

# Inebriation and Authenticity

The implications of consciousness alteration for the identification of self-  
concept; an analysis in the anthropology of affect

Abridged

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(with the help of many brilliant friends and an extensive pharmacopoeia)

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## Part I: Making Sense of Inebriation

How will we understand the “I” in the statements “I wasn’t myself that night” and “I don’t feel like myself right now”? If “that night” and “right now” are incommensurable with an ongoing conscious identity, is a differing embodied experience “inauthentic” for not bearing out that identity? Is the identity an inauthentic simulacra, a merely theoretical, disembodied self? These statements mark an embodiment as exceptional. Perhaps the “I” demanded and produced through surveillance and discipline (Foucault, 1977) is temporarily inaccessible. Making application occasionally, but facing inspection constantly, we are called upon to represent a publicly acceptable self or risk violent exclusion (Spade, 2011), an implicitly passive, representable self (Haraway, 1992): never partial, always static, a self which remains the same across contexts organisational, emotional, temporal and geographic. Self-craft and self-maintenance do not come equally easily to all, nor are all at all times both positioned and inclined to “pass” as acceptable. One may articulate identities to compensate for an insufficient self-concept; another might reject them in preference of a dynamism and fluidity threatened by the process of identification. (Butler, 1993) Many engage with this (dis)continuity through consciousness alteration. This paper concerns itself with the use and effects of techniques of inebriation in the context of a disciplined and at times rebellious self.

### Theoretical context: what do I mean by “Inebriation”?

I understand three distinct but dynamic /non-exclusive reasons why we seek change: inebriation, enhancement and psychedelia.<sup>1</sup> (Vipperman, 2012) Whereas enhancement is geared toward some form of improvement (in Performance, Pleasure or Immersion), and whereas psychedelia is geared

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<sup>1</sup> Techniques of consciousness alteration include far more than drug use, but drugs tend to provide ready and useful examples, and thus will often be rested upon in this paper.

toward awareness (of interconnective Communion, ego-dissolving Mystery, or didactic Discovery), inebriation is alteration for its own sake (for Variation, Negation or Disinhibition). An instance of consciousness alteration may be motivated by a desire as complex as “to create.” Insofar as this entails a desire to create more effectively, it’s oriented to Performance (enhancement); insofar as it entails a desire for the novel, it’s oriented to Variation (inebriation); insofar as it entails a desire to understand what can be created, it’s oriented to Discovery (psychedelia). Inebriation can be the sole desire: getting “fucked up,” not to gain or improve, merely to alter.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I seek to address instances of consciousness alteration of which inebriation is an important feature, even as other features may also be important, touching on other motivations where they bear relevance.

As well as goal and method, inebriation is also a quality of experience. We consider our “level of inebriation” to be the extent to which we feel altered, not sober, or “on something.” This is related to safety mechanisms, in that the feeling of inebriation tends to correlate with impairment,<sup>3</sup> and the two are often treated as interchangeable: to be “fucked up” may mean to be “out of it.” Because this implies a normal sobriety compared with which “alteration” is meaningful, it likewise pertains to the perception of authenticity or its absence. Whereas inebriation and authenticity are affective and ephemeral, “impairment” is task-relative and is therefore sometimes readily quantifiable. Dissociation eludes detection; aspects of expressed personality may be assessed without access to the inner orientation toward these aspects. Does the current extent to which one acts extroverted “feel natural,” or does it feel unfamiliar/artificial?

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<sup>2</sup> The result may pertain to other categories. Variation & Discovery are strongly interrelated, as in going and coming. Disinhibition & Performance, and Communion & Immersion, are similarly linked.

<sup>3</sup> In driving simulator tests, THC was shown to impair performance at normally automated tasks, but not at complex tasks upon which drivers are focused, while alcohol impaired complex tasks but not normally automated ones. Subjects under the influence of THC felt more inebriated and compensate with risk-adverse strategies, whereas subjects under the influence of alcohol overestimated their abilities and became more risk-prone. The intense feeling of inebriation therefore acts as a safety mechanism used to self-assess impairment, but it does not do so accurately or consistently. Highly inebriating drugs are not necessarily highly impairing, and vice versa. (Sewell, et al, 2009)

Inebriation attenuates or exaggerates affect, altering our relation to authenticity, such that we feel perhaps more “ourselves,” perhaps less, often but not necessarily in the ways we had intended.

