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Prohibited Methodologies: Psychoactive Substances, Embodiment and the Making of Epistemic Peripheries

Abstract: The consumption of illicit drugs is deemed both politically and epistemologically problematic due to social stigma and legal frameworks, making scholars' first-hand involvement in drug research widely contested. In this sense, prohibition not only restricts users; it also shapes how—and whether—researchers can engage with certain forms of knowledge at all. Yet many scholars ask whether it is possible to conduct profound research on psychoactive substances without experiencing their embodied effects.

Drawing on ethnographic research in Brazil, I discuss participation in “ayahuasca” rituals as both a condition of access to studied groups and a mode of knowledge production. I argue that methodological choices in drug studies are inseparable from wider structures of power: shaped not only by law and academic institutions but also negotiated in the field. This entanglement with power generates epistemic peripheries: spaces where knowledge is marginalized as it moves between regimes of legitimacy.

Keywords: embodiment, methodology, knowledge-production practices, ayahuasca, psychoactive substances

Can we write about the interaction with a non-human being that has a strong impact on our perceptual qualities—one that may entirely alter our experience of the world or even the very world to be experienced—without ever coming into direct contact with it ourselves? Can we conduct research on psychoactive substances without possessing embodied knowledge of their effects? These questions go to the heart of a broader dilemma that has long interested anthropology and sociology: what role does the researcher's body play in the production of knowledge (e.g., Bourdieu 1977; Csor-das 1990; Haraway 1988; Merleau-Ponty 1962; Stoller 1997)? While anthropologists have long practiced participant observation, this methodology becomes deeply problematic when participation involves ingesting substances that are legally prohibited, socially stigmatized, or epistemologically contested. Prohibition does not only restrict people who use drugs; it also structures the conditions under which knowledge about them can be generated. It creates what I call epistemic peripheries: zones where knowledge produced in research practice remains institutionally illegible or is devalued. In drug studies, these peripheries emerge when knowledge generated through embodied, sensory engagement and emic criteria of credibility is silenced, or when the conditions of its production are distilled away to meet academic expectations shaped by prohibition and stigma. More broadly, the term “epistemic peripheries” also appears in de-

bates on knowledge hierarchies, epistemic justice, and decolonizing perspectives, where it is used to describe forms of knowledge rendered marginal through dominant epistemic regimes (e.g., Domańska 2021; Macedo and Valentines-Álvarez 2016; Hilton and Pesarini 2026).

In this paper, drawing on my own research as well as feminist theory (Haraway 1988; Butler 1990), the anthropology of the senses (Stoller 1997; van Ede 2009), and the Ontological Turn (Barad 2007; Viveiros de Castro 2014), I argue that methodological choices in drug research are inseparable from wider structures of power. They are shaped by law, stigma, discursive constructions of drugs, colonial histories of objectivity and the researcher's vulnerability within uneven regimes of legitimacy. Moreover, these power structures can be contradictory across fieldwork settings and academic institutions. My reflections are grounded in ethnographic research in Brazil on the brew commonly known as "ayahuasca," which is socially and legally recognized there (CONAD 2010). This contrasts with many other jurisdictions, where DMT, a key constituent of the brew, is classified as a Schedule I substance under the 1971 United Nations Convention, and is therefore subject to the strictest controls, often accompanied by stringent sanctions at the national level (United Nations 1971). However, in Brazil, legality did not remove the methodological dilemmas that many "drug" researchers encounter. Instead, legality reconfigured them by adding a second layer. In the field, drinking the brew was treated as crucial for understanding and belonging, so people whose practices I observed often expected me to drink it. In my field sites, the brew's ontological status was not that of a mere "substance"; it was treated as an agentive being and as a primary source of knowledge about itself. Embodied familiarity with its effects thus became both an ethnographic expectation and, at times, a practical condition of access to the community. In the context of my ethnographic fieldwork, knowledge was often produced through the researcher's embodied participation, in accordance with emic criteria of what counts as knowledge, yet it could become institutionally illegible—or risky to claim—under conditions shaped by prohibition, stigma, and academic norms. These dynamics illuminate the formation of epistemic peripheries: zones produced by asymmetric regimes of legitimacy that marginalize some forms of knowing while privileging others through institutional, political, and historical conditions.

The paper proceeds in three steps. First, I situate the problem of embodied knowledge in relation to prohibition, stigma, and the ethics of disclosure, while outlining the broader methodological and theoretical framework that informs my approach, including the anthropology of the senses and more-than-human ethnography. Second, I turn to my own fieldwork, tracing how encounters with the brew and the social pressures to drink shaped both my position as a researcher and the very form of knowledge that could be produced. Finally, I bring my ethnographic material into dialogue with Karen Barad's agential realism and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's perspectivism in order to reflect on the epistemological implications of embodied research and to argue that knowledge, in many contexts, is not a matter of detachment but of entanglement. Methodology, I suggest, is not a neutral scaffold but a terrain where what counts as knowledge is drawn, policed, and contested.

