

trip where you stand: towards psychedelic liberation

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Kiara Mohamed Amin and Priya Sharma

Priya Sharma (PS): I have never ingested any kind of recreational drug apart from alcohol, and so I have never tripped. It might seem strange that I have dedicated myself to writing a piece about psychedelics, but an investment in liberatory politics outside of institutions is why I have felt the need to write about such things. In this short piece, the political and personal context is set, before moving on to an exploration of *Scouse Republic* (2022), a short film by Somali, queer, trans, multidisciplinary artist Kiara Mohamed Amin, with whom I have had the pleasure of co-authoring this piece. The film explores radical possibilities for healing through psychedelic, ecological and ancestral communion.

Kiara Mohamed Amin (KMA): Life in the UK is difficult, and increasingly so for those at the sharper end of capitalism; the population is coming to terms with the gas and electricity fuel hike, and many will have to make the hard choice between being able to eat and being able to heat their homes. A 2020 report led by the Joseph Roundtree Foundation stated that poverty has risen as a result of the pandemic (Barry *et al.*, 2021), and yet in September 2021 the government stopped the £20 uplift cost to Universal Credit recipients despite criticisms from other MPs and the British public (Ferguson, 2022). The climate crisis, a global upsurge in right-wing populism and ongoing wars notwithstanding, it is difficult to rouse any hope of autonomy or futurity.

PS: Psychedelics, and in particular psilocybin (a hallucinogenic chemical found in certain mushrooms), was only something I began hearing about a couple of years ago when psychedelic therapy came to my attention (Roseman, Nutt and Carhart-Harris, 2018). Talk around this resurfaced when, in early March 2022, I went along to Kiara's exhibition opening. His film *Scouse Republic*, which was the centrepiece to a show that included a painted wall mural and homemade altar, explored radical possibilities for healing through the use of psychedelic mushrooms. 'We live in a society that teaches there is not enough of any valuable resource to go around, including selfhood', write the CrimethInc. Ex-Workers' Collective:

we grow up in households where our parents don't have enough time for us; we are sent to schools that employ a grading system that permits only a handful to excel, and are discharged into a market that enriches a few of us while exploiting or discarding the rest. We internalize the values of this system. (CrimethInc. Ex-Workers' Collective, 2008, p. 148).

The film inspired me to think that through the ongoing personal and political devastation we are experiencing in this crisis of capitalism, it is imperative that we continue to find new ways to resist and to reclaim a life, a selfhood and a way of healing from the ravages of an oppressive system.

I watched the film at least three times. It was the first time I had seen Kiara in almost two years. Those years, exacerbated by the pandemic, had felt lonely and still; *Scouse Republic* prompted me to realise that life could move again. I invited Kiara to write something with me—a reflection perhaps of the thought processes he had poured into the work.

As two diasporic bodies that carry the legacies of colonialism from India and Somalia, we both find ourselves in Liverpool, the city built upon slavery. It has become a reliable home for us both and this makes me think of a black-and-white anarchist poster I used to have blu-tacked to my wall that had 'fight where you stand' emblazoned across it. I think about us both making the decision to stay here—whether out of necessity or choice—to stand our ground and to fight where we stand, for others and ourselves. This city isn't perfect, but we have found small avenues for liberation that gently foster hope. Throughout this piece, Kiara's journey is foregrounded more than mine because it is through his experience that we have arrived at this juncture—me primarily as listener, Kiara as storyteller and together, as decipherers of its liberatory dimensions.

To me, Kiara's psychedelic experience is illuminating because it is firmly rooted in this British city but potently conjures up Somali histories and ancestral spirit. The journey is all the more important because it is queer, trans, Black, disabled and working class—something that the Western psychedelic scene is obviously not. The historical discovery of psilocybin by Western practitioners is rife with colonial exploitation, and so acknowledging contemporary decolonial practices to claim these back is vital. Turtle Island-based collective the Ancestor Project practise psychedelic healing that centres Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) experience and aligns with social justice and anti-racism work. Here in the UK, Nigerian British psychedelic practitioner Buki Fadipe looks to understanding and utilising decolonial practices in her work; educator, researcher and organic horticulturalist Darren Le Baron has made it his mission to support diverse individuals via psychedelics research and how it can sustain communities. In and amongst these noteworthy specialists, we write this article simply to reflect on the possibilities for self-liberation and healing as experienced by somebody who has creatively explored it firsthand. This is by no means a handbook or endorsement of psychedelic therapy—it is a narrative of someone living with and through trauma and how they have found a way to not just survive, but live.

Kiara Mohamed Amin's story

KMA: The stage is set, the UK is a hellhole. On my personal stage, just before the pandemic began, I became very unwell in November of 2019. I was losing weight without trying to, I was becoming more and more fatigued and soon bed bound. By February 2020, I was told after being referred for blood tests that I had suspected lymphoma. My kidneys and liver tests were showing that I was fighting something, and my lymph nodes had grown to the size of hard chickpeas. By the end of March 2020, all hospitals were responding to COVID-19 cases and anyone who was being investigated for cancer was told to wait as appointments for magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and computerised tomography (CT) scanning

machines were not available. Many patients who were undergoing treatment or waiting for scans had appointments cancelled.