### Attenuation

Sometimes, the goal of inebriation is to feel less. This could assuage perceived unreality, allowing for a return to authenticity, or it could make tolerable the inevitable. Negation as an inebriative technique has been indicated for some and contraindicated for others for thousands of years (see: Proverbs 31:4-7).<sup>4</sup> It should come as no surprise that the same techniques which allow some to *not feel* some aspect of themselves may also lead some to *not feel like* themselves. Just as affect can be temporarily attenuated, so can inebriation be used to attenuate responsibility after the fact, à la the form: “I was drunk, so it doesn’t count” or “I don’t even really remember it.” The expectation that a drug may inhibit memory formation may thus be welcome even in contexts of pleasure/play.

For those who cannot while themselves admit to or act upon all of their desires, the presumed attenuation of affect can facilitate the navigation of contradictory identity structures; it is thus possible to do what one “really” wants without “really” having done it. Alcohol has a reputation for bringing out the “true self” through disinhibition; the Latin motto *in vino veritas*<sup>5</sup> parallels the Gematric<sup>6</sup> equivalency of the Hebrew words for “wine” and “truth.” Compare to the Frank Zappa lyric: “I’m really just a phony but forgive me ‘cause I’m stoned.”<sup>7</sup> Through policies which strive against integration, prohibition creates an outside to the sought but never realisable (Povinelli, 2006) totalising space of the normal; of structural necessity become regions into which

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<sup>4</sup>“It is not for not for kings to drink wine, not for rulers to crave beer, lest they drink and forget what has been decreed, and deprive all the oppressed of their rights. Let beer be for those who are perishing, wine for those who are in anguish! Let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more” (NIV)

<sup>5</sup> *In vino veritas*: in wine, truth

<sup>6</sup> Gematria is a system of numerological equivalencies

<sup>7</sup> Song lyric from “Who Needs the Peace Corps” by Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention, 1968.

discipline must fail to fully penetrate. In these autonomous gaps (Bey, 1985), we may be ourselves. Geographic regions may be marked for this purpose (Clairmont, 2007): “what happens in \_\_\_ stays in \_\_\_.”<sup>8</sup> States of consciousness, if similarly marked, can attenuate vigilance, empowering an honesty predicated on *non-representativity*; reduction in the perception of authenticity may thus provide new space for authentic expression. The more fucked up we are, the less perfect we must be, the more fluid we are free to be; by being less intensively, we can, extensively, be more.

### **Exaggeration**

In Emily Martin’s ethnography of manic depression, she noted that whereas their doctors saw their highs and lows as equally problematic – pathological/irrational deviations from an imagined ideal balance – her respondents neither identified with their depressive states, nor defined either in opposition to a middle ground, and instead, mourning flagging energy and expressivity, desired a return to their, (hypo)manic, “real selves.” (Martin, 2007) This is typical of inebriative experiences which involve an affective exaggeration. One may say that one feels “like myself, but more so,” or that one has discovered *how* to be authentic, engaging fully with the present moment rather than holding back from it. Our inhibitions aren’t “us,” we may feel.

On such a drug as MDMA, mood elevation, stimulation and augmented perceptions may contribute to affectively profound states. Such states may be delighted in and valued, or found to be unpleasant, manifesting as an anxiety or an abject pleasure, the feeling of being altered taken as unnatural, artificial, alien or inauthentic.<sup>9</sup> Expressivity may be foregrounded, previously repressed materials flowing forth with unprecedented ease. As it may seem that one’s degree of extroversion

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<sup>8</sup>This, itself, is an inebriative technique on a macro level; not all consciousness alteration is done by individuals.

<sup>9</sup> On MDMA and especially on conventional amphetamines, users sometimes complain that they feel great but “artificial,” with waves of generalised, rushy pleasure that may not be intuitively appropriate to the context

is inherent to one's personality, employing a technique of inebriation to allow exceptional expression may run counter to claims of conscious continuity: a personality altered by drug ingestion seeming like it ought to be less authentic, not more. If intimate moments during a high were with people we wouldn't "normally" even talk to, and surely not in that way, no authentic monad can have produced those interactions: a seemingly foreign body (the drug, among others) participated in their production. Yet, in the notion of variable self-expression, we assume a Self not merely bound up in such particulars as the capacity for expression, a Self not fully represented and accounted for in even the most totalising of disciplinary regimes, a Self we may approach during the altered state. Personality traits (such as extroversion/introversion) are thus no ultimate ground for identity. Further, the reasons one might not otherwise have had an intimate encounter might be prefigured by social expectations (caste, status, gender role, etc) more than a discrete "I." These too can be mitigated or transcended through the inappropriate/d (Haraway, 1992) slippages of the inebriated. Neither personality nor socialisation constitute an immutable self, and both can be radically altered while feeling ever more authentic. You can be more than you can know.