Embodied Knowledge and Drug Research

Under regimes of prohibition, the consumption of illicit drugs is framed as legally, politically, and ethically problematic, making the idea of first-hand engagement seem almost entirely condemned. However, many researchers in the field of drug studies wonder if it is possible to conduct profound research on this topic without embodied experience of how these beings/substances work (e.g., Becker 1963; Ross et al. 2020; Tupper and Labate 2014). This question can be situated within a broader debate on the role of the researcher's body in ethnographic studies (Behar 1996; Woodward 2008; Jungnickel et al. 2024), the significance of the senses in the fieldwork process (Stoller 1997; van Ede 2009), as well as on reflexivity (Behar 1996; Pels 2014) and the politics of knowledge production (Barad 2007; Viveiros de Castro 2014). In the research context of drug studies, questions of embodiment and knowledge production are inseparable from political stakes, often articulated through the language of ethics.

Even though personal experiences with psychoactive substances in drug studies are fairly common (Devenot 2016; Ross et al. 2020), the decision of whether to include this information in scholarly work is not an easy one, leaving researchers torn between the need for reflexivity and the possible stigma resulting from disclosure (Ross et al. 2020). As Ross et al. (2020) note, accounting for one's positionality or ensuring transparency in the research process may involve the risk of negative judgment, potential harm to one's academic position, and even criminal sanctions. Drawing on the examples they discuss, some ayahuasca researchers have faced legal consequences following public admissions of participation in ceremonies (see also Tupper and Labate 2014). Similarly, anthropology professor Ansley Hamid was arrested and dismissed from his university after admitting heroin use (Smallwood 2002). This contrasts with the fact that some psychoactive substances, such as alcohol, are normalized to the point of methodological invisibility, while others remain stigmatized or illicit. Sharing drinks with interlocutors is often treated as a routine part of fieldwork sociality and rarely problematized in academic texts (Joseph and Donnelly 2012).

The consequences of researchers' involvement with psychoactive substances vary considerably and depend on multiple factors. Are such experiences presented as past encounters or as ongoing engagements (Ross et al. 2020; Devenot 2016)? Which substances and modes of consumption are involved? For instance, the oral use of psychedelics may be received very differently from intravenous heroin use. Does such use take place with interlocutors as part of fieldwork relations, or privately, outside the research setting? The risks are also unevenly distributed: the same admission may be survivable, or even convertible into symbolic capital, for some scholars, while for others it carries disproportionate professional, legal, or reputational costs, depending on institutional position, citizenship status, and racialization. Similar asymmetries have been documented in studies of drug criminalization more broadly, where classed and racialized forms of privilege shape who can move in and out of illicit drug worlds with limited consequences, and who cannot (Søgaard and Bræmer 2023). Such cases illustrate the risks researchers may face when disclosing personal involvement with psychoactive substances.

Yet non-disclosure can also be problematic. Omitting this information may raise concerns regarding research transparency and affect drug policy debates, where the

inclusion of drug users from diverse social backgrounds can contribute to the destigmatization of drug use and the demarginalization of people who use drugs (Ross 2016). At the same time, disclosure can strengthen methodological transparency and clarify how knowledge was produced. When strategically framed, it can also challenge the classed and racialized asymmetries of whose drug use is publicly speakable and whose remains stigmatized (Becker 1963; Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Netherland and Hansen 2016).

Disclaimers about authors' personal experiences with psychoactive substances were frequently included in scientific works emerging during the counterculture era of the 1950s and 1960s, a period of intense contestation in which universities were deeply intertwined with the social and political currents of the time. Some of the most well-known examples include Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception* (1954), Howard Becker's *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (1963), Timothy Leary et al.'s *The Psychedelic Experience* (1964), and Alexander Shulgin's *PiHKAL: A Chemical Love Story* (1992) (Ross et al. 2020). With the growing emphasis on reflexivity in the 1990s, discussions about researchers' self-involvement in psychoactive substance use began to resurface in academic works (e.g., Adler and Adler 1993; Harris 2015; Newcombe 2008; Pearson 1993; Potter 2010, 2017; Devenot 2016; Ross et al. 2020; Wakeman 2014). Beyond the possible challenges of personal involvement with psychoactive substances as a researcher—such as stigma, legal consequences, compromised research goals, and questions of objectivity—these studies provide insights into its methodological advantages, including enhanced access to hidden populations, the ability to build trust, and a deeper understanding of interlocutors through shared experiential knowledge. However, such knowledge often remains in epistemic peripheries. This reflects not only legal or institutional risk but also asymmetries of recognition, whereby some embodied experiences are treated as legitimate sources of knowledge while others remain epistemically marginalized. Moreover, my research draws attention to another kind of risk, one that emerges through specific fieldwork situations and embodied encounters. This risk can carry costs that are difficult to anticipate, in part because such experiences are rarely discussed openly, given their association with practices that are often academically condemned.

The Researcher's Body and Non-Humans

How do our senses allow us to apprehend the surrounding reality—what can they perceive, and what remains beyond their reach? Are they in any way distinct from the senses of those we meet, or even from their very bodies, as a perspectivist might wonder? How can what our body already knows from its own experience influence our understanding of what we are investigating? And if we are interested in more-than-human ethnography, where a being with qualities entirely different from those of a human becomes the main actor of the story (even if we still describe its existence in human words), how do we encounter it? To what degree does our body participate in these encounters? Can we truly get to know it and understand its agency if we do not allow ourselves to engage with it sensually: if we do not allow ourselves to feel it, to be affected by it, or even to be transformed? After all, it is through embodied participation that we establish shared worlds.

