topics including interpretation, language and most recently ethics. In a manner similar to

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*corpus* of work. As for the grammatical component of his approach, this was aimed at reading a text in such a way as that “the whole [of the text] is understood from its parts, so that the parts can be understood only from the whole” (Schleiermacher, 68). This process is iterative, forming a hermeneutic circle, as newly emergent interpretations are again applied to the text or passage in question.

Heidegger, Ricoeur has challenged the acceptance of metaphysics as primary in the western philosophical heritage. In fact much of his work can be seen as an attempt to mediate dichotomies established by metaphysics by bringing together seemingly opposed philosophical positions. Though the topics he studied were wide-ranging, a clear trajectory is apparent in Ricoeur's body of work as he cumulatively builds on the themes and topics of his previous studies. For this reason it is necessary to briefly summarize his earlier works in order to arrive at the topic of hermeneutics in relation to narrativity which is my present concern.

Following his early study of the phenomenology of the will in *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary* (1950), Ricoeur's philosophical approach began to change. According to Joy, this move was one away "from a basic Husserlian phenomenology to a more hermeneutically engaged approach in the mode of the early Heidegger" (18). In his following publications: *Finitude and Guilt, Fallible Man* (1960) and *The Symbolism of Evil* (1960), this change in Ricoeur's philosophical underpinnings is perhaps most evident in the ways that he "was no longer content to accept that human consciousness was always immediately present to itself" (Joy, 2011: 19). In this way, a purely phenomenological approach, that is, one that strictly serves to identify a phenomenon as it appears to the conscious mind, was no longer a sufficient means to describe the dynamic operation of symbols in human consciousness. What was needed was an approach that "attempts to unravel, insofar as is possible, the workings of the unconscious" (22). This introduced the need for an awareness of the presuppositions that are operative in the act of interpretation. In turning towards hermeneutics, Ricoeur also rejects the strict subject/object dichotomy that he detected in Husserl's phenomenology,

where the object of consciousness, the phenomenon at hand, appeared in a pure and transcendental form bracketed off from its material context by means of *epoche*, a technical term indicating a distancing or removal by the observing subject.

In *The Symbolism of Evil* Ricoeur deploys in contrast a method of interpretation which takes as its focus, not the grammatical or semantic meaning of symbols, but their symbolic meaning (Simms, 2003: 31). Interpreting the meaning of symbols in this fashion requires that the symbol be placed in relation to the specific meaning of the text in which they appear. This is due to the property of polysemy, or multiple meanings, which symbols exhibit, which is to say that symbols may possess multiple possible meanings depending on the context in which they occur. As a result, attention to the text in which they appear will help to clarify what they are in fact meaning in that context. In this sense proposing a symbol's meaning does not correlate to positing a 'Truth' as fact. For Ricoeur, "the truths revealed by symbolic meanings are human truths, telling us something about life as lived through human experience" (Simms, 32). Thus in positing a symbol's interpretation one is not concerned with the truth-value of the claim but more so with the appropriateness of the interpretation – that is the interpretation's validity in a specific context.

Continuing his concern for the retrieval of meaning in the interpretation of symbols, Ricoeur develops a hermeneutical theory, not just of the meaning of symbols in texts but a distinct theory of texts themselves (39). Simply interpreting symbols was no longer a satisfactory method for him. He wanted to investigate the role that language plays in discerning meaning(s) that may be attributed to a symbol. Language is the medium by means of which symbols operate, and thus a hermeneutical theory must take



account of the operation of language in discourse and text. In order to develop his textual hermeneutics as such, Ricoeur turns to an investigation of language as it operates first through the use of metaphor, and then in narrative. In describing how these elements function to convey meaning within a text, Ricoeur develops an approach that respects the fullness of language which includes numerous books and articles, including most notably: *The Rule of Metaphor* (1977) and *Time and Narrative* (1984-1988). For Ricoeur, metaphor and narrative are intriguing in their relation to meaning in that they both promote creative dynamics of meaning; metaphor in the sense of productive assimilation and narrative through the function of its plot (Simms: 81). While Ricoeur's theory of metaphor is indeed rich and insightful, it is through his later theory of narrative that Ricoeur bridges the apparent gap that exists between narrative as fiction and narrative as important for lived experience.

### **Methodological Considerations in Understanding and Explanation**

The task of unfolding meaning from a narrative, be it that of a text or one derived from lived experience, requires an act of interpretation. For the purpose of this thesis, this act of interpretation will be two-fold: first narrative theory will be applied separately to *ayahuasca* narrative accounts, while the second act of interpretation relates in a more abstract sense to the concept of neo-shamanism with which we have previously dealt. As interpretation is a hermeneutic act aimed at a sense of knowing, it is useful to briefly develop a methodological framework in order to both structure and illuminate this process. Here I will be drawing from secondary sources that explicate Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology.

Ricoeur's work on narrative theory can be seen as a contribution to his overall hermeneutical project which has sought a reconciliation of Husserl's phenomenology and Heidegger's hermeneutics<sup>25</sup>. According to Joy, it is through blending these two approaches, that Ricoeur "introduces an attempt to integrate understanding and explanation within an act of knowing" (Joy, 2004: 203). Hermeneutic phenomenology provides "a model of the interaction between explanation and understanding, where both of these aspects function as two complementary rather than exclusionary modes of knowing" (Joy: 186). As we may recall, the notion of understanding was sought as an epistemological foundation for the human sciences by Dilthey, who separated understanding from explanation which he relegated to the domain of the natural sciences. A similar form of hermeneutics was later taken up by Martin Heidegger (1889-1911), whose approach to interpretation focused on individual experiences of being in the world, and thus can be seen as a hermeneutics of ontology.

Ricoeur is thus seen to revise the oppositional relationship between understanding and explanation, by incorporating them into a single act of knowing. As Joy notes: "such a modification permits an approach that does not subscribe to either of the opposed stereotypes of an unrestricted empathy/intuition (understanding, with its Romantic associations) and its reactive opposite, a reductionist objective stance (explanation with its positivistic associations)" (203). Understanding and explanation in this regard are not separate pursuits but relate to one another by means of the hermeneutic circle through which they are "engaged in a mutually productive mode of interaction" (203). Objective analysis through explanatory models "helps to provide insights into the meaning of a text,

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<sup>25</sup> For a description of the development of these two philosophical traditions, see Joy (2004).

so that it does not remain at the level of a superficial reading” (205), while grasping meaning through understanding acknowledges that language is not opaque and may predetermine the outcome of explanation. In this way, my analysis of *ayahuasca* narratives will not seek to over-ride the meanings therein posited by the authors through reductive explanation, but will instead acknowledge that their interpretation requires both an act of understanding, in addition to explanation.

### **Configuring Lived Experience: Ricoeur’s Narrative Theory**

My intention in this present section is to provide an understanding of Ricoeur’s narrative theory in relation to lived experience. In order to approach the nuanced account of narrative experience presented by Ricoeur it may be helpful to first briefly explain a number of related key concepts that he develops in *Time and Narrative*. Ricoeur’s aim in the three volume work *Time and Narrative* is hermeneutic in that he brings to light how narrative and time, forming a circular relationship with one another, function in such a way as to structure lived experience, rendering it intelligible and making it meaningful to humans. This is conveyed by Ricoeur in the opening pages of *Time and Narrative* where he states his thesis as such: “Time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, becomes meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal existence” (Ricoeur, 1984:3). It is interesting to note that Ricoeur presents his thesis at the outset of his work and not at its conclusion, following elaboration of its premises. In doing so, Ricoeur is not tipping his hand, so to speak, but is providing the reader with an explicit pre-understanding of his aims, allowing them to structure their reading of his text accordingly.

Of central importance to the overall development of Ricoeur's thesis is his notion of time. Within the history of philosophy the concept of time has been received tenuously, often being described in conflicting terms as being both meaningful, a requisite for individual human existence, as well as, an inevitable destroyer, indifferent to human needs. David Wood notes that, in his *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur takes up the challenge "of reconciling, of doing justice to" two seemingly opposed conceptions of time that have historically reigned in the western philosophical tradition (Wood, 1991: 3). The first of these is Aristotle's notion of cosmological time, as found in his *Physics*, of time as an endless secession of 'nows,' arising and falling away in the sequence of before and after without providing a basis for thinking about time as experienced" (3). The second notion of time was first conceived by St Augustine and is what may "be called the 'phenomenological' theory of time" (Simms, 2003: 81). Later adopted by Husserl and Heidegger, the phenomenological theory of time identifies a paradox in cosmological time resulting from a deficiency in language as it grasps the 'now' within the present: "The paradox is that the word 'now', which refers to the present, can never actually refer to the present, since as soon as the word is uttered, it is in the past" (Simms: 81). In order to resolve this paradox Augustine proposed a three-fold division of the present, where the lack of extension of mind into the present is overcome by the distension of mind into the past through memory and the future via expectation (82). This approach to time, however, does not allow the possibility of a position from which to think of objective time.

In order to reconcile the philosophical aporias associated with these contrary notions of time, Ricoeur claims that "narrative is the guardian of time" (Wood: 4). In

taking this approach to the reconciliation of cosmological and phenomenological notions of time Ricoeur can be seen to privilege a phenomenology of time, which acts to structure cosmological time. For Ricoeur, such a structuring is a function of narrative plot which operates in such a way as to integrate the disparate elements of experience found in stories, such as interactions, motivations, and unplanned occurrences, into a unified whole and thus making them meaningful to humans. The relation between these elements of plot and reality is not one of representation in the Platonic sense, but one of imitation, as in the tradition of Aristotle's *mimesis*. To support this development, Ricoeur adapts Aristotle's notion into a tripartite concept of mimesis which is given shape through plot. Here, Ricoeur deploys the term plot in the sense of *muthos*, which Aristotle uses in his *Poetics* to denote the passage of events in a constructed story. Mimesis<sub>1</sub> is *prefiguration* which refers to the already given human competency in comprehending the place of questions relating to the interrogatives "who?", "what?", "when?", "where?" in the structure of plot. *Configuration* is denoted by Mimesis<sub>2</sub> and is where the narrative elements of a text are emploted, that is to say they are integrated into a relationally meaningful secession. The last in its three-fold division, Mimesis<sub>3</sub> is *refiguration* which is "the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader" (Ricoeur, 1984: 71). The innovation introduced by Ricoeur refers to his observation that the world of the reader is re-described through the application of the meaning, as understood in the text, to their own field of experience. In keeping these features of emplotment in mind we can succinctly state that narrative is mediation: it is "a rule of linguistically mediated temporal synthesis" (Wood: 8). This mediating function is

accomplished through the mimetic act of emplotment which acts to mediate between Mimesis<sub>1</sub> and Mimesis<sub>3</sub>.

### *Narrative in Quest of Life*

While Ricoeur's theory of narrative, as presented in *Time and Narrative*, is primarily concerned with the function of narrative in mediating the unified meaning found in fiction and history by means of plot, the theory remains open to the possibility that it may be applied to lived experience. This is a topic which Ricoeur later takes up in his essay "Life in Quest of Narrative" (1991). Here he illuminates the connection between fiction and lived experience, as being one that is mediated by the narrative function. While Ricoeur's writing could possibly be seen as an addendum to *Time and Narrative*, it is perhaps best viewed as an expansion upon his work's themes in order to demonstrate that the narrative function is can be seen as operative in lived experience through the enactment of a life story. As we will soon see, it is through collapsing the tension between fiction / history and life, that Ricoeur shows how "fiction contributes to making life, in the biological sense of the word, a human life" (Ricoeur, 1991: 20). This is to say that the sense of life as anything more than a strictly biological phenomenon, is to ascribe to life an interpreted meaning.

In order to re-evaluate the connection between literature and lived experience in light of narrative, there is a necessary qualification to Aristotle's concept of *muthos* in the sense that it signifies plot as the core element in a well constructed story (Ricoeur, 1991: 21). Earlier *Muthos* was described as important because its main operation is that of emplotment, which is defined as: "a synthesis of heterogeneous elements" (21). From his

analysis of this synthesis, Ricoeur identifies its three main features. Firstly, it is a synthesis between the “events or incidences that are multiple, and the story which is unified and complete” (21). This is more than a mere ‘serial’ succession of events, but is a constructed progression from beginning to end. The second is the synthesis of such heterogeneous elements as “unintended consequences, discoveries, those who perform actions and those who suffer them” (21). This aspect of emplotment works to integrate such disparate, intended, as well as unforeseen, events together into a specific configuration. Within the configuring act, events are placed in relation to one another in such a way that the “primacy of concordance over discordance” (22) characterizes their final configuration. Lastly, emplotment is a synthesis of the two notions of time discussed earlier as it draws “a configuration out of a succession” through creating a mediation between “time as passage and time as duration” (22). This last feature of emplotment’s synthesis is its impulse towards a progression which works to configure what could be viewed as random occurrences into a coherent and consistent plot.