### **Navigation**

Techniques of inebriation complicate our perception of authenticity. Both attenuation and exaggeration can lead to more authenticity in one sense and less in another. Through the multiplication of intensity (Massumi, 2002), affectively charged experiences are rendered more memorable than those which lack this charge, or from which it is deprived by the intercession of an attenuative technique. By upregulating or downregulating intensity via techniques of inebriation, we may exert influence over what will be remembered, what will feel authentic, and what will not, can not, or must not.

## Part II: Non-Sense Through Inebriation

No category scheme is perfect (Rosch, 1978). Denomination dominates the anominal, as if some people are but experimental noise in otherwise consistent data. (Sapolsky, 2010) Out beyond the margins of acceptability, liminal, lie outliers, the incommensurable and uncontained (Massumi, 2002). “Insane,” “freak,” “on drugs” and “queer” have all been used as pejoratives to limit the varieties of subjectivity for which a hostile system must account. “You don’t fit in my system” is employed not to mean “my system is incomplete,” but that “you must not exist.” (Schiebinger, 1993). War against Natives was never as effective as defining them away (Harris, 2008). In isolation and exclusion grow promising inappropriate/d monsters (Haraway, 1992); in the cracks, the multiplicitous excluded elude control. Freaks and queers, weird-kids and outcasts, institutionalised, DSM-defined minds and consumers of subaltern sacraments (Sandquist, 2008) all share “out-group” experience. (Tajfel, 1974) How is it that so many of my friends are not subaltern in only one way, but many at once? Pagan, queer, kinky, polyamorous, anarchists or other political heretics, “mentally ill” or “abnormal,” users of drugs some of which are merely not-illegal-yet (Wallace et al, 2007)... the Canadian state has needed no more justification to ban a substance than that people like my friends use it.<sup>10</sup> Is this what medicine calls “comorbidity?” These terms recapitulate our discomfort with this pathologising praxis: oppositional systems make “morbidity” of everything different. What they call comorbidity calls for solidarity.

Becoming inebriated entails the rejection of coercive category imposition. By interfering with the consistent continuity of consciousness, superficial identities based on easily mutable characteristics are exposed as such. Reality can thus be “playtested:” what falls away when you

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<sup>10</sup> Some obscure drugs banned in recent memory not for safety but because of who uses them: AMT, 2C-B and 5-MeO-DiPT. Others which may be banned soon include 4-AcO-DMT and 2C-E

change your mind, and what remains regardless of any alteration? This process of psychic triangulation allows us to nuance our sense of authenticity: is this feeling essentially “me,” or is familiarity the only reason I identify with it? This can be read as inherently political. By actively transforming his consciousness, an otherwise “normal” boy (Adams, 1997) – privileged, unmarked, etc – might expand the range of subjectivities with which he can empathise, and may even stumble across something strange enough to situate him within the subaltern, revealing contradictions of a hegemonic system (Friedland and Alford, 1991) hitherto taken for granted. Having now viscerally experienced incommensurability (Farmer, 1997), he may be motivated to interrogate his preconceptions or seek out alternative forms of understanding. To occasion subaltern experience is to undermine normativity, to tear open previously invisible frameworks and theories which, though exclusionary in nature (and therefore inadequate), need not be challenged by any for whose experience they remain tenable (Gilovich, 1991). Unless you know what it means to be a freak, how can you understand the urgency connected to queer feelings, or grasp why cis/heteronormativity inspires such intense affect among those it excludes? (Ahmed, 2004) Why something must be done about it? Enter the concept of the “experimental psychosis.”

Psychologists working at mental health institutions in the 1950s were among the first scientists to indicate the use of classic psychedelics<sup>11</sup>, which they called psychotomimetic. Despite their therapeutic and transformative potential (Griffiths et al, 2006; Grof 2008), the original indication was not for the mentally-ill, but for their doctors. The theory was that experiences occasioned by LSD and mescaline resemble reversible psychopathologies, and so giving these drugs to psychologists could provide insight into the otherwise impenetrable experiences of the institutionalised insane. (Grof, 2008) While we ought to reject the notion that taking a drug could

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<sup>11</sup>By “classic psychedelics” I mean anything similar to LSD, psilocin, etc, not atypical psychedelics such as iboga



allow us to “get inside the mind of the schizophrenic,” the unspeakable (Slattery and Ascott, 2011) nature of powerful psychedelic experiences is all that is necessary if the goal is empathy with stigmatised minds. In this respect it was not the revelatory nature of the drugs they were after, but their strangeness: inebriation more than psychedelia, though both were involved.