The body has long been a significant topic in the humanities. In the 17th century, rationalism perceived the sensory body as a source of subjectivity that needed to be controlled so as not to disrupt objective knowledge. The pursuit of “disembodied” observation resulted in an academic style devoid of sensuality (van Ede 2009: 63–65). Social theory has questioned the assumption that rigorous research methods necessarily lead to objective results. This critique originates primarily from feminism and poststructuralism, both of which suggest that Cartesian dualism is not merely an abstract philosophical concept, but a mechanism of power that regulates the body and subjectivity (Foucault 1975; Butler 1990; van Ede 2009). Feminist scholars such as Elizabeth Grosz and Judith Butler have analysed how the mind–body divide legitimized gender hierarchies, naturalizing the subjugation of women, who were associated with corporeality, emotionality, and irrationality (Grosz 1994; Butler 1990). Poststructuralism, inspired by thinkers such as Michel Foucault, has demonstrated that Cartesian dualism functioned as a tool of biopolitical control in medicine, science, and state institutions (Foucault 1975; van Ede 2009).

Beginning with phenomenology, many scholars have sought to unsettle this Cartesian legacy by treating sensory, embodied experience as a condition of ethnographic knowledge (Stoller 1997). Moving away from Cartesian dualism entails not only a theoretical shift, but also a methodological transformation, in which the researcher is no longer a “disembodied” observer, but an embodied participant in the research process (van Ede 2009; Stoller 1997). In this view, knowledge is not acquired solely through rational analysis but also through embodied participation, including tasting, touching, listening, and movement (Stoller 1997). This methodological shift has been explored through richly embodied ethnographic accounts. Researchers have described their bodily involvement in the very activities their interlocutors engage in, seeking to better understand them—whether it be boxing (Woodward 2008), sewing (Jungnickel et al. 2024), or sorcerers’ rituals (Stoller 1997; Stoller and Olkes 1989). Others, in turn, have reflected on how their bodies respond during fieldwork, through the sensations and emotions evoked while listening to the stories of the people they work with (Behar 1996). Meanwhile, some have explored their encounters with the non-human beings they investigate, like the matsutake mushroom, which Anna Tsing (2015) not only observes but also smells, touches, tastes, and collects. In her ethnographic work, she shares her own bodily sensations related to these beings, not only as mediated through her research participants but also as part of her direct experiences, much like Eduardo Kohn (2013) does with the Amazonian rainforest. However, encounters with such beings are not always politically and ethically charged in the same way as those involving “consciousness-altering substances.” Multispecies ethnography may welcome mushrooms, rivers, or trees, yet it grows cautious when the non-human is a controlled substance. This reminds us that the ethics of embodied knowledge are unevenly distributed and embedded in a broader moral economy (Fassin 2009).

Situating My Research and Methods

In my ethnographic research, I investigated the brew as a non-human other through embodied participation—an important part of my methodological strategy that turned

out to be inseparable from power relations both in academia and in the field. During my multisited fieldwork, which took place over nine months in Brazil primarily in two states, Goiás and Acre, I followed the movements of the brew, which shaped both the terrain of inquiry and the questions that emerged within it. Inspired by Anna Tsing's work (2015, 2017, 2024), this methodology was grounded in tracing non-human agents as they move across geographical locations and through shifting epistemologies and ontological becoming. At every stage of the project, I took special care to ensure the anonymity of people and places. The choice of Brazil as a field site was partly dictated by the legality of practices related to the use of the brew in this country. In Brazil, the consumption of "ayahuasca" does not break the law.

The principal method was participant observation, which, along with interviews, is one of the core tools of anthropological research. Each research participant was informed about my presence, the nature and purpose of my work, as well as about the fact that the research results would be published as scholarly texts. The interviews I conducted were carried out in Portuguese, Spanish, and English and, with participants' consent, recorded using a voice recorder. During fieldwork, I lived in the studied communities and engaged in their daily activities, including rituals involving the consumption of a brew.

Field notes were typically written one day after each ritual. During the ceremonies themselves, I did not take notes; instead, I relied on an intentional effort to retain as much detail as possible in memory. While this approach may raise questions about accuracy, especially given the intensity of the experience, I found that my recollections were often vivid and detailed, a point that may challenge assumptions about the limits of memory in "altered states." My degree of participation directly shaped what could be observed and later recorded. Over the course of my fieldwork, I took part in approximately twenty ceremonies, roughly half of them under the influence of the brew and half without, which allowed for a broader comparative perspective. When not under the influence of the brew, I found myself focusing more on what was externally visible, the structure of the ritual, the arrangement of bodies, the sequencing of songs and actions. In contrast, participation after drinking the brew made certain aspects of the ritual intelligible, such as shared shifts in the experienced qualities of *força*. In the contexts I studied, *força*, a Portuguese term for "force" or "power," referred to the brew's animated force, felt in the body during ritual as something that circulates, acts on participants, and can be guided through songs and ritual practice. Such participation, however, also limited my ability to observe others' behavior in detail.