In order to clear the path for a narrative understanding of human experience, Ricoeur supplies the analysis of emplotment with two epistemological corollaries concerning “the kind of *intelligibility* that should be scribed to the configuring act” (22). First, the analysis of configuration is not directed towards positing an objective science of narrative as such, but instead seeks through practical philosophy a *phronetic* application<sup>26</sup>. This is distinct from narratology, which is the product of a science of narrative, and would be a second-order, rationally constructed, discourse. Ricoeur himself

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<sup>26</sup> Phronetic understanding relates to the concept of *phronesis* that Aristotle introduces in Book Six of his *Ethics*. It is the result of a ‘practical’ application of general rules to particular situations. For Ricoeur, it is that type of understanding “by which we learn to link together the ethical aspects of human conduct and happiness and misfortune” (Ricoeur, 1991: 23) in specific individual contexts.

seeks a narrative understanding that can be characterized as one of a first-order of understanding, namely, an answer to the question: what is the narrative quality that structures *lived* human experience? It is this primary concern for a first-order understanding that serves as Ricoeur's second corollary. From this perspective Ricoeur is able to talk about the 'life of narrative', which is to say that "the narrative schemata itself" (24). Here, Ricoeur borrows the term schemata from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and applies it to his work on narrative. For Ricoeur, it is through the plot as schemata that the act of emplotment organizes experience into a cohesive narrative configuration. Narrative schemata are not static, but are the dynamic and variegated configurations of experiences of life, history, or of reading literature, which help convey meaning and insight into what otherwise could be scattered or chaotic events.

### *Life of Narrative*

Equipped with these two epistemological concepts, it is possible to begin to bridge the gap between life and narrative by way of thoroughly revising their modes of relation as depicted by Ricoeur. Starting on the side of narrative, it can be posited that a reconfiguration of life by way of narrative is made possible because the process of configuring narrative, that is of emplotment, "is not completed in the text but in the [mind of the] reader"(26). By reading a text, the work of narrative configuration, an individual appropriates its perceived meaning and can apply it to their own horizon of experience through an act of refiguration. As such, an act of reading is as well an act of textual appropriation that 'unfolds the world horizon' of the configured narrative included in which are its characters, and events (26). This process is hermeneutical as it represents



“the intersection of the world of *the text and the world of the reader*” (26). This intersection is one of temporal mimesis and is where, through refiguration, “the horizon of expectation and the horizon of experience continually confront one another and fuse together” (26) in the present. Within this process, the dynamics of refiguration collapse the dichotomous distinction between the outside and the inside of the text, that is between the world of the work and the life of the reader. In order for this process to take place, one must follow the story of the narrative thus “reactualizing the configuring act that gives it form” (27). This ‘act of reading’ completes the work unifying it and transforming it into ‘a guide for reading’ (27), and furthermore, it allows us to say that stories are not only recounted, “but they are also *lived in the mode of the imaginary*” (27). Narrative has been shown to transgress the demarcation between the interior and exterior of a text through an act of reading, which through the process of refiguration can change the world of the reader.

### *Narrative of Life*

Just as we can talk about the ‘life’ of narrative, so too can we consider the ways in which the character of life is marked by the workings of narrative. The narrative character of life is apparent in its pre-narrative capacity, which is to say that life is not strictly a biological phenomenon, but also the basis of interpretation, where the text to be interpreted is the “mixture of acting and suffering which constitutes the very fabric of a life” (28). This pre-narrative capacity is related to what Ricoeur has described as the mimetic act of prefiguration in emplotment. In this first stage, Mimesis<sub>1</sub> thus acts to ‘anchor’ for narrative understanding in its depiction of lived experience in three related

ways. The first is through a pre-narrative *semantics of action*, which is comprised by the “entire network of expressions and concepts” (28) that we have at our disposal in order to differentiate between action and behaviour. In this way, the semantics of action can configure wilful actions from those un-willed actions which are undergone in the course of experience. The second is through the operation of immanent symbols which act as the “internal interpreters of action” (29). Expressed differently, this refers to the ‘context of description’ in which particular actions occur. This context provides actions with “an initial readability” (28). In light of this characteristic of prefiguration, action becomes a “quasi-text for which symbols provide the rules of signification in terms of which a given conduct may be interpreted” (29). The third anchorage that can be found for narrative in life is, what Ricoeur calls, “*the pre-narrative quality of lived experience*” (29). This relates to the sense in which life can be viewed as a story waiting to be told; life is “an *activity and a passion in search of a narrative*” (29). If life is ‘a story to be told,’ then, in order for it to be recounted, there must be recognition of the temporal features of action which constitutes a genuine demand for narrative (29). In recounting a narrative of one’s life, it is the pre-history of the story that connects one to a “vaster whole and gives [the story] a background ... made up of the living imbrication of all lived stories” (30). In this way narrative is implicated in the primary constitution of our personal identity; through narrative we are able to untangle ourselves from our virtual story, our pre-history, and configure the “explicit story for which we assume responsibility” (30). In this way narrative configuration is “an irreducible dimension of *self-understanding*” (30), and is the means through which an ‘examined life’ becomes a ‘life recounted’ (31). This configuration constitutes mimesis<sub>2</sub>.

### *A Life Recounted*

It is through the function of narrative configuration that life is recounted, its elements drawn from the pre-narrative fields of semantics, symbolic mediation and understanding, and its aim set towards discovering one's personal narrative identity through narrative self-understanding in light of "the narratives proposed to use by our culture" (32). In this process there is an interplay between discordance and concordance which constitutes narrative itself, and through which we become the "*narrator* and the hero of our own story without actually becoming the *author of our own life*" (32). We are able to appropriate the narrative voices and forms which constitute the 'great symphony' of literary works, but due to the nature of lived experience as constituting of action, as well as suffering or undergoing the actions of others, we are never able to become the absolute author of our own lives. What Ricoeur is developing here is the notion that we are never fully in control of narrating our own lives.

As Ricoeur draws his argument to a close, it is this aporia that remains between narrative and life, characterizing the nature of narrative identity as existing between "sheer change and absolute identity" (33). It is through the use of narratives handed down from literary tradition that one is able to 'partially abolish' this "unbridgeable difference" (33). The act of reconfiguring one's life story, and "trying the different roles assumed by our favourite characters" (33), entails a mediation between literary and lived experience.

In this way, a narrative 'life' becomes a text itself, temporally synthesized through configuration, and its narrative function of emplotment. As a mimetic action, emplotment imitates pre-existing forms of plot in order to structure lived experience into a

configuration. Human life and narrative are indeed interconnected phenomena which share a circular relationship: narrative increases our understanding of lived experience, shaping our anticipation of future events, while lived experience increases our understanding of narrative, providing new opportunities for interpretation. Insofar as we interpret narratives, or then appropriate their ideas or actions, we then reconfigure our lives. This step indicates mimesis<sub>3</sub>.

What I have intended to convey in this section is an understanding of the actions of emplotment, or configuration, and their importance in mediating, through the three-fold mimesis, between meaningful life and narrative, in the cause of effecting both cohesion and continuity in a narrative.

Narrative, as I have shown, is not merely a method of structuring recounted experience, but is in fact nascent in the very fabric of experience itself. In this sense, lived experience is a ‘story waiting to be told’, insofar as we make it intelligible and meaningful, that is if we render it a human experience. At the same time, the act of configuring narrative is dependent on the traditions of narrativity that are deployed in the emplotment of the secession of episodes one encounters in life into a unified and meaningful whole. In this way, the configuring act, that is the work of emplotment, is one of mimetic imitation which has its antecedents in the vast pool of characters and actions that sediment into humanity’s literary heritage<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> For Ricoeur, this literary heritage can be seen as a tradition which is constituted by the on-going negotiation between factors of sedimentation and innovation (24). Put in relation to narrative, sedimentation acts to solidify the form of narrative, while innovation tests the limits of its rules. On the side of sedimentation we have a conservation of form and style; opposite we find a calculated deviance at work, tinkering, re-mixing, and breaking the rules of narrativity. Popular myths tend towards repetition and sedimentation, while various contemporary, science fiction or post-modern, literature can be seen to resist established norms and incorporate innovative forms.

Narrative configurations are given form through both, a network of semantic action which opens the realm of behaviour into the realm of action, as well as implicit cultural symbols which comprise the ‘something’ of the act of ‘doing something’. These aspects of narrative find their expression through human action and are constitutive of narrative’s prefiguration. The specific meanings of symbols and the semantics of action are culturally informed and are inherited via an individual’s enculturation into a specific socio-cultural sphere. These inherited meanings relate to the negotiation of moral values, worldview, and modes of being in the world. The specific content of one’s narrative prefiguration are not static entities but are fluid, the result of narrative’s ability to mediate between refiguration and prefiguration which results from the act of reading narrative accounts. The forms of narrative configuration are similarly fluid as they are the products of interplay between innovation and sedimentation within the configuring act itself. Innovative acts of configuration push the boundaries of culturally dominate or established narratives, which are denoted through their sedimentation in the popular cultural imagination.

Ricoeur’s theory of narrative thus relates not just to the narrativity of literary works but also to the narrative character of lived experience. As such, it is well positioned to provide insights into the phenomenon of *ayahuasca* narrative literature, as well as the concept of neo-shamanism more generally. This latter component of my analysis will be accomplished through examining the process of refiguration that occurs when an individual reads neo-shamanic literature, such as *ayahuasca* narratives. While the field of hermeneutical inquiry has been traditionally focused on the retrieval of meaning from texts, Ricoeur’s work “allows that this [hermeneutic] procedure can also

be applied to the analysis and interpretation of human behaviour” (Joy: 206). I will not be applying Ricoeur’s theory of refiguration to any ethnographic data per se, but will use it as a means to bridge the divide between the world of written narrative and the world of experiential narrative. This will serve to acknowledge the influence of written narrative in the reader’s anticipation of future events. As the meanings found in these texts have resonances for the behaviour of the reader, it is crucial that they also be evaluated for the presence of cultural presuppositions that may distort their narrative accounts.

### **Ricoeur’s Hermeneutics of Suspicion**

As stated, the aim of my application of Ricoeur’s narrative theory is two-fold, relating both to the interpretation of written texts, as well as of lived experience through refiguration. As such, it is necessary at this point to acknowledge that Ricoeur’s narrative theory, as indicated in the essay, “Life in Quest of Narrative,” does not constitute an explicitly normative framework<sup>28</sup>. In order to accommodate this observation, as well as to acknowledge the cultural and historical contexts within which *ayahuasca* tourism and neo-shamanism exist, I will apply an additional critical perspective, or a hermeneutic of suspicion to my primary sources.

As David Kaplan notes: “*what* is experienced is always correlated with *how* it is experienced by someone” (Kaplan, 2003: 18). The nature of neo-shamanic practice is such that it relies heavily upon individual interpretations (adoption, adaptation and appropriation) of indigenous cultural beliefs and practices. This act of interpretation is not outside of history but is implicated (as cause or coincidence) in a history of colonial

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<sup>28</sup> Ricoeur would later fully develop a framework for ethical evaluation which appears in *Oneself as Another* (1992).

and neo-colonial relations of which western neo-shamanic practitioners are firmly embedded. A characteristic of being embedded, as such, is the uncritical presumption that epistemological presuppositions arising from enculturation are true. It is thus necessary to include an additional critical perspective in order to highlight any ideological or cultural distortions that may be present in the texts. Towards this end I will construct a hermeneutic of suspicion as developed by Ricoeur to be incorporated into my analysis.

In order to develop a concept of the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ it is helpful to contrast it against ‘the hermeneutics of belief’. While the latter is a task aimed at “recovering a lost message, animated by faith<sup>29</sup> and a willingness to listen” (Kaplan: 21), the former is aimed at “demystification, animated by mistrust and skepticism [sic]” (21). This is not a scepticism that seeks to impose its own explanation upon a phenomenon without due recourse but instead one that does not take posited meanings at ‘face value’. A story, be it one’s life story or a literary plot, can indeed be recounted in multiple, and sometimes conflicting, formulations. This is evident in judicial proceedings where the various accounts accorded by witness testimonies implicating the defendant are contested in order that an ‘objective’ view of events may be established. Similarly, the derivation of interpretations abounding from a single phenomenon, be it an event or action, is the result of subjective nuance.

Suspicion in this sense is aimed at overcoming the forms of biased subjectivity inherent in individual narrative accounts and exposing its origins. This procedure was first referred to in Ricoeur’s *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (1965). Here, Ricoeur draws his inspiration from the so-called ‘masters of suspicion’: Marx,

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<sup>29</sup> This needn’t signify faith in a religious or theological sense, but in fact can refer to a ‘suspension of disbelief’ whereby the text or event being interpreted is accorded semantic autonomy. Interpretation sought through the use of hermeneutics requires both belief and suspicion.

Nietzsche, and Freud, “who read the “text” of their culture, and critiqued the values and interests involved” (Joy, 2004: 208). In doing so, they showed how the individual is not always aware of the mechanisms, be they related to class, power, or the unconscious, that are operative in the structuring of their subjective accounts. What we find in the works by the masters of suspicion is a disruption of the “illusion of the self” (Joy: 208) as being self-transparent and sovereign in terms of its volition. The individual is not found in isolation but is already involved in the world, entangled in a series of relations that may act to constrain or empower particular interpretations of self-understanding.