Many users of psychedelic drugs have complained that the most frustrating thing about their experience was how little of what was revealed in their visions and reveries could be made verbal. This is not unlike the experience of the mentally-ill, perpetually unable to effectively communicate, treated as “irrational” (Martin, 2007) and hence not worth listening to. In the words of Bob Dylan, “how does it feel to be such a freak?”<sup>12</sup> Inebriation is one heuristic for answering that question. My hypothetical “normal boy,” seeking only to get fucked up, may undergo the same process as psychologists striving to empathise with the institutionalised insane: he may enter uncharted territory, and perhaps come to know how it feels to be a freak.

People on drugs sometimes have a “freaky experience:” either “feeling freaky,” or “freaking out.” The forms of affect these descriptors gesture at are not commensurable with “sober” affect or consensus rational understanding, and only in that way are they commensurable with each other. “Feeling freaky” has positive, creative connotations, whereas “freaking out” suggests terror, hinting at the glistening possibility of permanent madness. We have stepped outside of normal categories, opening up the possibility of the radically novel: in the case of a creative experience, new forms of expressivity emerge which may even be wonderfully productive according to the logics of the prior framework (Berardi, 2009), but could have never emerged inside it; in the case of a terrifying freaky experience, the new forms of perception and affect are felt as violations and threaten

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<sup>12</sup> Song lyric from “Ballad of a Thin Man” by Bob Dylan, 1965

permanent destabilisation and destruction, often literally. It's not uncommon to become convinced that death is immanent, in process, or has already occurred: "so this is what it's like to be dead." This experience of destruction may be extended to the entire world, perhaps with vivid visions of cataclysmic devastation: nuclear holocaust or hell on earth.

A person freaking out in such an extreme way – viscerally, tactilely, visually and conceptually experiencing destruction – sometimes reaches a turning point which resolves into an experience equally intense, but of absolute beauty, love beyond description and cosmic union. These "death-rebirth" experiences often hinge upon the act of "letting go" or surrendering (Grof, 2008), and having gone through such a process reliably leads to permanent benefits<sup>13</sup> (Griffiths et al, 2008; MacLean et al, 2011). A terminal patient may "no longer fear death," because that fear has been faced and transcended, the very categories of "life" and "death" shattered, a glimpse of the transpersonal having obviated the need for corporeal continuity. (Grof, 2008)

Profoundly intense experiences can serve to blast through the ego, overwhelming defence mechanisms, shattering barriers and distinctions. Who are you when you are not yourself? Become so inebriated that not just some but all of your identities collapse, and all that's left is Nothing. In some mystical metaphysics, Nothing is seen as the true grounding of authenticity: absolute, free of all attachments, beyond the grasp of both illusions and context. This model inverts and repudiates a prosaic, empirical/imperial notion of authenticity. What we believe to be real is but the consistent product of our conceptualisations; contact with truth requires the total annihilation of naïve misperceptions. Fear of inebriation can thus be interpreted as obsession with control and

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<sup>13</sup>MacLean et al observed a 4 point increase in the "Big 5" category of Openness after a single mystical experience

category maintenance, and the impulse toward “self destructive” behaviour conceptualised as a – perhaps dangerously misdirected – yearning for authenticity in the face of abject experience.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Inebriation complicates the perception of authenticity, problematising the distinction between “self” and “not self.” Do “I” include my personality? my history? my network situatedness? my ideas? my dietary and substance use choices? As I become inebriated, each of these may rise to centrality, or seem illusory and fall away. Strategic exaggerations or attenuations of affect can either reinforce continuity of experience by “levelling out,” or break up that continuity and foster a “multiple levels approach” (Meyer and Jepperson, 2010) for self-concept, exposing ironies, undermining habits and allowing for the emergence of novelty. Taken to extremes, this expansion and contraction of identification can dissolve the oppositional “self” altogether; as soon as we viscerally understand that nothing we identify with is primary or immutable, new vistas of dynamic, forever changing possibility unfurl. If making sense of reality fails, we can always try non-sense instead.

***“How long do we want to ignore the possibility for ourselves to enjoy the fullest collaboration with the world as a harmonious system of contained conflicts, based on the realisation that the only real ‘I’ is the whole endless process?”*** – Sunjye, Toronto area shaman and artist

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