A central aspect of my methodology was ongoing attention to the role of my own body in the field, particularly the ethical-political and epistemological implications of engaging physically and affectively with my object of study. My own experiences with the brew were often difficult, but they opened up a distinct mode of access to many of the central themes of this research, which might otherwise have remained alien or intangible. In the contexts where I conducted fieldwork, knowledge about a brew, and often knowledge more broadly, was widely regarded as unattainable without embodiment. This approach demanded a willingness to let my own vulnerability become part of the research process, exposing me more directly to the power relations at work in the field.

Moreover, in line with the Ontological Turn in anthropology, which emerged as a methodological critique of representationalism and Western ontological universalism

(Halemba 2022; Heywood 2017; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017), my research treats non-Western modes of knowing not as beliefs or symbolic representations but as ontological propositions that require specific ways of engagement. This stance is inherently anti-objectivist and carries decolonial implications, and in my case it meant challenging the assumption that legitimate knowledge must conform to the standards of detached observation privileged in Western academia—with “Western” used in what follows in Strathern’s sense as a set of knowledge-production practices that prioritize objectification, individuation, and universalism, rather than a geographic or political entity (Strathern 1991: 46).

To explore the depth and risks of embodiment, the vulnerability of the researcher, and how strikingly non-human some non-humans can be, let us now follow one of my encounters with the brew.

Entering the Uncanny: The Ritual

It started with a sound, a strange vibration reminiscent of the jungle’s characteristic trance, composed of the noise of all the insects, animals, and plants. I felt my body transforming through something deeply organic, as if a snake were writhing inside it. The vibration grew stronger, as if I had become a receiver, like a radio, able to pick up waves, though the waves were unbearable to the human body. Eventually, the vibration completely engulfed me, taking the shape of a language. Whatever it was, it was profoundly unhuman.

It seemed to me that there was something geometric there, though I couldn’t say whether it was within me or outside of me, but it wasn’t a vision or a specific space. That geometric quality was somewhat string-like. It reminded me of some kind of luminous, energetic harp, but that’s already a huge simplification. I felt the presence of some beings around me, though I cannot say why; I did not see them, but sensed them otherwise. The most central element in all of this was the vibration—the *força*—which affected me deeply and seemed to be produced by those beings, as if they were attempting to contact me. I also remember a throbbing light, which I experienced as another form of communication. I had a very intense feeling that I wouldn’t be able to withstand it, physically or mentally, as if I were about to go insane, as though this was somehow beyond the limits of human experience. Not because those beings had any bad intentions, but because we simply weren’t meant to meet; they came from a reality too different from mine. Their form of contact—this *força*—felt too alien for my body to endure (even though, at that point, was my body even still there?).

I don’t think it was just one entity, because there were many vibrations; they formed some kind of collective choir. It lasted a long time. I felt, somehow, like an effervescent tablet dissolving in a glass of water. I tried to calm myself: maybe it was a healing, maybe they were reprogramming me: phrases I had heard before, now returning as the only way to make sense of what was happening. If I made it through, I might come out changed for the better. Then I was no longer within this “string” reality, but rather in the emptiness of some dark—cosmic?—space, where time flowed slowly, suspended. I now felt so far removed from the place and events that had preceded this moment—events that, in some other version of time, had occurred only three hours earlier, when I drank the brew. Suddenly, I felt

my back slowly tilting toward the ground. I returned to the ritual space and remembered how it had all begun.

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On the evening of the ceremony, around fifty people dressed in colourful clothes gathered on a private plot of land a few kilometres outside Alto Paraíso, on the vast uplands of central Brazil. The ritual was led by members of the Kamanawa Indigenous group, visiting from the Amazon. When the moment came, the *pajés* briefly introduced themselves and began to serve the brew in small shot glasses. It was thick and viscous, almost like honey. Each participant received their first portion of ayahuasca and expressed gratitude. About thirty minutes later, the Kamanawa began to sing in their native tonal language. It was incredibly beautiful, polyphonic singing. Simultaneously, the brew was starting to take effect. The singing, among other ritual tools, was meant to guide its *força* and protect the participants from malicious beings and energies.

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I didn't hit the ground as I came back to my body (or perhaps, as my body shifted states, if we weren't to think in dualistic terms). But then it got even worse. I was back in my fully material body, but I also began sensing things passing through it—one by one. I didn't want this. I felt like a channel, a conduit, for a multitude of something, entering from below, from the earth, passing through me, and then disappearing, moving onward. I thought they were spirits. Why? I can't explain. I couldn't see them, I just felt. And yet now, I think they might be better conceptualized as souls. I felt them as a kind of living light. I wanted them to give my body back. I was horrified. What had happened to my boundaries? Would they take over my body and leave me disintegrated? It's not that these things were good or bad; they were neutral. But they were alive, and that alone was enough to terrify me. When it finally stopped, I was exhausted.