For Ricoeur, the hermeneutics of suspicion is important critical intervention because it represents a form of distancing, where-by the meaning of a text or action is distanced from the author, as well as, from his or her context and intentions. Distancing is productive as it “allows for a critique of ideology to be incorporated, as an objective and explanatory segment” (Kaplan: 34) of interpretation<sup>30</sup>. As such, a hermeneutic of suspicion “supports a critical reading of texts, which indicts them insofar as they are products of a false consciousness, stemming from cultural biases that do not acknowledge the distortions, exclusions, and impositions involved” (Joy, 2004: 208). A critique of presuppositions does not take the place of interpretation but occurs within the hermeneutical act of interpretation as a means to disclose presuppositions that are evident in a text. If the individual is the bearer of meaning, then it is the task of hermeneutics to attempt at laying that meaning bare through the interrelated aims of: understanding, explanation, and critique.

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<sup>30</sup> It is distancing that allows for the meaning found in a text to be appropriated by reader, that is the distance between the context of the text and the context of the reader allows for the meaning found in a text to exist as discourse. Conversely, appropriation is the dialectical counterpoint of distancing and “refers to the hermeneutical act to make what was foreign familiar and one’s own” (Kaplan: 33) through projecting the meaning of a text through one’s own world horizon.



Thus far, I have established a framework, drawn from Ricoeur's narrative theory, for the interpretation of neo-shamanic *ayahuasca* literature, and have as well laid the groundwork for an additional hermeneutic of suspicion which will provide a critical perspective on the author's presuppositions. In order to inform my hermeneutic of suspicion I will now turn to the post-colonial theory of Enrique Dussel, as an example of a specific form of hermeneutics of suspicion.

### **Enrique Dussel, Eurocentrism, and the Emergence of Trans-Modernity**

Enrique Dussel (b.1934) is an Argentinean-Mexican post-colonial philosopher who is regarded as "one of the most eloquent and trenchant contemporary intellectuals hailing from the South" (Dallmayr: 8). Much of his work has aimed at the establishment of an agenda for furthering inter-cultural dialogue amongst the various cultures that have commonly been referred to within 'European' discourse as colonial, third world, and now as the global South.<sup>31</sup> This aim, as such, has its antecedents in Dussel's concern for the reclamation of a history for Latin America outside of European history and modernity, paradigms which in recent history have been extended to North America and in particular the United States. For Dussel, this reclamation of Latin American history represents a project of decolonization and has involved both an affirmation of Latin American culture as 'exterior' to modernity, as well as a negation of the cultural presuppositions that have been historically imposed on those peoples who are situated in Europe's periphery (Dussel, 2004: 20)<sup>32</sup>. This is required due to the manner in which European history, as a

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<sup>31</sup> While Dussel's career has been lengthy, as well as productive, it has only been in the past fifteen years that many of his works have been available to an English speaking audience.

<sup>32</sup> For Dussel, this undertaking was initiated while studying philosophy in Europe during the late 1950's and 1960's which culminated in the defense of his thesis concerning 'Hispano-American' history at the

universal history, has attempted to assimilate the cultures and histories of those peoples peripheral to Europe into its own historical horizon.

An important step in this process, and of direct concern to my thesis, is Dussel's decisive critique of the hegemonic interpretation of the concept of modernity proffered and imposed by both modern Europe and North America. Here, Dussel brings attention to "two opposing paradigms, the Eurocentric and the planetary, [that] characterize the question of modernity' (Dussel, 1998: 3). The first paradigm is regional and provincial which, "from a Eurocentric horizon, formulates the phenomenon of modernity as *exclusively* European" (3), and the result of its own "exceptional internal characteristics that allowed it to supersede, through its rationality, all other cultures" (3). Modernity, as such, is additionally viewed as emancipatory, representing "a way out from [cultural] immaturity by mean of reason, understood as a critical process that affords humanity the possibility of new development" (Dussel, 2000:469). Such emancipation, as Dussel observes, was possible only if it flowed from Europe, the centre of history, in a manner which linked it directly to the universal history of Europe. This Eurocentric position was first formulated at the end of the eighteenth century by European philosophers who "reinterpreted all of world history, projecting Europe into the past and attempting to show that everything that happened before had led to Europe's becoming" (Dussel, 2002: 222).<sup>33</sup> As Dussel states: "since the beginning, Europe had been chosen by Destiny as the

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Sorbonne in Paris in 1967 (Dussel, 2009:3). During his time at the Sorbonne, Dussel attended the classes of Paul Ricoeur, who he notes helped him discern "new depths" (2) in his critical studies of Latin American history.

<sup>33</sup> Accompanying this notion is the myth that Modern Europe is a cultural descendent of, in a manner which is linear and diachronic, Rome and ancient Greece (Dussel: 465). This view is shown to be false by Dussel, who highlights the influences that both the Eastern Byzantine culture had in the Italian Renaissance (14<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> century) and the Arab Muslim philosophical tradition exerted on the philosophy of what he calls "Medieval Latin" (466) Europe. As such, the history of Europe, as well as that of modernity, can be seen to

final meaning of universal history” (222). It is from this notion that the civilizing missions of colonial and neo-colonial Europe, and later of North America, drew their inspiration. European history in this sense is a universal history, one that attempts to totalize the histories and subsume the cultures of those non-modern, non-Europeans it has confronted.

The second paradigm of modernity is the planetary, which “conceptualizes modernity as the culture of the *center* of the ‘world system’” (Dussel, 1998: 4). Here Dussel opposes the unanimity of conventional interpretations of European modernity, offering a new perspective on the development of modernity by inserting it into a world context. In this view, it is Europe’s position of centrality, of being the core of the world system and the centre of world history, that is “an essential trait of the modern world” (Dussel, 2000: 470), that is put into question. Under this view, there was “not a world history in an empirical sense before 1492” (470) when Spain invaded the new world which it incorporated into its periphery.

Placed within this context, it becomes clear that European modernity is not an independent entity, but is a solely European phenomenon. Moreover, nor is European modernity commensurate with Europe’s self positioning as the core of the world system (Dussel, 1998: 4). Prior to 1492 there was no world system, but only regional systems which were integrated into the modernist project upon the consolidation of the world system. This was coextensive with the implementation of colonialism and the rise of capitalism as the dominant global economic system. European modernity, as such, is not an isolated ‘ideal’, but was interrelated with other social, economic, and political projects

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deviate from actual historical reality in order to establish a version of European history that is selective, self-referential, and ideological in its construction (468).

that were occurring simultaneously, that is to say that modernity “is the fruit of these events not their cause” (Dussel, 1998: 5). The application of this ‘idealized’ notion of European modernity on to the lives of indigenous peoples was not only directed at their economic or religious spheres but to the ‘totality’ of their cultures and lives.

From this view, modernity becomes “the management of the world-system’s centrality” (Dussel, 2002: 222), and corresponds to a reductive simplification of the ‘life-world’ through a rationalization of the cultural, religious, political and economic systems of peripheral peoples (Dussel 1998: 15). The imposition of this system of management on the peoples of peripheral cultures has been coupled with the previously mentioned promise of modernity as ‘a way out’ of provincial and regional cultural immaturity. In this way modernity, itself, becomes the “justification of an irrational praxis of violence” (Dussel, 2000: 472). According to Dussel, this notion is perhaps the formative myth of modernity, whereby modern civilization is cast as superior, and thus is morally obligated to improve the lives of the barbaric and primitive who are met with violence insofar as they oppose the civilizing mission (472). This is an example of the so-called ‘white man’s burden’ that was invoked in defence of Europe’s project of colonization. This myth, Dussel contends, has operated, and indeed continues to operate, and as such it has remained “concealed” (472) from the modern gaze.

Modernity’s praxis of violence has been applied with devastating results for the world’s indigenous peoples and the ecological systems in which they live. Further to this, the capitalist drive towards profit maximization continues to result in never-before-witnessed environmental degradation and the use of state sanctioned military violence in order to secure resources and markets. In fact, given the destructive power of

contemporary military technology and the rationalization of pre-emptive strike heralded by the Bush doctrine, modernity's praxis of violence, if provoked, would have globally catastrophic consequences for humanity. It would not be contrived to state succinctly that the stakes have never been higher.

According to Dussel: "by way of denying the innocence of modernity and of affirming the alterity of the other (which was previously denied), is it possible to "discover" for the first time the hidden "other side" of modernity" (Dussel, 2000: 473). Modernity's 'other side' is not newly emergent or merely a defence against modernity, but in fact resides in a space that is 'exterior' to modernity. That is to say that modernity's claim of a universal history is not true, for in the periphery there "are cultures that are alive, resistant and growing" (Dussel, 2002: 224). Following such a process and negating modernity's negation of peripheral cultures as inferior and then affirming the alterity of the 'exterior' other, it is possible to glimpse the articulation of a new global paradigm which has emerged from the periphery.

This aforementioned process can become viable because these cultures were never actually fully subsumed into the cultural apparatus of modernity. As such, peripheral cultures represent responses to modernity that are independent of modernity itself<sup>34</sup>. Moreover, these living cultures, discarded by modernity as primitive and immature, predate European modernity, and continued to develop alongside it. For Dussel, such exterior cultures are neither pre-modern nor post-modern, "rather they are cultures that have developed on a "trans"-modern horizon, something beyond the internal possibility of simple modernity" (234). Within this horizon there is a wealth of cultural

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<sup>34</sup> This is not the case with anti-modern discourses such as post-modernism which is a response to modernity from within its own cultural boundaries. As such, they still retain a it Eurocentric focus (Dussel, 2002: 233).

invention and creativity that will be needed “if humanity is to redefine its relationship with nature based on ecology and inter-human solidarity, instead of reductively defining it on the solipsistic and schizoid criterion of increasing rates of profit” (235). This trajectory, our current trajectory, is one where an increasing number of decisions related to war, economic expansion, and ecological devastation are determined by the all too visible hand of the market. The reckless abandon with which the exploitive ethic of capitalism has transformed humanity, and the planetary ecology, into economic inputs, creates a calculus into which a viable long-term global future is not factored.

What emerges from this description is a view of the ‘transmodern’ as an actively engaged constituency in the world system. As outlined by Dussel, the transmodern is a project that envisions “a multi-polar twenty-first century world, where cultural difference is increasingly affirmed, beyond the *homogenizing* pretensions of the present capitalist globalization and its supposedly universal culture” (236). Transmodernity, however, does not call for a complete negation of modernity but a “subsumption of modernity’s emancipatory, rational, European character [which is to be] transcended as a world-wide liberation project from its denied alterity” (Dussel, 2000: 474). Importantly, this view is not emerging from the domain of populist culture, which is an appeal to nationalist identity by political and neo-colonial elites, nor from mass culture, which is unidimensional and alienating (Dussel, 2004: 11).

The paradigm of transmodernity is emanating from the popular culture sector of peripheral cultures that have retained their exteriority (11). This process is not isolated to one specific culture or continent but is both heterogeneous in its cultural composition and global in its scope (Dussel, 2002: 236). As the project of transmodernity is aimed towards

the “multicultural, versatile, hybrid, postcolonial, pluralist, tolerant and democratic” (Dussel, 2002: 236), intercultural dialogue becomes increasingly important as a means of affirming exteriority. The transmodern paradigm, while global in its scope, is comprised of on-going dialogue and negotiation between representatives from different peripheral cultures and is thus anchored regionally. It is this aspect of the transmodern which allows its global scope to escape becoming like the old universal paradigm of European modernity.

The scope of Dussel’s project is extensive, and carries with it far-reaching implications for research projects studying cross-cultural phenomenon that should not be ignored. While, his primary focus is the development of inter-cultural dialogue (of a philosophical nature) between the sub-altern groups which habit a locations which are exterior to modern European and North American culture (Dussel, 2004: 24), the implications of his critique of modernity as being inherently Eurocentric in its outlook have direct import for the analysis of *ayahuasca* literature and neo-shamanism more generally. As the concept of shamanism has its genesis in western discourse, it is beneficial, and moreover necessary, to incorporate a critical perspective, such as a hermeneutic of suspicion, to investigate modernist discourse. Not only will this present valuable insights into modernity’s presumption of totality, but as well provide a measure against which we can gauge the character of neo-shamanic/indigenous interactions and transmissions of knowledge. This will be done in order to determine if the attitudes of the authors which we will examine in the next chapter are oriented in the direction of inter-cultural dialogue, or, if the religious cultures of the *mestizo vegetalistas* they represent

through their narratives are still being subsumed within a Eurocentric and modernist worldview.

As Dussel has indicated, inter-cultural dialogue must proceed from the acknowledgement that inter-cultural relations are asymmetrical due to the differentiated political, social, economic contexts in which they are located. Only through open, authentic, and symmetrical dialogue is it possible to “transcend the Eurocentrism of modernity, so prevalent today, which impedes creativity and often obscures the great discoveries achieved by other traditions” (Dussel, 2004: 500). Can westerners, such as neo-shamanists, enter into a dialogue with representatives from alternative cultures, such as *vegetalistas*, in order to understand those cultures’ responses to ‘core universal problems’, specifically those of an ontological character? Indeed there is a duty to observe vigilant care for westerners who seek such a dialogue. This requires that they proceed from a position that is cognizant of modernity’s imperialist claims to a universal history and is also aware of the injustices that have been wrought as a result of this claim. It also means that their position affirms the alterity of ‘exterior’ cultures. It is not my intention to propose that such a dialogue has been achieved, particularly in regards neo-shamanic practitioners, many of whom it is safe to presume have not received formal training in this field. Nonetheless, given that the interaction between modern and peripheral cultures has been one of domination and exploitation, I am inclined to suggest that participation in inter-cultural dialogue with the above precautions in place, as outlined by Dussel, is a goal towards which it is necessary to strive.



## Chapter Five - Configurations of Shamanism in *Ayahuasca* Narratives

From the perspective of Ricoeur's theory of narrative, the figure of the 'shaman,' from which the notion of neo-shamanic practice is constructed, possesses its own tradition of narrative form. This is comprised of the various plots, characters, and actions that have been deployed by authors as a means to configure indigenous religious practices into narrative and make them intelligible from within their own cultural horizon. The neo-shamanic *ayahuasca* narratives, which are the present chapter's primary concern, draw from the existing and prefigured 'shamanic' narrative tradition.

By analyzing the narrative processes through which concepts of the shamanic are emploted into individual narratives, I am echoing Buzeková's assertion that in the study of neo-shamanism, "the term 'shaman' should not be used as an analytical concept" (2010: 128). As such, instead of exclusively attending to the content of the individual author's representations of *mestizo* religious practices as shamanic, I intend to identify certain narrative mechanisms. These are the representations by which *vegetalismo*, as shamanism, are emploted within a specific narrative configuration.

The subject of this analysis will be the accounts presented in recently published neo-shamanic *ayahuasca* narratives. Given that there has been significant growth in the number of narratives published in the past five years, a comprehensive survey of this literary sub-genre is not feasible for this thesis. Instead, I will focus my analysis upon two published accounts: *Fishers of Men: The Gospel of An Ayahuasca Vision Quest* by Adam Elenbaas (2010), and *Ayahuasca In My Blood: 25 Years of Medicine Dreaming* written by Peter Gorman (2010). These particular narratives were selected because the

juxtaposition of the distinctive narrative configurations of shamanism presented by the authors serves to highlight the diverse interactions shared between neo-shamanists and *vegetalistas*.

Following my analysis of these works, my intention is to discuss the broader implications of Ricoeur's theory of narrative for the study of neo-shamanism in the Peruvian context. This task will be primarily concerned with identifying how narrative operates as a mediating mechanism for *ayahuasca* neo-shamanists through which representations of the shamanic are emploted into one's life story. Ricoeur's theory of narrative thus relates not just to the narrativity of literary works but also to the narrative character of lived experience, and as such is well positioned to provide insights into the phenomenon of *ayahuasca* narrative literature, and the concept of neo-shamanism more generally.

### **Two Examples of Literary Structure in *Ayahuasca* Narratives**

As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, the two published *ayahuasca* narratives that will be analyzed in this thesis are: Elenbaas's *Fishers of Men*, and Gorman's *Ayahuasca in My Blood*. Before proceeding to their analysis by way of applying Ricoeur's narrative theory, it is necessary to say a few words about their overall structure and the over-all content of their plots. Additionally this will familiarize the reader with the authors, which is intended to assist in developing an understanding of their work. Of course, there is a necessary process of selection that occurs in reducing hundreds of pages of narrative to a short summary. As this thesis is primarily concerned with the question of

how representations of indigenous religions as shamanic are emplotted in neo-shamanic narratives, the following summaries will be focused accordingly.

In his 270 page book published by Penguin Books in 2010, Elenbaas recounts not just his experiences using and learning about *ayahuasca* in the Peruvian Amazon over a four year period, but as well the transformative and healing effects that it produced in his life. He accomplishes this by utilizing a diachronic literary structure in which chapters alternate between two separate successions of events. The first of these documents Elenbaas's time at an *ayahuasca* lodge outside of Iquitos, Peru, participating in *ayahuasca* ceremonies with Ethan, an American who became a shaman, and his Peruvian teacher, the shaman, Domingo. Elenbaas's intention in travelling to the Amazon to drink *ayahuasca* is not recreational but is to have a sacred experience akin to "a vision quest or primitive rite of passage" (4). In addition to his experiences drinking *ayahuasca* in the Amazon, Elenbaas shares his accounts of participating in multiple *ayahuasca* ceremonies set in a yoga studio in the United States. In this narrative stream, Elenbaas recounts how the insights he obtains from his *ayahuasca* experiences have helped him to transform his life. Central to this process is his identification of negative patterns of behaviour that have persisted through out much of his youth, many of which are inherited from his father and strongly relate to a cross-generational sub-plot that figures prominently in his story. As well, Elenbaas receives cathartic visions during his *ayahuasca* experiences, which he emphasizes alongside the brew's purgative affects in healing his mind, body, and spirit from his previous drug addiction and destructive lifestyle.

The second series of events is a biographical account of his life from early childhood to his first *ayahuasca* ceremony. This biographical sketch tells of Elenbaas's

life story as the son of a Methodist pastor living in Minnesota and his eventual downward spiral into existential despair, drug addiction and hopelessness. Within this narrative stream, Elenbaas presents the trials and tribulations of his rebellious youth which is characterized by seemingly irreconcilable conflicts with his father, the repression of childhood sexual abuse at the hands of one of his peers, and his engagement in increasingly self-destructive behaviours leading to a sustained addiction to opiates and self-indulgent sexual relations.

These two primary narratives streams are framed by a third that acts to structure the books overall plot and is featured at the book's outset and conclusion. In the opening segment the reader is introduced to Elenbaas as he assists his father who, in the midst of serious emotional depression, has slashed his arm with a hunting knife. Elenbaas's father, planning to go to Peru "on a vision quest" (2) in want of healing, had ceased taking his prescribed medications, a requirement for working with *ayahuasca*, and had descended into a state of psychological crisis. The closing passages of Elenbaas's story return to the topic of his father's healing, and feature a letter and journal entry from his father describing his insights following his use of *ayahuasca* while in Peru. Additionally, Elenbaas supplements these narrative streams with chapters that present explanations of shamanic concepts, such as the rite of passage, a concept that is important to Elenbaas's overall plot. As well, Elenbaas incorporates reflections on Christian theology and scriptural passages as he tells his story, a feature that is reflective of the spiritual eclecticism characteristic of neo-shamanic literature.

The second *ayahuasca* narrative that will be analyzed is Gorman's *Ayahuasca in My Blood*, a 247 page account which was self-published by the author in 2010. The

structure of Gorman's narrative account is linear and presents a series of events beginning with Gorman's introduction to the indigenous uses of *ayahuasca* while on an expedition with a friend in the jungles of the Peruvian Amazon. This first *ayahuasca* experience was coordinated by a *mestizo* guide they met in a small town outside of Iquitos, Peru named Moises who had knowledge of the surrounding jungles. Led by their guide, Gorman and his friend hike through dense jungles to the home of Alphonse, a man who possessed a familiarity with *ayahuasca*. What follows is Gorman's story of his "experiences with *ayahuasca* over a period of 25 years as its student" (12). While descriptions of his *ayahuasca* experiences account for much of his book's content, the importance of these experiences is often related to his inter-personal relationships, such as with his wife Chepa, or the respected *curandero*<sup>35</sup> Julio (35) who would become his friend and teacher.

A journalist by profession, Gorman returns multiple times to Iquitos, Peru from his home in New York in order to pursue stories, or in order to undertake excursion into the jungles for ethno-botanical purposes. During his time in Iquitos, Gorman frequently visits Julio and drinks *ayahuasca* in order to foresee if he will be confronted by any challenges during his travels, as well as to gain insight into his personal relationships. Gorman forms a life-long friendship with Julio, who instructs Gorman in the uses of *ayahuasca* and nudges him towards learning the various healing methodologies that a *curandero* employs. While Julio does assist him in this endeavour, Gorman's primary instruction comes from the spirit allies that he meets and forms relationships with during his *ayahuasca* experiences. Most prominent among these are: 'The Man Who Tells Me

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<sup>35</sup> As mentioned in Chapter three, *curandero* is a term that refers to *mestizo* healers, and is similar to other emic titles such as *vegetalista* or *ayahuascero*.

Things', which takes the form of a Boa living in his stomach, and *sachavaca*<sup>36</sup> who instructs Gorman during their encounters in the spirit world.

During one of his expeditions, Gorman meets Chepa, a young Peruvian woman whom he hires to help him guide his boat through the region's river systems. Gorman later marries Chepa, becoming a surrogate to Chepa's children from a previous marriage, Marco and Italo, as well as becoming integrated into the structure of her extended family. He returns to Peru numerous times, sometimes with his family so that his children could visit with their grandmother, mamma Lydia. Before too long, Gorman moves his family back to Iquitos, opening a bar and leading small groups to participate in *ayahuasca* ceremonies at the camps of *curanderos* with whom his is familiar. Gorman learns about *brujaria* first-hand when he is attacked with *virotas* by jealous acquaintances during an *ayahuasca* ceremony, an act of aggression that he successfully defended himself against. In addition, Gorman gradually becomes more familiar with various healing methodologies, such as sucking out sickness from the body of the patient, or blowing *mapacho* smoke over the body to protect it. He is able to put his knowledge to use by treating mamma Lydia, himself, and later even Julio.

Later, after becoming estranged from his wife Chepa, Gorman seeks answers from *ayahuasca* about how to repair his strained relationship. He is shown how his lifestyle choices, including his excessive drinking, have pushed Chepa away and moreover negatively impacted his life. For Gorman, his initiation into the world of *ayahuasca* started him on an "incredible journey of the heart...[one that] has just begun"

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<sup>36</sup> Literally translated as 'jungle cow,' the *sachavaca* is a South American tapir, as well as the name by which Gorman refers to his ally.

(13). The act of seeking guidance from *ayahuasca*, as well as his various spirit allies, is a central motif in Gorman's narrative.

As is evident from this brief summarization, Elenbaas and Gorman emphasize similar themes in their writing, such as needing to confront one's fears or the importance of family. At the same time the *ayahuasca* narratives that they present are very different, in terms of their plots and the experiences they recount. This is mainly the result of their greatly varying individual circumstances and cultural contexts, which have led them to uniquely interpret their experiences. Most important for my current purpose is that these two narratives also present different representations of *mestizo* religious practices, the use of *ayahuasca*, and the concept of shamanism. It is this aspect of their narratives that will become the focus of my analysis in the proceeding section.

### **Emplotting the Shamanic: An Analysis of *Ayahuasca* Narratives**

To undertake the task of interpreting the representations of shamanism posited by Elenbaas and Gorman I adopt the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur. In the words of Ricoeur, such hermeneutical inquires aim "to reconstruct the set of operations by which a work lifts itself above the opaque depths of living, acting, and suffering, to be given by an author to readers who receive it and thereby change their acting" (Ricoeur, 1983: 53). In the context of the *ayahuasca* narratives under consideration, this reconstruction consists in identifying the ways in which the authors' emplot specific representations of shamanism into the configuration of their narrative experiences. Moreover, in order to interpret the meanings that the authors attach to specific shamanic representations, it is necessary to set them in relation to the themes presented in the text as a whole. This will

allow for a more precise interpretation of the author's use of terms such as shamanism, which Kehoe (2000) and Sidky (2010) have shown to be polysemic and comprised of overlapping meanings.

The process of unfolding the meaning inherent in these authors' narrative configurations will also be guided by Ricoeur's theory of narrative. As developed in the previous chapter, this theory views narrative as the mimetic emplotment of experience through the act of configuration. Such narrative configuration in turn is linked through the three-fold mimesis to the author's own cultural prefiguration, and as well to the world of the reader through the act of refiguration that occurs when a text is read. While the act of configuration that occurs in relation to shamanic narratives is but one point in Ricoeur's threefold mimesis, it is an essential waypoint for my analysis of *ayahuasca* narratives and will therefore be my focus. Nonetheless, as my intention is to develop a theory of shamanic narrative that highlights the dynamic role of literature in the mediation of shamanic representations for neo-shamanic practitioners, it is necessary to discuss *ayahuasca* narratives as they relate to each of the three mimetic acts.

### *Prefiguration*

The tradition of shamanism's narrative prefiguration is comprised of the various characters, actions, and experiences, basically of an unthematized nature, written by authors in order convey the sense that indigenous religions are shamanic. These elements provide the individual with a background awareness which is anticipatory in nature. While the origins of this tradition are found in the earliest accounts of European explorers and intellectual who documented their encounters with indigenous peoples, later scholars,



such as Eliade and Hultkrantz, have had substantial influence on the formation of the tradition of shamanic narrative found in contemporary western culture.