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But it was not yet over. A wave of nausea swept over me, along with the sharp discomfort of having to purge in front of others. I had the impression that, through their chants, the Indigenous singers guiding the ceremony were now invoking *limpeza*—the ritual cleansing. The *força* grew dense and heavy. I noticed how the specific, elongated, high-pitched tones articulated by the *pajés* seemed to synchronize with the purging that many participants had begun to undergo in the surrounding bush, while the sound of someone's scream pierced the night air. Finally, with what little strength I had left, I crawled on all fours to the nearest patch of bush, feeling humiliated. I felt poisoned, and what's worse, I had done this to myself. I was supposed to be healing, and instead, I had given myself poison. And now I couldn't handle it. It didn't feel like just purging, but like the end of my life. It lasted an eternity. But eventually, it passed. I sat down somewhere—I didn't even know where. In a way, I realized I had no shame left.

The phase of the ceremony marked by a noticeably stronger *força*, with the singing becoming more vibrant, intense, and repetitive, gradually began to ease. This change was visible on the faces of the participants, who began to appear more relaxed. Toward the end of the ritual, people started to dance around the fire. The glass of brew I had drunk many hours ago had finally been worked through (*foi trabalhado*). I did survive, though I realized the place I had chosen to sit down was, in fact, a cactus.

Consuming Body, or a Body Consumed?

The scene above is meant as an entry point into the methodological problem that follows: what happens when embodied participation becomes at once a condition of knowledge, a source of vulnerability, and a site of power? Already after the second ceremony in which I participated during fieldwork, a sense of anxiety about drinking the brew began to grow, although not yet at a fully conscious level. Each subsequent ceremony only reinforced this anxiety, and the social pressure to drink the brew intensified my unease, leaving me with few perceived options. I felt cornered. In all of the places I was, it was assumed that if I was researching "ayahuasca," then a brew itself must be my primary source of knowledge. My reluctance to drink placed me in an uncomfortable position—that of an outsider, an observer whose interest in the brew was, at times, difficult to justify, since drinking functioned as an unwritten condition of belonging and access to the community. I often felt judged for not drinking, as if I were a coward, a fraud. Saying "no" made me feel exposed and vulnerable. But so did saying "yes." I knew everything would be different if I could just drink the brew, without the lingering sense that the price for doing so might be too high. Though there were places where "no" was not taken for an answer. I tried to participate in the rituals under the *força* as little as possible. Whenever I agreed to participate, I approached the ritual with fear, always negotiating the portion and the conditions of my participation. Sometimes these negotiations turned into struggles over power. Paradoxically, they were often the reverse of the expectations I described earlier in academic contexts.

There was considerable social pressure on my active participation in the ritual, where sharing the brew emerged as a gift in the Maussian sense (Mauss 2002): a relational act that binds persons together and makes refusal socially consequential. Refusing the brew could thus be understood not only as declining a substance, but as refusing the relation it enacted, while drinking it was often taken as evidence of my trust in those who offered it. And even though, whenever I agreed to drink it, people would take very special care of me, this did not mitigate the fact that participation involved entering a state of heightened vulnerability and a loss of control over the experience on my part. There were also expectations that I would share a specific way of conceptualizing the brew—for instance, treating it as bringing *cura*, a form of healing, or, in religious contexts, as something *sagrado* (sacred)—and that I would come to recognize in it what others themselves recognized. It is difficult to refuse something that others consider sacred or see as the most valuable gift they can offer.

In the contexts I studied, *força*, understood as an animated force of the brew, was closely entangled with social power, shaping relations, hierarchies, and modes of belonging. Those who were seen as capable of enduring, guiding, or managing the *força* were often more

respected and occupied positions of leadership within the community, so that relations with the *força* both shaped and reinforced social hierarchies. My fear of *força* and my reluctance to engage with it bodily often weakened my position within these relations, shifting me toward the position of a less legitimate member of the community, although this position was also shaped by my own perceptions—by shame, by the fear of being judged, and by the feeling that I was failing to meet expectations.

However, I could not say that I was entirely without power. As a young European woman, I was often perceived as both attractive and exotic, which, together with my academic position and my ability to build relationships, facilitated access and trust. Yet this position was constantly negotiated, and I often felt extremely vulnerable and, at times, placed in a subordinate position in relation to the people who participated in my research. Here, the tables turned: power often lay not with the researcher, but with those I met in the course of fieldwork.

Although ethnographic literature discusses many challenges associated with fieldwork—dealing with loneliness, feeling like an outsider (e.g., [Hastrup 2008](#)), interlocutors' reluctance to speak or to speak honestly (e.g., [Rabinow 1977](#)), difficulties in entering specific groups (e.g., [Bourgois 1995](#)), or even dangers such as sexual abuse (e.g., [Kloß 2016](#))—the difficulties related to interacting with non-human beings have, to my knowledge, received little attention (with some exceptions, such as [Young and Goulet 1996](#)). Apart from recurring doubts about whether and how it is truly possible to decentralize the human in such work (see [Kohn 2013](#); [de la Cadena 2015](#); [Haraway 2016](#); [Ingold 2013](#); [Tsing 2015](#)), less consideration has been paid to how anthropologists come to know these beings through embodied and experiential engagement—and what risks or transformations such processes might involve.

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One woman I met during my fieldwork, as we spoke of the brew, once asked: “Do you think we are getting to know the brew itself, or is it coming to get to know us?” The question lingered in my mind, unfolding new meanings with time. I began to realize that the strangeness of interacting with a brew is inseparable from this very sensation, so often evoked in the context of “*ayahuasca*,” that it is not merely something one consumes, but something that feels alive, deeply organic, uncanny, and in control. Yet this control is not imposed from the outside; rather, it emerges from within one's own body. This, perhaps, is what makes the encounter with it so frightening. The loss of control under the power of the brew may manifest in deeply physical ways: the inability to move, the loss of coordination, the impossibility of stopping the effect, the urge to vomit, to scream, or even an inability to regulate basic bodily functions. It can feel humiliating, even though the ceremonies themselves foster a strong sense of mutual care and understanding. Yet, for me, the most disturbing part of this loss of control was not the physical discomfort but the sheer strangeness of the experience: the way the brew made itself known within my body, and the feeling that this encounter was no longer taking place on human terms. The *força* itself felt strange, sharpening my senses to the point of overwhelm, to the edge of feeling as though the brew had claimed me, leaving me utterly vulnerable among people

who, under its influence, became just as strange. I felt an overwhelming unfamiliarity and remember becoming fully aware of it during a ceremony at a *União do Vegetal* church in Acre. Beneath a simple wooden structure decorated in an aesthetic so distant from my own—garish blue and yellow, with the image of an old, thin rubber tapper at its centre, said to be the incarnation of a mythical entity named Caiano, a vassal of King Solomon—I sat surrounded by people so different from me. I could feel the strange *força* flowing through me, the *força* of this strange being called *Vegetal* (local name for a brew), whom we had come to consecrate (*consagrar*). I watched as those around me struggled to contain it within their bodies, and I thought: *I will never find anything stranger in this world*. And yet, I wondered if, as humans, we do not seek to unravel, but rather to belong.

This strangeness often felt like a threat to the integrity of my person; as if I were dissolving, going mad, turning into something else, or dying. Of course, not everyone experiences the brew this way. Still, among those I spoke with, the feeling of losing one's mind or confronting death itself is surprisingly common. The sensation of death under the brew's influence can take many forms, but to give just one example, it can feel like an inability to breathe—which seems utterly real, even though, upon returning to the “material plane,” one realizes it had never actually happened, at least not here. My experiences with the brew were very different from what I had expected prior to starting my research. Based on the existing literature, I was prepared for something fascinating and otherworldly that might provide access to deeper knowledge or insight, yet still remain within the horizon of human intelligibility. The unpleasant aspects I anticipated were largely limited to physical symptoms such as vomiting, and thus seemed bearable. The literature did not prepare me for the intensity with which the experience can affect the mind, how profoundly it can disorient, evoke fear, or bring one to the edge of what feels like madness.

Knowing Through Being-with / Knowing Through Being-out

These reflections lead to a broader methodological question concerning the role of embodied participation in anthropological research. The most academically contentious aspect of my research methodology was my own consumption of the brew during fieldwork. Even though anthropology is based on personal experience, which has always been the starting point for gathering data, participant observation, the principal methodological tool for anthropologists, can arguably become problematic when one becomes, well, too much of a participant... This may be why in most texts, researchers working on similar topics rarely reflect on the nature or degree of their participation in rituals, leaving such forms of participation in epistemic peripheries. Still, everyone I met who had conducted such research had drunk a brew; moreover, many scholars were themselves members of communities or religious groups centred around its consumption. When the degree and form of the researcher's involvement are obscured, we lose an important dimension of the researcher's role in knowledge production. Being personally involved in religious groups or these types of communities can affect one's ability to critically reflect on a brew itself, the social dynamics around it, and the power relations within the group consuming it. My own embodied experiences also shaped the production of ethnographic knowledge:

how I conducted conversations, and how I came to think and write about the brew. Rather than reinforcing the fascination present in much of the literature that informed my initial expectations, they led me to approach the brew and the social dynamics surrounding it with greater ambivalence. Embodiment, then, does not simply expand knowledge; it also orients it in particular ways, introducing specific forms of partiality into the research process.

On the other hand, observing the ceremony without drinking a brew raises a different concern: can one truly observe the ritual without any embodied experience, which is a central element of these ceremonies? Even though the effects of a brew are profoundly subjective, the embodied feeling of its agency, its *força* seems crucial for making sense of the ceremony as it unfolds. Of course, I am aware that my own experiences cannot be assumed to mirror those of other people. Yet I maintain that they brought me closer to their perspectives, since a ceremony under the influence of the brew is profoundly different from one without it, and because the ways I felt *força* resonated strongly with how other people described it in their own narratives.

My aim is not to propose embodied participation, or the use of psychoactive substances, as a necessary or normative condition of anthropological knowledge production. Rather, I seek to show that any methodological position a researcher adopts has epistemic consequences. In research with psychoactive substances, embodiment can have several inter-related epistemic consequences. First, embodied participation can function as a condition of access: it enables entry into the community, supports trust, and makes it possible to grasp how practices are said to work from within shared experience. Second, it can become a mode of knowledge production in itself, insofar as certain forms of understanding are generated in interaction with a non-human other. Yet such participation can also orient attention and interpretation in particular ways, adding another layer of partiality shaped by the researcher's own encounter with those beings. At the same time, pharmacologically altered bodily or perceptual states are often presumed to undermine epistemic credibility, so knowledge produced through such states is easily relegated to the periphery of what can be recognized as legitimate. Importantly, embodiment is not necessarily pleasurable or hedonistic, even when the object of study is a psychoactive substance. When it comes to its more problematic aspects, embodiment can be methodologically difficult and may impose costs on the researcher's own body, while also orienting attention and interpretation in particular ways. However, in drug studies, embodied participation is not always fully chosen or fully under the researcher's control; it is shaped through a negotiated arrangement of power, formed both in the field and in academia.