By peering into this tradition of shamanic narrative and identifying how the semantic and symbolic components found therein act to structure the reader's reception of its conveyed meaning, one is taking stock of its narrative prefiguration. These semantic and symbolic elements relate fundamentally to human action, and in particular the quality of human action that can order it towards a certain end goal. Included in this is the network of semantics that relate to aspects of acting, and suffering or undergoing the actions of others that characterizes human experience. In the context of shamanic narratives, the actions of the shaman are variously expressed as actions of: healing, teaching, and defending against, as well as responding to, in the case of shamanic attack. Additionally there is the symbolic nexus of meanings that circulate, supplying the context in which the action is being conducted. In the emerging tradition of *ayahuasca* narratives, these actions are characterized as ritualistic. They include, administering *ayahuasca*, medicinal plants and other such plant teachers, conducting the rituals related to their ceremonial setting of their use, and employing various healing methodologies through ritual action.

The aforementioned field of prefiguration is related to the various ideas and actions of the shaman figure that have been made available through academic and popular literature. Examples of this include: emphasis on the attainment of an altered state of conscious through ritual action, as well as the shaman's relation to other characters in the story such as their patients, family, and the community at large. Additionally, many shamanic narratives, such as that of Harner's core shamanism, which

regards shamanism as a universal methodology to be utilized regardless of the practitioner's cultural context, directly impact on the reader by casting 'shamanism' as a universal phenomenon. Taken together, this pool of pre-narrative elements forms the tradition of shamanic discourse, a tradition that finds its expression through the activation of the pre-narrative capacities nascent in all experience.

### *Configuration*

In the case of the *ayahuasca* narratives written by Elenbaas and by Gorman, the act of configuration relates to the ways in which the authors emplot the characters and actions into individual narrative accounts. Both Elenbaas's and Gorman's accounts are the product of narrative configuration and, as such, are influenced by the field of prefiguration while, at the same time, being creative inventions representative of their lived experiences. This is due to the ways that the authors emplot their experiences alongside concepts in order to furnish the events of their narrative with personal meaning.

The emplotment of such representations of the 'shamanic' into a narrative configuration is a mimetic action, that is, one of active composition. This is to say that their narrative works, themselves, are reflections upon their lived experiences, in particular, the use of *ayahuasca* while in Peru, a topic they learn about experientially. Through emplotment, the various events and experiences that occur, be they encounters with spirits or instances of healing, are organized into a meaningful composition. With respect to representations of shamanism present within these *ayahuasca* narratives, this process results in the synthesis of heterogeneous elements. These include, the various *vegetalistas* with whom the authors work, their specific ritual or healing practices, and as

well their socio-cultural contexts. Such elements are emploted into a narrative configuration that is made meaningful in light of each author's own individual context.

Most importantly, my use of Ricoeur's concept of emplotment concerns the various features of narrative configuration as the synthesis of the heterogeneous: "the mediation performed by the plot between the multiple incidents and unified story; the primacy of concordance over discordance; and, finally, the competition between succession and configuration" (Ricoeur; 1991: 22). Starting with Elenbaas's *Fishers of Men*, it is possible to distinguish two distinct plots from the multiple events that comprise his story. The first of these plots consists of the multiple *ayahuasca* sessions in which Elenbaas participates, while the second relates emotionally traumatic events of his childhood and youth as well as his adolescent search for identity. Included in this latter category are: the emotional neglect he feels from his parents as a child, particularly from his father (13); sexual abuse he is subjected to at the hands of another boy (36); his conversion to a fundamentalist Baptist Christian church, in spite of his father who is a Methodist preacher (121); heartbreak after false rape allegations are issued by his former girlfriend (145); promiscuous sexual relations (212); and, sustained addictions to drugs resulting in an opiate overdose (230). Toward the end of his account, Elenbaas begins experimenting with psychedelic substances, such as mushrooms (237) and mescaline (246), and finds the experiences that they induce to be therapeutic and beneficial. We discover near the conclusion of Elenbaas's story that it was after watching an "adventure program on television [featuring] an *ayahuasca* ceremony and a group of indigenous shamans and their young American apprentice, Ethan" (257), that he decides to travel to the Amazon in order to use *ayahuasca*.

Elenbaas supplements this plot with numerous events in the lives of his father and grandfather, such as his grandfather participating in a bombing raid on a village as a result of his service in the United States military during the Korean War (90). Through this sub-plot, Elenbaas situates himself in a cross-generational context in order to develop the idea of a ‘family sickness’ (247). Taken together these events present a background against which Elenbaas’s account of his *ayahuasca* experiences are made significant and meaningful.

In Elenbaas’s story, the events of this aforementioned plot occur in tandem with the numerous *ayahuasca* ceremonies in which Elenbaas participates. Placed in contrast against the episodes of his youth and childhood, Elenbaas’s accounts of his experiences drinking *ayahuasca* offer descriptions of his vivid visions, personal insights, and process of emotional healing. This succession of episodes begins in the Peruvian Amazon with the American ‘master shaman’ Ethan handing Elenbaas a cup of *ayahuasca* in his first ceremony (3). This is set at *El Puma Negro*, a lodge developed to heal westerners and teach them about *ayahuasca* shamanism, and is where Elenbaas establishes himself returning there multiple times. He becomes an initiate in the use of *ayahuasca* under the guidance of Ethan, who he terms a gringo-shaman, and his maestro or teacher, the *mestizo* shaman Domingo. During each visit Elenbaas, participates in multiple *ayahuasca* ceremonies during which he receives visions of a cathartic nature helping him to release his repressed emotional traumas and reform his self-destructive patterns of behaviour.

His visions are recounted in detail and relate the cognitive insights that allow him to breakthrough his previously held dilemmas. Elenbaas does not make mention of being able to control his visionary experiences but instead is an active observer in them, only

infrequently interacting with spirit entities. In one such vision he encounters the figure of Jesus who he realizes, through his communication with him, is an enlightened being, and foremost a person, not a dogma, doctrine, or religion (73). In this way, Elenbaas's *ayahuasca* experiences are related primarily through colourful imagery depicting the surreal and rapidly changing character of *ayahuasca* visions, into which retrospective insights about his past emerge.

Additionally, Elenbaas notes how his visions are influenced by the *icaros* that Ethan sings with the accompaniment of his *chakapa* during the ceremonies, as his body and all of his perceptions melt into “the vision producing *icaro*” (6). During Elenbaas's ceremonies, Ethan's role is not confined to singing *icaros*, but is one of active engagement. As well, Ethan offers verbal encouragement and teachings to the participants such as when he declares that “we are all of one body” (45) in response to the participants amazement at witnessing telepathic communication. At other moments Ethan challenges them, confronting them with statements such as: “You wanted to drink *ayahuasca*. This is what *ayahuasca* is about. It's about getting real” (28). Later, Elenbaas observes how Ethan began confusing his distinct roles as teacher and healer, leading him to treat all of “the guests [as if they] were both patients and apprentices at the exact same time” (197). This was not the only change at *El Puma Negro* that Elenbaas notices over his years of attendance. He notes that the cost of “attending a healing retreat” (195) more than triples, a change that seems to occur as Ethan obtains significant status as a “celebrity shaman” (195). Elenbaas observes that drinking *ayahuasca* was becoming “like a religion at *El Puma Negro*” (196), with patients returning even after being healed. Because of this, Elenbaas does not return to Peru, but begins participating in *ayahuasca*

ceremonies in the United States with “a wealthier, urban shaman” (217) named Carlos who would travel in from South America.

Of central importance during his *ayahuasca* ceremonies is the act of purging related to the emetic effects of *ayahuasca*, which he notes is ‘in a league of its own’ when compared to other forms of psychological and bodily detoxifications (21). As Elenbaas progresses through the accounts of his various ceremonies, the insights he gleans are set in relation to the experiences of his youth. Here he demonstrates in carefully structured narratives the way that his *ayahuasca* experiences transform his life. One such beneficial insight that Elenbaas receives is that his previously failed quests for identity, through drugs, or fundamentalist religion, have been the result of him always struggling against his self (49). Indeed a pivotal theme in his story is that psychedelic substances, particularly *ayahuasca*, can be of psychotherapeutic and spiritual benefit when taken as a medicine. Moreover, the experiences resulting from the ingestion of such substances can also allow one to heal themselves. Elenbaas’s *ayahuasca* sessions become central events tying together his overall narrative. Alternating between this narrative and that of his troubled youth, Elenbaas structures his configuration as one of cross-generational healing made possible through the use of psycho-active plants, most notably *ayahuasca*. On a more personal level, Elenbaas credits drinking *ayahuasca* with helping him to ease his addiction to drugs. For Elenbaas, the use of *ayahuasca*, as well as other psychedelics, should not be recreational, but should be guided by an existing tradition (225).

In Elenbaas’s overall narrative, the figure of the shaman and the concept of shamanism play an essential role in his emplotment of the various events into a cohesive whole. Taken as a whole, Elenbaas’s story integrates two distinct notions of shamanism,

one experiential, and the other abstract. The first involves Elenbaas's personal relationships with the shamans at *El Puma Negro*, Ethan and Domingo, as well as Carlos who leads his *ayahuasca* ceremonies in the United States. This experiential notion of the shaman is developed through the various relations he has with the shamans with whom he drinks *ayahuasca*. They facilitate his insights through their actions within the ceremonies, such as: presenting verbal teachings, singing *icaros*, and caring for him when he is in crisis.

The figure of the shaman represents an element of concordance in Elenbaas's narrative configuration, as it is through his personal relationships with shamans that he seeks resolution on the events of his past. Ethan's frequent teachings and suggestions during ceremonies figure prominently in key events where Elenbaas confronts his past choices and previously held ideas. While Ethan's subsequent ascent to being a 'celebrity shaman,' could be viewed as discordant within his story's overall plot, this event in fact serves to further clarify Elenbaas's preferred notion of the shaman. Dissatisfied with Ethan's confused and overly confrontational approach, Elenbaas finds in Carlos a shaman whose gentle approach to teaching allows him to develop his own relationship with the medicine. Implicit in the narration of this experience is that the primary benefit of *ayahuasca* usage is psycho-therapeutic, an aspect of Elenbaas's *ayahuasca* experiences that is emphasized throughout his story. In this way the discord introduced into the plot by Ethan's shifting role as a 'celebrity shaman' is resolved by the relationship that Elenbaas forms with Carlos. This produces a notion of the shamanic figure as one who facilitates the participant's own process of personal transformation. In this way, Elenbaas's emplotment of the shaman into his narrative account acts to unify the events

of his story. The shamans with whom Elenbaas develops relationships, propel his story forward by facilitating the insights he recounts during his *ayahuasca* ceremonies as well as embodying the shift in Elenbaas's approach to the use of *ayahuasca*.

The second notion of the shaman that Elenbaas configures into his narrative is of an abstract nature and relates more specifically to the concept of shamanism that he develops. This is done through a series of chapters interspersed throughout the story that present numerous vignettes on topics pertaining to various aspects of 'shamanism'. These are not grounded in Elenbaas's lived experiences but represent a universalized concept of shamanism lacking in specific cultural context. Instead, Elenbaas refers to "ancient shamanic and tribal traditions" (37) as he builds his concept of the shamanic which resemble expressions of what could be described as an archetype of shamanism. Moreover, the views of shamanism he presents in these chapters are likely informed by his familiarity with popular and academic literature on shamanism, a point he repeatedly gives reference to throughout the story.

Elenbaas emplots this abstract concept of shamanism into his narrative in order to unify its events in two main ways. The first of these relates to the idea of a rite of passage within 'ancient shamanic and tribal traditions,' during which, "a young man or woman was taken through an initiation ritual or rite of passage ... in order to function in the greater world of nature and the tribe." (37). Elenbaas presents this concept of the rite of passage against the experiences of his childhood and adolescent years, which serves to highlight the lack of positive guidance he perceived coming from his 'elders'. This theme can as well be connected to the overall plot of his narrative. From this perspective, Elenbaas's travels to Peru and his subsequent *ayahuasca* experiences become a 'vision



quest' of their own, in which Elenbaas learns how to function 'in the greater world,' as well as in the context of his familial relationships. The concept of the 'rite of passage' that Elenbaas develops is highly generic and is not explicitly associated with any specific indigenous culture. It can be easily linked, however, to his father's interest in Native American indigenous traditions, which he shares with Elenbaas throughout his narrative. This previous background of Native American cultures is likely an influence in Elenbaas's characterization of the vision quest as a pan-indigenous phenomenon<sup>37</sup>. For Elenbaas, a rite of passage, or vision quest, does not initiate one into the vocation of shaman, but it marks the passage into a greater social sphere and is facilitated by shamans and elders. The significance of this theme for Elenbaas's narrative is emphasized in the closing chapter of the narrative, titled 'Returning the Elders,' which includes a journal entry from his father's first *ayahuasca* ceremony.

The second way that Elenbaas emplots this abstract notion of the shaman into his narrative is in relation to the broader concept of a generalized and historical shamanism. This is accomplished by way of short expositions on shamanism and vignettes set in a seemingly timeless, 'tribal,' past. These short stories feature characters such as 'tribal council members', 'the shaman', and 'a young shamaness'. The most developed of these narratives tells the story of this young 'shamaness's' initiation (53) into the role of shaman. Through the emplotment of these abstract representations of shamanism, Elenbaas gives form to the shaman figure in his narrative.