This brings into focus a tension I repeatedly encountered: how to situate myself in relation to the brew, and whether understanding it requires embodied participation or deliberate distance. The former corresponds more closely to how knowledge is understood in the contexts where I conducted my research, while the latter aligns more readily with dominant standards of academic knowledge production, which remain deeply rooted in an ideal of objectivity based on detachment from the object of study. Within such Western scientific reasoning, mere observation is often considered more "objective," insofar as objectivity is equated with distance from the object of investigation and is typically limited to sight, as if excluding other senses somehow guarantees greater neutrality. This reflects a specifically modern logic in which distance is mistaken for impartiality (Viveiros de

Castro 2014). Yet, as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2014) has pointed out, this ideal of objectivity is far from universal. He contrasts it with different ways of knowing, ways that recognize knowledge as relational, embodied and situated, and it is precisely these alternatives that underpin the phenomena I explore.

To know is to objectify by distinguishing between what is intrinsic to the object and what instead belongs to the knowing subject, which has been inevitably and illegitimately projected onto the object. To know is thus to desubjectify, to render explicit the part of the subject present in the object in order to reduce it to an ideal minimum (...). Subjects, just like objects, are regarded as the results of a process of objectification: the subject constitutes or recognizes itself in the object it produces, and knows itself objectively when it succeeds in seeing itself 'from the outside' as a thing. Our epistemological game, then, is objectification; what has not been objectified simply remains abstract or unreal. (...) Amerindian shamanism is guided by the inverse ideal: to know is to 'personify,' to take the point of view of what should be known or, rather, the one whom should be known. (...) Here we have an indigenous lesson anthropology could benefit from heeding. (Viveiros de Castro 2014: 60)

To put it simply: while Western epistemology seeks to know by separating the knower from the known, Amerindian epistemology seeks to know by inhabiting the perspective of the Other: by recognizing subjectivity where modernity sees only objecthood. Such a view destabilizes the dominant ontological binaries between subject and object, observer and observed. It suggests that knowledge is not the extraction of facts from inert matter but a process of entering into relationship, of allowing the Other to act back, to teach, to resist categorization. From this perspective, a brew in the realities I sought to approach through my ethnographic work is not a biochemical compound to be tested, nor a metaphor to be decoded, but a subject or a cluster of relations that can be known through embodiment. Refusing to relate to it on those terms, while claiming to study it, would not only reduce it to an object but also negate the ontological commitments embedded in the very context I am studying. This, I argue, is not merely a methodological issue but an ethical one. If I insist on maintaining distance, refusing to engage with the brew as an agenting being as the people I work with do, I risk reproducing the very forms of epistemic violence that anthropology has long sought to overcome.

As Peter Pels has argued, unless we hold on to the illusion, long refuted by the anthropology of colonialism, that the colonial past can be left behind without a trace, we must acknowledge that ethnography has never been a neutral or innocent form of knowledge production. What we often take as "scientific objectivity" was, in fact, shaped within a colonial context and became entangled with asymmetrical relations of power. For much of its history, anthropology legitimized its authority through a hierarchical claim to expertise in classifying and interpreting human differences—claims grounded in epistemological frameworks that privileged Western norms of objectivity. This objectivity, Pels (2014) argues, was not a timeless scientific norm, but a historically situated construct, emerging in tandem with colonial ideologies and only later challenged by calls for reflexivity and intersubjectivity in ethnographic practice.

Similarly, for Karen Barad (2007), objectivity does not mean neutrality, distance, or detachment. She challenges the idea that knowledge reflects a pre-existing world, waiting to be discovered. Instead, she argues that knowing actively participates in the world's ongoing becoming, even at the level of its materialization. This is not simply because imperfections in our methods prevent a full separation of observer and observed; rather, they were never separate to begin with. This is because what she calls an *apparatus* is a condition for entities

to emerge, differentiate, and become intelligible through specific material arrangements. Beings and objects emerge, according to Barad, through what she calls *agential cuts*: enactments that momentarily define and separate entities. These cuts are always performed through apparatuses, meaning dynamic configurations of bodies, technologies, discourses, and practices. In anthropological fieldwork, the researcher is part of such an apparatus. Whereas classical science seeks to eliminate the observer to ensure neutrality, Barad insists that responsibility arises precisely from acknowledging the observer's role in the production of knowledge. In science, repeatability means that repeating an experiment under the same conditions confirms the existence of stable, inherent properties. Barad rejects this view. For her, repeatability does not reveal objective truths but demonstrates how a particular configuration—of people, instruments, concepts, and techniques—reliably produces specific effects. Objectivity, then, lies in accountability and transparency: in the ability to trace how knowledge is produced and to take responsibility for its material consequences. From this perspective, objectivity is not about removing the subject, but about recognizing and taking responsibility for how specific practices bring particular realities into being. However, returning to the dilemmas discussed by Ross et al. (2020), transparency is deeply problematic in drug studies due to stigma. As a result, the researcher's engagement is often distilled away in the published account in order to conform to prevailing norms of academic legitimacy. Yet this is precisely the kind of erasure that Barad's framework warns against. When the conditions of knowledge production cannot be openly traced, the apparatuses through which knowledge was produced are obscured. In that sense, the politics of academic credibility helps generate epistemic peripheries, relegating many embodied and emic forms of knowledge to the margins of what can be recognized.