For Elenbaas, the traditional role of the shaman or medicine man is ambiguous because the position of the shaman is not a stable one. The shaman is a "shape shifter"

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<sup>37</sup> This is supported by Elenbaas's use of the term medicine man, which he uses synonymously with the title of shaman.

(51). This notion of the shaman, as shape shifter, is rooted in the shaman's ability to "intuit archetypes and patterns within the worlds of the personal, societal, and the universal (perhaps all at once) and then relay his findings to others as a form of instruction, ritual, healing, work of art, song, or ceremony " (51). This act of retrieving rituals from their visionary experiences, to be used for the obtainment of certain ends, serves to differentiate the shaman from others. It is by way of the shaman's initiation, generally entailing an experience that "breaks open his boundaries between these personal, societal, and universal layers of existence" (51), that he / she learns "teachings and healing" (57) on these three varying levels. By way of addressing these different levels of existence, the shaman acts to restore harmony. For Elenbaas, this is an important aspect of the shaman, and is one that he develops in a descriptive style of prose typical of his writing:

Given their psychic initiation, shamans can bring balance and harmony to the diversity of dimensions within other life forms: humans, animals, ecosystems, concepts, pathologies, and so forth. Through the initiation and training process, a shaman learns to manipulate the structures of energy / spirit to create new life. A shaman is a self-regenerator. A shaman makes things new. This is why shamans can heal people. Shamans lead people safely through psychic or spiritual death and into a new form or self-identity (52).

Commensurate with Elenbaas's characterization of the shaman as a shape shifter, the shamanic figure that emerges from this description is one whose form is not easily discerned. Easily adaptable to different cultural contexts, Elenbaas's notion of the shaman, relies upon the shaman's ability to bring 'balance and harmony' to their three levels of existence. Elenbaas additionally notes that there is a "dark side of shamanism in the history of 'shamanism' ... [where shamans] played a role in things like tribal politics, warfare, and social disputes (54). This dark side of shamanism is contrasted against the work of 'good shamans' who "create rituals meant to promote peace and vitality among

all beings...A good shaman also hopes that we might learn to heal each other in the future. A good shaman knows that each one of us is a shaman” (55). This is possible because “to some extent, each of us is a shaman” (59). Elenbaas’s concept of shamanism is explained through short narratives stories set in a ‘tribal’ context in which a ‘shaman’ addresses the various concerns of the tribe and its members. Elenbaas does not fully relate these short narratives to his own socio-cultural context, but instead emplots them into his narrative as expressions of an’ ancient shamanic and tribal’ world, contrasted against the culturally and temporally situated events of his own life.

Both of these abstract notions of shamanism are currents that run throughout Elenbaas’s narrative, which act to inform the experiential notion of shamanism that he deploys. Taken together, both of Elenbaas’s notions of the shaman, as informed by experience or abstract concept, become elements of concordance and contribute to the stability and progression of Elenbaas’s account. In terms of his over-all narrative, the notion of the shamanic rite of passage, or visions quest, casts his own narrative account as a rite of passage, the essence of which Elenbaas characterizes as shamanic. This relates to the various ways in which the shamans, Ethan, Domingo, and Carlos, fulfil the role of tribal elders for Elenbaas. Not only does this act to structure the events of his narrative as such, but it as well grounds his experiences in the ‘ancient traditions’ ensconced in ‘shamanic and tribal cultures’. Similarly, Elenbaas’s emplotment of the shaman into his narrative account acts to thematize the entire work, showing how the shamans with whom he works mediate between his past and present, and bring “balance and harmony’ into his own life through their teachings and healing. This process finds its completion at the end of his narrative when Elenbaas develops his own relationship with the *ayahuasca* outside

of the Peruvian context. In the case of Elenbaas's *Fisher of Men*, the emplotment of the concept of shamanism acts both to propel his narrative forward, as well as to synthesize the various events of his troubled past together with his *ayahuasca* experiences into a meaningful configuration.

The second example of *ayahuasca* narrative that will be analyzed is Gorman's *Ayahuasca In My Blood* (2010). The configuration of Gorman's *ayahuasca* experiences into a unified narrative is accomplished through the emplotment of successive episodes or events into a single cohesive narrative account. These events are comprised of experiences which primarily relate to two topics: Gorman's cumulative experiences drinking *ayahuasca*, and instances where Gorman implements the specific knowledge and abilities obtained from these experiences into his various life situations. With the exception of an introduction, an opening prologue, and the first pages of his first chapter, the events of Gorman's narrative follow a linear and chronological progression from beginning to end. These opening sections, which introduce central characters and concepts through explanations grounded in Gorman's lived experiences, provide the reader with a context of background knowledge and serves to thematically orient the events that follow.

While Gorman incorporates multiple sub-plots into his account, there are two separate, though interrelated, main plots around which Gorman configures the events of his narrative. The first of these plots relates to Gorman's relationship with Julio, a respected *curandero*, which could be characterized as both a friendship as well as an apprenticeship. The second of these plots follows Gorman's induction onto the path of

*ayahuasca* healing, and is expressed through his subsequent incorporation of the knowledge and abilities he learns into his own life.

In the initial chapter of Gorman's narrative we are introduced to Julio, a *curandero* who is knowledgeable in the use of numerous medicines, including *ayahuasca* which, as Julio relates, allows him "to see inside a person and see what is wrong" (25). In this opening segment, Gorman and Larry, a friend from Brooklyn, have returned to the Amazon to meet with Julio, a 'friend of several years', and again imbibe *ayahuasca* with him. Set at Julio's "stilted hut on the Rio Aucayacu" (25), this retrospective episode becomes a point of departure for Gorman's own introduction to *ayahuasca* and Julio, as well the events that will follow.

This narrative begins in 1984 with Gorman, Larry, and, another friend Chuck, arriving in Iquitos. After having spent time at Machu Picchu and the Cordillera Blanca (27), the trio of companions hire Moises, a 55 year old *mestizo* guide, to take them into the jungle for a multiple day trek. Moises inquires if the small group would be interested in drinking *ayahuasca*, which he claims is "*muy diferente*" from other drugs and is the fastest way to know the jungle" (28). Having never heard of the brew before, the group is intrigued by Moises' description and treks with him through the jungle to the house of Alphonse who agrees to make *ayahuasca* and conduct a ceremony for them. For Gorman, this first experience with *ayahuasca* is marked by several visions, as well as the pronounced purging that *ayahuasca* produces. Most notable during Gorman's first *ayahuasca* session is his experience of merging with a soaring bird within his vision. As he recounts, "I realized I was seeing with the bird's perspective, picking out the most minute details of the landscape" (31). Additionally, the bird takes Gorman to specific

places that are meaningful to him, where he separately observes an ex-girlfriend, and friends in New York. The experience of transforming into various animals occurs multiple times throughout Gorman's *ayahuasca* experiences and becomes an ability that Gorman uses as a source of insight, as well as other utilitarian ends. These initial experiences challenge Gorman forcing him to ponder if it was "possible that [his] ego had really dissolved – momentarily – to allow [him] to interplay with another life form" (33). Upon his return to the United States, Gorman collects various literature pertaining to *ayahuasca*, but later decides not to read them as he fears that the written accounts of others "would influence his next experience" (33). This emphasis upon experiential learning is a theme that characterizes Gorman's over-all approach to learning about *ayahuasca*.

While much of Gorman's narrative account is structured around the numerous *ayahuasca* ceremonies in which he participates, these are not configured as stand-alone events but are couched in terms of Gorman's relationships with the various *curanderos* with whom he works. The most important of these is with Julio, with whom Gorman would form a life-long friendship. Gorman is introduced to Julio by Moises during his return to the Amazon several months later with the intention of spending time with Moises and "learning about the jungle" (34). Before their first ceremony, Julio and a small group of Julio's patients discuss his previous work as a healer, amazing Gorman with descriptions of a spiritual operation he had performed: "How is it possible to cut open a stomach and wash it in the river? It isn't. But with *ayahuasca* it is" (36). Julio continues, elaborating on this topic: "You might say it is all a vision. Still, people come to me and with *ayahuasca* I heal them" (36). As Gorman continues to drink *ayahuasca*

with Julio during future trips to Peru, he slowly becomes acquainted with the *ayahuasca* experience and the abilities that its use makes possible.

Throughout this process, Gorman is confronted with phenomena during his *ayahuasca* ceremonies, which he cannot rationally explain. Instances of telepathy, clairvoyance, and encounters with spirit entities are not met with disbelief but with added astonishment as Gorman begins to verify that the information he clairvoyantly gains from his *ayahuasca* experiences is indeed correct. During one *ayahuasca* ceremony Gorman is told to deliver an urgent message to Moise's son Junior about a change to their expedition's route (46). Within the visionary realm of *ayahuasca*, Gorman attempts his task, transforming into a boa and travelling miles upriver in order to locate Junior's small boat. The following day, Gorman's groups rendezvous' with Junior at their revised location, much to Gorman's surprise. Junior reports having encountered a boa the night before, a 'spirit snake,' he reports, that just disappeared (47). Additionally, Gorman gleans insights into his personal life from his *ayahuasca* experiences, learning to let go of a previous lover (66), and foreseeing danger on an up coming boat expedition into Brazil (77). In these and the numerous other accounts of *ayahuasca* ceremonies that follow, Gorman's use of *ayahuasca* is structured around definite and specific intentions, which are frequently informed by Julio's instruction.

This process occurs in tandem with Gorman's additional excursions into the jungle, through which he, as well, becomes familiar with the different indigenous families, and communities that live in the jungle. For Gorman, the *ayahuasca* experience is not the sole reason for his frequent trips to the Peruvian Amazon; as he notes, "I'd fallen in love with the people who lived along the riverbanks or back in the woods. And

learning about all of it was aided by the *ayahuasca* experience” (48). This sentiment soon takes on a very literal dimension, as Gorman returns to Peru and meets Cheba, a young Peruvian woman helping to guide one of his expeditions, who he thereafter marries, moving his new family back to New York (81).

Over the course of the years that follow, Gorman establishes himself in Iquitos and leads numerous small groups of foreigners on “Amazon jaunts” (105) to the homes of familiar *curanderos*, such as Don Francisco (123), for *ayahuasca* ceremonies. During these tours, Gorman’s ability to facilitate *ayahuasca* ceremonies develops, he learns various *icaros*, and develops a sense of confidence in the use of the various healing methodologies with which he has become familiar. As Gorman’s experiences with *ayahuasca* continue, he becomes able to follow the actions of Julio, and other *curanderos*, while in ceremonies, observing the specific techniques they use to treat patients. During these group trips Gorman is able to work with multiple *curanderos*, each of whom Gorman learns from; however, it is Julio’s teachings that Gorman emphasizes most in his narrative. Julio’s instruction does not totally consist of verbally teaching Gorman about specific plants, or helping him to interpret his visions, but Julio also instructs Gorman within the visionary space of *ayahuasca* during their ceremonies. This instruction is conducted by Julio himself in shared visions (109), but as well by the spirits that Julio sends to Gorman in order to teach him.

As his narrative progresses, Gorman develops lasting relationships with numerous spirit entities that help him to glean insights into his life, particularly into his failing relationship with Cheba. In addition to these experiences, the spirits also teach Gorman various techniques to be used for patient diagnosis and treatment. While there are many



such entities that Gorman encounters during his experiences, the ‘doctors’ (114), “The-Man-Who-Tells-Me-Things”, and *sachavaca* are featured most frequently. While it is often Gorman who approaches these spirits with specific questions or requests, the spirits frequently visit Gorman without direct solicitation in order to teach him necessary lessons. As mentioned, these lessons are often of a personal nature, as when the doctors attempt to help Gorman ‘become’ Cheba and see himself from her eyes (120). At other times, he is encouraged by individual spirits to perform acts of healing, such as when he removes the spiritual form of a sickness from one of his group members with a healing technique that ‘The-Man-Who-Tells-Me-Things’, appearing as a boa, shares with Gorman (129). As Gorman reflects on the teachings that he receives from his spirit allies, he begins to incorporate his insights into his life-world, outside of the context of his ceremonies in Peru.

Additionally, Gorman learns about the hazards of working with *ayahuasca*, which are expressed most predominantly through the realities of *brujaria*, which initially act as a discordant element within the narrative. After being forced to defend himself from spiritual attacks conducted by jealous acquaintances, Jake and Larry, Gorman integrates the occurrence of *brujaria* into his worldview. For Gorman, this becomes framed by an understanding of the moral dimensions of *ayahuasca*, and the power of unconditional love to inform one’s responsible actions, both within *ayahuasca* ceremonies, but as well in all aspects of one’s life (165 – 170). This can be seen as one of the primary themes that emerges from Gorman’s narrative, the development of which characterizes the configuration of his narrative’s primary plots, namely: his relationship with Julio, and his growing confidence on the path of learning that was set by his initial *ayahuasca*

experience. At the conclusion of Gorman's narratives, set in 2007, these two aforementioned plots converge, and Gorman is forced to provide treatment to Julio, who now vulnerable due to his increasing age is the target of sustained spiritual attacks (222). Although Gorman is effective in removing the *virotas* from Julio resulting from the *brujaria*, Julio ultimately succumbs to future attacks and dies. For Gorman, his relationship to Julio possesses a depth which is likened to his relationship with his parents, as he recounts: "The same as when my parents died, I wished I could have another day with [Julio]" (229). After the death of Julio, Gorman continues working with *ayahuasca*, bringing small groups of foreigners in need of healing to the jungles surrounding Iquitos in order to drink *ayahuasca*.

While the character of Julio figures prominently in Gorman's narrative, structuring the events of his narrative into a progression from beginning to end, Gorman additionally casts his narrative as "an incredible journey of the heart" (13). While this journey begins with his initial *ayahuasca* experience, for Gorman it is a journey that has not yet ended, as he states, "my work [with *ayahuasca*] is certainly not finished" (244). As such, Gorman intentionally leaves this aspect of his narrative open, emphasizing that his *ayahuasca* practice is not motivated by the obtainment of a grand sense of closure or resolution. Instead, Gorman closes his narrative reflectively, emphasizing his gratitude for having been able to work with Julio, as well as for watching 'the medicine work' with the people whom he led into the jungle.

From the perspective of this analysis, Gorman's *ayahuasca* narrative is most notable in that he does not actively develop a concept of the shaman or of shamanism through which to emplot his experiences. While the concept of shamanism is absent from

his narrative account, it is included as an entry in Gorman's glossary, which is intended to be a contextual resource for the reader. Here, Gorman defines shamanism as: "A range of traditional beliefs and practices concerned with communication with the spirit world... [noting that] the word originates among (sic) the Tungus people of Siberia, but now includes any system in which spirit-world communication is vital" (10). As is evidenced by this entry and those accompanying it, Gorman does possess a degree of knowledge related to shamanism and indigenous religions outside of the Peruvian context. Additionally, through his various occupations, including journalist, naturalist, and explorer, Gorman would have undoubtedly become familiar with the various academic and popular literature pertaining to shamanism.

With the exception of this and one additional idiosyncratically isolated mention within his narrative, Gorman does not configure the concept of shamanism into his narrative account as a means to make his experiences personally intelligible. Moreover, his representation of the religious and cultural lives of *mestizo* and indigenous Peruvians is not framed by a shamanic conceptual framework, but is constructed organically from his lived experiences and interactions. In this way, his views on *ayahuasca* and the figure of the *curandero*, are developed experientially within the context of his relationships with numerous *curanderos*, and companions, such as Moises, that facilitate Gorman's journey. This is particularly evident through the frequent passages Gorman devotes to Julio's descriptions of previous healings that he had conducted. As such, Gorman's approach to configuring topics, such as *ayahuasca*, and *curanderismo*, into a narrative composition is primarily accomplished by relating the examples and explanations offered by others. This approach is implicitly established in Gorman's

prologue, which contains a collection of retrospective narratives in which Gorman observes Julio treating various indigenous patients.

While Gorman's representation of *mestizo* religion is primarily emplotted into his narrative through examples, this is not to say that Gorman's narrative is an unthematized series of objectively recounted events. In select passages, Gorman shares his personal spiritual views, and places his experiences in a more global context. In one such instance, he commences his prologue by stating, "I'm going to start with a supposition: that all matter has a life force. By that I mean that all matter is sentient" (14). Here Gorman, develops the concept of master teacher plants which are gatekeepers of a sort, allowing us, "we humans, to slow down enough to communicate with the mountains; to speed up enough to communicate with the hummingbird; to visit the other realms present and past and simultaneous that are here but that we don't ordinarily see or hear within the bandwidths of our senses" (15). Through this description, Gorman emphasizes the importance of these plants for communication with different other-than-human entities, and transportation to realms which are normally inaccessible. For Gorman, the indigenous use of *ayahuasca* in this regard is analogous with the use of several other master plant teachers "among (sic) the indigenous peoples of the world" (12). These are briefly described by Gorman through various examples, such as the use of *peyote* in northern Mexico, or the *Amanita muscaria* mushroom ingested by Siberian shamans (12). For Gorman, these examples are not unified through the concept of shamanism, but are related by virtue of the relationships these plants share with humanity.

With *Ayahuasca In My Blood*, Gorman presents a series of events, unified into a meaningful narrative by way of emplotment. While the events of his narrative are

primarily constituted by his multiple *ayahuasca* ceremonies, it is his relationships with his teachers and family, as well his spirit allies, and with *ayahuasca* itself, that propels his narrative forward.

### *Refiguration*

As with all written accounts, the function of the previously analyzed *ayahuasca* narratives is to communicate to the reader, providing them with but a glimpse into alternative worlds which flow forth from their author's mind. These *ayahuasca* narratives become possible worlds with which the reader interacts through the imaginative explorations of their reading. For Ricoeur, this act is one of mimetic emplotment, which as he states "marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer, or reader" (71). The result of this intersection is the refiguration of the world of the reader by way of read narrative, entailing a re-description of the reader's world through the various configurations of characters, actions, and experiences that are emplotted into narrative form.

With respect to the present *ayahuasca* narratives authored by Elenbaas and Gorman, the reader is presented with two separate narrative configurations of the *ayahuasca* experience. In order for a narrative to be completed, it must be read, an act through which its meanings are unfolded in the mind of the reader. In reading the written accounts of Elenbaas, and Gorman, one is presented with an opportunity to imaginatively explore the worlds they describe. Additionally, the reader is able to 'try on for size', in the mode of imagination, possible changes in their ways of acting in the world. This may lead one to undertake a journey similar to that of Elenbaas, or travel to Peru and explore

the landscapes and cultures found in the Amazon, such Gorman. Additionally, these *ayahuasca* narratives may resonate with the existing views of the reader, not enticing them to travel abroad, but serving to reinforce or expand their worldviews.

Most importantly, the work of refiguration is completed in the mind of the reader, and is correctly called his or her own. Such refiguration, is expressed in relation to the reader's own individual context, being drawn from the content of their lived experience. As such, it is only possible to identify the potential forms of refiguration that a reading of Elenbaas's, or Gorman's narratives may produce for the reader. Despite the variegated contexts in which the reader is embedded, the act of refiguration is both creative and exploratory. This relates to the interplay between sedimentation and innovation within the act of reading itself. Refiguration, by way of narrative, can thus be seen as a conduit through which specific representations of the shamanic are transmitted spatially and preserved temporally within the cultural imagination. By way of its mediation to the lived narrative of the reader through refiguration, specific notions of indigenous religions as 'shamanic' are emploted into the reader's lived narrative. This entails that the reader is able to adopt certain attitude, behaviours, and positions that they are drawn to in certain texts. Additionally, a readers emplotment through refiguration of certain representations of indigenous religions, may act to determine the very manner that they approach the topics of *ayahuasca* and *mestizo* religion, as well as its practitioners.

Refiguration could also be said to mark the intersection of "the world configured by the poem [or other literary work], and the world wherein real action occurs and unfolds its specific temporality" (Ricoeur, 1984: 71). Because the 'real actions' carried out in this latter world carry with them very real consequences for those who suffer them,

a close, critical reading of *ayahuasca* narratives is warranted, let alone required. As such, it is necessary to apply a hermeneutic of suspicion to the *ayahuasca* narratives presently under analysis.

### **Ayahuasca Narratives and Dussel's Concept Modernity**

For Ricoeur, the imaginative exploration of narrative through refiguration makes it possible for the reader to adopt different ways of being in the world. As shown in the previous section's narrative analysis of neo-shamanic *ayahuasca* literature, it is this process that mediates the transmission of representations related to *mestizo* religion and the use of *ayahuasca* for the reader. Because topics such as *ayahuasca* 'shamanism' directly implicate the religious and cultural lives of those indigenous people who have traditionally utilized *ayahuasca*, it is a necessary to apply a hermeneutic of suspicion to Elenbaas's and Gorman's *ayahuasca* narratives and the representations of indigenous religion contained therein. As discussed in the previous chapter, this hermeneutics of suspicion will be informed by Dussel's criticism of modernity as an essentially Eurocentric position. Additionally, Dussel's concept of the transmodern, as well as his model of intercultural dialogue, will be applied to Elenbaas's *Fishers of Men* and Gorman's *Ayahuasca In My Blood*, in order to determine if their author's configuration of events is oriented towards symmetrical dialogue, or asymmetrical imposition.

For Dussel, modernity denotes two specific, though essentially opposing paradigms, the Eurocentric and the planetary. The first modernist paradigm is self-referential, regarding modernity as a solely historical European phenomenon in which destiny is equated with an emancipatory 'modern subjectivity,' which develops spatially

via the philosophical and cultural traditions initiated in Europe, such as the Enlightenment, and the Protestant Reformation (Dussel, 1998: 4). Modernity, from the perspective of the second paradigm, is constitutive of the world system, of which Europe, and now North America, occupies the position of core. In order to maintain its centrality in the world system the core actively manages the life-world, and the cultural sub-systems contained therein. This occurs by way of the simplification of the life-worlds of peripheral cultures through a process of rationalization and incorporation in the various, economic, political, and cultural systems of modernity (Dussel, 1998: 15). By viewing the two previous examples of *ayahuasca* narratives in relation to Dussel's work, it is possible to determine if, and how, the narrative configurations of each author's experiences contain modernist presuppositions. My intention here is not to over-write the self-understandings posited by the authors, nor to dismiss their insights, but to highlight instances where, by my reading of their narrative accounts, modernist presumptions are evident.

In the case of *Fishers of Men*, it is possible to identify the presence of both modernist paradigms within Elenbaas's narrative configuration. The first notion of modernity, although only subtly apparent, relates to what Elenbaas self-describes as his evangelism. As mentioned earlier, Elenbaas's narrative includes frequent reflection on his own Christian faith; this is a topic which, owing to the necessary constraints put in place by scope and subject, has not been fully developed. Suffice it to say, Elenbaas emplots these reflections in the form of short sermon-like, chapters which discuss topics such as Christian identity (76), prayer (105), and the second coming of Christ (167). It is in discussing this last topic that Elenbaas's narrative most prominently exhibits the



influence of universalizing modernist distortion. In his discussion of the nature of Christ's second coming, Elenbaas describes the role that *ayahuasca* will play, which as he states, is "a special one" (170). In developing this topic further, Elenbaas proclaims that in *ayahuasca* "a new sacrament is revealed" (170). Through its use one is exposed to the spiritual realm and that will allow them to 'connect to the Christ consciousness within it, the holy spirit of God's evolutionary work in creation" (171). According to Elenbaas, as this process happens "one time will end and a new one will begin" (171). This sees *ayahuasca*, and the tradition of its use by *mestizos*, subsumed into a totalizing theological paradigm of redemptive emancipation, which from the tone of immediacy in Elenbaas's descriptions, seems to be manifest as destiny. While these sentiments are not pronounced within Elenbaas's narrative, it is possible to tease them out of select passages, as has been demonstrated.

Elenbaas's narrative, additionally, possess a modernist presumption related to the simplification of *mestizo* religion and its rationalization as an 'ancient' shamanic tradition. While Elenbaas emplots the shamanic in order to render his *ayahuasca* experiences intelligible both personally, his development of the concept shamanism is conducted without any empirical basis. Moreover, what is conspicuously missing from his configuration of shamanism are emic descriptions which ground his concept in the empirical realities of the indigenous peoples whose cultures and religions he assimilates into the conceptual manifolds of his shamanic category. The assertion that Elenbaas's emplotment of the shamanic acts to simplify the cultural life-worlds of Peruvian *mestizos*, and moreover indigenous peoples generally, is evidenced by the abundant passages in which Elenbaas characterize indigenous religious traditions as a tribal, unified, or

homogenous. Moreover, this assertion is substantiated by the ways in which Elenbaas confers a minimal importance to illustrating the distinctions between the indigenous traditions enveloped within his concept of the shamanic. Nowhere does Elenbaas describe the Siberian origins of the shaman, nor does he give any indication that shamanism is a category constructed by western intellectuals. What is accomplished by the imposition of Elenbaas's conception of shamanism, however, is an attempt at totalizing indigenous traditions into a paradigm that seeks to simplify certain indigenous cultural systems through their rationalization as archetypal phenomena primarily comprised of psychotherapeutic practices.