Conclusion

In this article, I use the concept of epistemic peripheries to describe a specific space of tension between different regimes of knowledge, in which knowledge produced within one regime becomes institutionally illegible or difficult to legitimate in another and is thus relegated to the periphery of dominant epistemic structures. This lack of inclusion may result from its grounding in ontological, epistemological, and methodological commitments that do not align with institutionally recognized paradigms, such as those of Western academia. In the field of drug research, epistemic peripheries emerge at the intersection of legal regulation, moral stigma, and the lived realities of fieldwork, which may involve researcher participation in the consumption of controlled substances. This practice, which may be productive in the field and at times effectively compelled by power relations within it, can simultaneously expose researchers to professional, reputational, or legal risks once disclosed in academic contexts, or be dismissed as too subjective to produce valid knowledge. As a result, what enables access, trust, understanding, and apprehension in the field can be difficult to render legitimate within institutional settings.

Although the body was long excluded from science as a site of subjectivity under positivist frameworks, it re-entered the social sciences in the 1970s through phenomenology and feminist critique (Stoller 1997). However, this re-entry did not mean that the body became

fully recognized as a source of scientific knowledge; rather, embodiment has remained permissible only within established epistemic regimes and under specific conditions of bodily control. In practice, it is accepted only insofar as it does not fundamentally transform the researcher's body or perceptual state. Once embodiment involves consuming substances that change the researcher's perception, it often crosses a boundary beyond which the traces of how the knowledge was produced are distilled out in order to render it institutionally legible. This boundary may be grounded in the assumption that pharmacologically altered bodily or perceptual states undermine epistemic credibility. This dynamic also extends to research on non-human others, which in recent years has gained prominence in anthropology. In such research, non-human beings are often known not only through the accounts of the people researchers meet in the field, but also through direct sensory engagement. However, when the non-human in question is a legally prohibited psychoactive substance, embodied engagement becomes methodologically and politically problematic. Ultimately, not all non-human beings carry the same legal, ethical, and epistemological burdens.

In the contexts where I conducted my research, epistemological and ontological commitments were quite different from those that structure dominant academic Western approaches. Knowing was understood as necessarily embodied and could also emerge through bodily transformation even when this occurred through relations with non-human others that elsewhere are typically treated as controlled substances. This had important methodological implications. Mere observation of ritual practices in a detached manner, without allowing these beings to affect my (researcher's) body, would reveal little of what was considered central and meaningful by the people I encountered in the field. Much of what occurs during ceremonies takes place beyond the limits of what can be perceived without the embodied experience of the brew. While I do not claim that my experiences were equivalent to those of others, I am convinced embodied participation brought me closer to emic concepts that would have remained largely inaccessible through observation alone. Moreover, refusing to relate to the brew, while at the same time claiming to study it, would not only reduce it to an object but also negate the ontological commitments embedded in the very contexts I am studying, reinforcing asymmetrical, colonially grounded claims to define what things are, what counts as real, and to determine whose knowledge counts.

At the same time, this immersion was, in my case, accompanied by fear, vulnerability, and ongoing negotiations in the field. Here, two intersecting dimensions of power come into play. On the one hand, fieldwork contexts imposed expectations of embodied participation as a condition of access and understanding. On the other hand, academic norms privileged distance. Positioned between these regimes, the researcher's body became the site where conflicting expectations and asymmetrical regimes of epistemic legitimacy collide. It is the researcher who is compelled to navigate this conflict: the demand for embodied participation as a condition of knowing, and the lack of methodological infrastructure in academia to fully recognize—or take responsibility for—the risks such participation entails. The academy offers limited support for accounting for such experiences, leaving them in epistemic peripheries—produced in the field, yet risky to articulate, hard to prepare for methodologically, and only later rendered legible once abstracted from their embodied grounding. But, following Karen Barad (2007), objectivity is an illusion unless

it is redefined as responsibility for the traces we leave. This responsibility also extends to recognizing the conditions under which such traces are formed.

Yet the ethical stakes of embodied research do not end with epistemic accountability. If certain forms of knowledge require exposure to vulnerability, loss of control, or psychological strain, then the question is not only how knowledge is produced, but also at what cost, and under what conditions such knowledge production remains sustainable for those who produce it. Reflexivity, in this sense, must also include withdrawal as a practical possibility: the recognition that researchers may need to stop, refuse, or modify forms of participation when they begin to exceed their limits, even when academic commitments seem to demand continuation.

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