In terms of Gorman's *Ayahuasca In My Blood*, the situation is markedly different. Within Gorman's narrative account, there is little to indicate that he regards modern history as exceptional, let alone as the *lingua franca* through which the emancipatory force of 'modern subjectivity' unfolds. Moreover, in Gorman's account he is careful to avoid subsuming, to the extent possible, the cultural and religious traditions he observes into an over-arching modernist historical narrative. This is particularly evident in one passage where, asked by a Peruvian doctor if he believes in black magic (*brujaria*), Gorman replies: "I said that while in Peru, where black magic is taken as something real, I did. In the States, where we don't believe in it, I didn't" (91). While Gorman's response to the doctor's query may seem trivial, it is relevant in two key ways. First, it clearly denotes a distinction between the different cultural systems, Peruvian and American, in which he operates. In this way Gorman is seen to interpret his experiences as though he were effectively operating in a separate cultural context. Secondly, it indicates that Gorman does not regard such cultural notions, such as *brujaria*, as expressions of a

primitive, or inferior, worldview in need of correction. Gorman, thus, can be seen to consciously refrain from totalizing the various cultures in which he participates into an over-arching narrative configuration, promising their emancipation, by way of a universalizing, modernist, discourse.

As discussed previously, Gorman's *ayahuasca* narrative is unique in that he does not depend upon a cross-cultural concept of shamanism in order to emplot his *ayahuasca* experiences. Carried into the context of Dussel's concept of modernity as a planetary paradigm, this characteristic of Gorman's narrative takes on new import. Foremost, Gorman does not reduce the complexity of *mestizo* religion into a conceptualized notion of the shamanic in order to render its diverse forms intelligible within his narrative. Furthermore, while he describes the various methodologies employed by *curanderos*, as similar insofar as they emphasize the use of master teacher plants, Gorman does not additionally synthesize their heterogeneous elements into a simplified conceptual category. This is evidenced through Gorman's frequent use of detailed description in relating his experiences, and the cultural contexts in which they occur. This is apparent in one particular instance where Gorman describes the various items that Julio arranges in front of himself during *ayahuasca* ceremonies. These consist of various items such as, *mapachos*, and Julio's *chakapa*, but additionally, a book of stories about Catholic saints (26). While the presence of this in Gorman's description is not unexpected, it does serve to indicate his acknowledgement that *mestizo* religious traditions are complex entities constituted by diverse forms of religious practice and belief. Furthermore, Gorman's emplotment of different *mestizo* religious practices is

framed in terms of their cultural context, as well as expressed through the descriptions and explanations of the various *curanderos* themselves.

When his worldview is challenged by the teachings he receives, or the insights that unfold from his *ayahuasca* experiences, Gorman's response is consistently one of bewilderment, in addition to a determination to continue learning. As Gorman recounts: "I still didn't understand the concept of talking with plants or communicating with the spirit world, but I'd lost what remained of my skepticism (sic)... I knew when the appropriate time came for me to use [*ayahuasca*] again I would know" (50). In this way, Gorman's approach to emplotting *mestizo* religious concepts into his narrative is guided by a focused exploration of the cultural world in which he participates. Gorman's approach throughout the experiential process of learning about these distinctive religious forms, is one of humility: "I didn't see the whole picture – and didn't even know there was a whole picture to see" (85). From this, and previous quotes, it is fair to say that Gorman does not simplify the tradition of *ayahuasca* in order to emplot it into a pre-determined and rationalized conceptual framework. In the absence of such an overreaching concept of the shamanic, the representations of *mestizo* religion that Gorman configures into his narrative emanate from the descriptions provided by *mestizo* practitioners themselves.

For Dussel, the critique of modernist presuppositions is important because it enables an inter-cultural dialogue to emerge, which is both self-reflexive, as well as liberated from dependence upon modernist discourse. While Dussel's focus centres on inter-cultural dialogue of a philosophical nature, his model can easily be adapted for use as a yardstick against which to assess the degree to which Elenbaas's, and Gorman's

narrative accounts represent a symmetrical dialogue or conversely an asymmetrical imposition. Symmetrical dialogue, as such, proceeds from a negation of modernity's dismissal of peripheral cultures as inferior and an affirmation of the periphery's denied alterity.

Both Gorman's narrative, and to a lesser extent Elenbaas's as well, are seen to implicitly negate the notion that *mestizo* culture is inferior. For Gorman this is most pronounced by his dedicated participation in *mestizo* culture for over 25 years, as well as his sustained relationships with *mestizo curanderos*, and friends. As Gorman recounts: "Learning about the jungle and its people had become a motivating force for me" (48). In this way, Gorman's experiences are implicitly emplotted around the notion that *mestizos* and their cultures are not inferior. Additionally, it can be said that Gorman's narrative configuration represents an active affirmation of *mestizo* alterity. This is most prevalent in Gorman's approach to emplotting *mestizo* religion into his narrative, which does not seek to conceptualize *ayahuasca* usage or *mestizo* religious practices by way of grafting them onto conceptual categories, which are external to the *mestizo* cultural context. Instead, Gorman develops an understanding of *mestizo* culture through descriptions and examples, a responsibility that Gorman confers to the various *mestizo* characters configured into his narrative.

Elenbaas's interest in indigenous religions, in particular the *mestizo* tradition of *ayahuasca* healing, is, as well indicative of an implicit denial of modernity's characterization of indigenous cultures as lacking worth. This sense is primarily developed through the contrasts evident between Elenbaas's representation of indigenous religions as 'ancient shamanic traditions' and passages in which Elenbaas are critical of

American history (224) and the excesses of western culture. Though instead of affirming the alterity of *mestizo* religion, Elenbaas affirms a romanticized notion of the shamanic, which is configured into his narrative as a personal, if not global, remedy to the negatives of western society. This is especially apparent in Elenbaas's description of '*ayahuasca* purging' as being "in a league of its own" (21) in comparison to other methods of bodily and psychological detoxification, such as 'Bikram's yoga classes', 'sauna sweats', and 'ecstatic dance' (21). In this sense, *ayahuasca* becomes a commodity, albeit a superior one, to be sought by the discerning spiritual consumer. As is the case in this example, Elenbaas's descriptions are typified by the deafeningly silent voices of the *mestizos* whose religious practices and ritual implements are being explicated. So, while Elenbaas could be said to deny modernity's negation of peripheral cultures, he falls well short of affirming the self-understandings of *mestizo ayahuasca* practitioners. By emplotting his own representation of *mestizo* religion as 'shamanic', Elenbaas's narrative does not seek an understanding of *ayahuasca* practitioners in terms of their distinctiveness, but instead can be seen to characterize them in relation to his own modernist presuppositions.

One may attest that the differences between these two *ayahuasca* narratives are easily explained by way of the different contexts in which they occur. Gorman of course recounts over twenty-five years of participation in *mestizo* culture, while Elenbaas makes only a series of short trips to Peru over a shorter duration of time. While this observation is certainly true, this distinction is superficial in the context of my analysis. This is because it is not the contexts, or circumstances, in which the authors' *ayahuasca* experiences occur, but the different meanings discerned from the authors' own configuration of those events, that distinguishes Elenbaas's, and Gorman's *ayahuasca*

narratives. As has been shown, the difference between the meanings discerned from each author's narrative relate primarily to their employment of the concept of shamanism

The importance of Dussel's model of inter-cultural dialogue lays its ability to facilitate cross-cultural exchange, while respecting the heterogeneous and hybrid cultural positions from which it is engaged. For Dussel, this connotes a transmodern paradigm which is neither pre-modern or post-modern, but is expressed 'beyond the pretensions' of modernity's 'supposedly universal culture' (Dussel, 2002: 236). In the present context of *ayahuasca* narratives, and *ayahuasca* tourism more generally, the boundaries that separate modern from transmodern paradigms is not so easily demarcated. This is because such boundaries are subject to continual negotiation by *mestizos* themselves. As such, it is not possible, and moreover it is not my place, to determine if either Elenbaas's or Gorman's narratives are expression of the transmodern. What I have been able to provide, however, is my own interpretation of *Fishers of Men* and *Ayahuasca In My Blood* in light of the principles that Dussel has proposed.

## Conclusion

This thesis has endeavoured to shed new light on the newly emergent genre of neo-shamanic literature referred to as '*ayahuasca* narratives'. By way of interpreting two such published accounts through the application of Paul Ricoeur's narrative theory, my intention has been to ascertain the specific manner in which each author configures their *ayahuasca* experiences into a narrative account. In particular, this analysis has focused on investigating how the authors emplot various notions related to *mestizo* religious practices, such as ritualized *ayahuasca* use.

Through a narrative analysis of Elenbaas's *Fishers of Men* (2010) and Gorman's *Ayahuasca In My Blood* (2010), it has been possible to identify the specific ways that each author configures the religious practices of *mestizo vegetalistas* into their own narrative account. In the case of Elenbaas, this is accomplished through the deliberate representation of *vegetalismo*, and its tradition of *ayahuasca* usage, by characterizing it as an 'ancient shamanic' tradition. Elenbaas's conception of the shaman is developed through various literary expositions which are not grounded in empirical fact, but that appear to flow from the author's own creative imagination. As such, the shaman becomes an amorphous figure, connected through the 'history of shamanism' to an idealized tribal past. Such a notion is reflective of Elenbaas's characterization of the shaman as a shape shifter and serves to make it possible for Elenbaas to emplot his constructed notion of shamanism into his narrative without acknowledging the nuances of indigenous cultures. As a result, indigenous cultures are lumped into a single shamanic tradition; a tradition



that Elenbaas uses to configure his narrative account and make his own *ayahuasca* experiences personally meaningful.

Although Elenbaas notes his familiarity with literature pertaining to shamanism, the degree to which shamanic literature influences the prefiguration of his narrative account is not evident. Nonetheless, it is apparent that Elenbaas's concept of the shaman shares certain resonances with the notion of shamanism posited by Eliade. As shown in the first chapter, Eliade's concept of shamanism was unified by virtue of the shaman's ecstatic technique, a characteristic that Eliade teased out of assorted ethnographic accounts of indigenous cultures. While, Elenbaas's concept of the shaman-as-shape-shifter is inconsistent with that of Eliade, it is their approaches to representing indigenous religions that share a certain affinity. Specifically, this relates to the manner in which both universalize shamanism, making it a category seen to extend across space and time.

In Gorman's narrative account, the second example of *ayahuasca* narrative that was analyzed, the concept of shamanism was largely absent. This is not to say that Gorman was unfamiliar with the concept of shamanism. Aside from isolated mentions, the concept of shamanism did not directly factor into Gorman's narrative configuration. His experiences participating in *ayahuasca* ceremonies within a *mestizo* religious context were instead framed by his interactions with various *curanderos*, particularly his teacher Julio. Most important within Gorman's narrative were the various *curanderos*, who instruct Gorman in the use of *ayahuasca* and encourages him to learn from his experiences. In this way, it was the *curanderos* themselves, and particularly Julio, who developed the representation of the *mestizo* tradition of *ayahuasca* which Gorman emplots into his narrative.

Although Gorman does not actively develop a concept of the shamanic within his account, both his and Elenbaas's narratives could be considered examples of different forms of neo-shamanic engagement. For Gorman, unlike Elenbaas, the term shaman is descriptive and not explanatory. This is primarily due to the fact that Gorman loosely acknowledges the concept of shamanism, but does not meaningfully incorporate it into his narrative as a means of explanation. This is not the only difference. Additionally, Elenbaas's account is more characteristically neo-shamanic as it embodies the features of spiritual eclecticism, and an emphasis on personal volition that were developed in Chapter Two. These attributes are, mostly, absent from Gorman's account, which is more representative of the Castaneda's tradition of neo-shamanic narrative. Indeed, neo-shamanism is an elastic category, representing heterogeneous practices and worldviews. The extreme variation in their treatment of what would commonly be considered as 'shamanic' topics exhibited by Gorman's and Elenbaas's account, may indicate that the conceptual boundaries of neo-shamanism need to be sharpened.

Nonetheless, the importance of analyzing these published accounts has laid in the fact that they are both contributions to neo-shamanic print culture. This point has been developed through the use of Ricoeur's narrative theory, which describes the process of refiguration that occurs with the act of reading narrative accounts. In this way, I have intended to show that the transmission of representations of the shamanic, and moreover representations of indigenous cultures, operates through the process of narrative refiguration.

As such, an important component of my analysis has been the incorporation of a hermeneutic of suspicion in the manner of Ricoeur, as informed by Dussel's criticisms of

modernity. This has allowed for an additional critical perspective in the interpretation of the *ayahuasca* narratives that have been considered. In particular, Dussel's post-colonial theory has allowed for the identification of distortions in the author's narrative accounts resulting from the inclusion of modernist presuppositions. Such a hermeneutic of suspicion is vital due to the history of colonial and neo-colonial relations that have historically characterized relations between Europe, and indigenous peoples.

For these reasons, a hermeneutical approach that incorporates a further critical perspective, such as Dussel's criticisms of modernity, represents a viable method for conducting further studies of neo-shamanism. Moreover, scholars of shamanism would do well to integrate similar approaches into their research, as this would provide a needed element of self-reflexivity to the study of indigenous peoples through the lens of conceptual shamanism. Furthermore, such an approach works to ensure that the diverse cultures of indigenous peoples are not reduced to singular conceptual categories.

Language is not neutral. This statement holds true is even if one fails to acknowledge this fact. The notion of the shaman, and its systematization into the concept shamanism, are no different in this regard. The term's usage, and the particular meanings that are attached to it, carry political implications. At stake here is the ability of indigenous peoples to posit their own identities, free from the imposition of presupposed categories.

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