In the meantime, I had become almost vegetative, I physically could not look after myself and I was trying to come to terms with the fact that I could be dying; my GPs were of no help. Pain and severe fatigue management had become something I had to desperately get help with through my GP whilst I waited to hear back from oncologists. I was always told that I could not possibly be in pain as I did not present in typical distress. Tony Sewell's report on race and ethnic disparities within the UK is a betrayal to the experience of many Black disabled people who find themselves at the mercy of a system that does not see their pain (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021). Thankfully, I had friends who fundraised for me to get tested privately, and after two months of investigating I was found to have an autoimmune disease and a vitamin D deficiency so severe that my liver had started failing. Once I was diagnosed, I underwent treatment to help improve my deficiency and liver issues.

As I grappled with my health, I tried to homeschool my children whenever I could and work from home. I was a general manager at a hotel in Liverpool city centre and by the spring of 2021, I had started to physically go back to work. In June 2021, one of my staff members was racist to me during work. I was talking about the excitement I felt about growing my hair out. As a trans man this is a big deal for me due to societal attitudes around gender expression. The maintenance manager then told us all that he hated Black hair—not mine though, just other Black people's hair, he added, as though this was perfectly okay to say. There was a heated exchange and I reported this to Human Resources (HR).

HR started investigating me instead of supporting me by saying that the maintenance manager didn't know better—I was treated as the aggressor. I reported this to the CEO of the company, and he told me that the way HR behaved was not racist and that it was not anti-Blackness when I was accused of being responsible for what had happened. He yelled at me for being childish. He was on my phone loudspeaker in a taxi—both my partner and the driver heard and all of them witnessed me have a nervous breakdown. I blacked out, not knowing what had happened.

I still don't fully remember what happened; I have some snippets of memory of my screaming in audible pain. I remember it had felt as though someone had put a spear through my soul. I felt the furthering of racist brutality even after the experience of the initial racist attack because of HR.

In October 2021, my bathroom flooded whilst my child was in the bath. For years, water would come through the cracks in the walls—I had reported this every year but due to incompetency the landlord left this unresolved for four years. Finally, my kitchen ceiling came down, leaving us with no electricity (or ceiling!) in the kitchen for one month. In the meantime, I was left to figure out how to cook and get my kids to school. I come from war in Somalia; I've lived in many inadequate shelters, but nothing triggers my complex post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) more than seeing a missing ceiling. From the kitchen I could see into the bathroom. This caused another nervous breakdown to my system. The bathroom and the kitchen eventually got fixed, but now I am writing this in April 2022 and my kitchen ceiling is leaking again.

Between January 2021 and December 2021, I experienced a multitude of racialised, homophobic and transphobic aggressions in person and on social media. It was during this time I learnt that receiving testosterone for hormone replacement treatment had a four-year waiting list. Professionally, socially and medically, I was at the sharp end of patriarchal, white supremacist, ableist, capitalist society. bell hooks tells us in *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (2004, p. 74) that 'clearly we cannot dismantle a system as long as we engage in collective denial about its impact on our lives'; it is important to examine the soil in which psychedelic healing is being fertilised.

My interest in psychedelics started after watching *Fantastic Fungi* (2019) on Netflix. At this point I had already experienced two nervous breakdowns in the space of six months—life felt even more hopeless than it did when I thought I was dying. Paul Stamets, a lifelong mycologist, declared that one session of psilocybin trip was worth years of therapy. I had already been in therapy for a number of years and at this point I was ready to try anything. I wanted to know more about this 'paradigm shifting breakthrough on psilocybin and depression' (*ibid.*) that Stamets excitedly spoke about in the documentary. I spent time reading trip reports, research, psychologist reports and test trials.

I attended the online Zoom of the Maudsley Psychedelic Society; they lead the Psychedelic Trials Group at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience at King's College London. Their purpose is to act as a forum for medics, researchers, students and allied professionals to discuss the therapeutic use of psychedelics and their place in psychiatry, medicine and society. These monthly psychedelic integration groups were used as harm reduction measures, as well as framing these discussions as potential healing through expanded states.

I only attended once but it was enough for me to conclude that psychedelics were something I wanted to use to find a way to heal from intergenerational trauma. This research gave me hope because it meant that I could undertake the vocation of healing; I was at the bottom of the barrel, mentally I couldn't conceive of things getting worse as I was barely living. I wanted to have the luxury of feeling like a human being because I had awakened to the ways the oppressive system we lived in was interfering with my life, and the fact that I have children meant that I had to find a way to live in this world.

It is my opinion that psychedelics are the engine fuel to kickstart the process of 'coming to voice' that Paulo Freire (2000 [1970]) speaks of. The dehumanisation that I experienced demanded me to seek out humanisation. Then, humanisation demanded me to review my experiences and put my own words into the experiences. This process also allowed me to gather all these seemingly separate events of my everyday life, recognise the patterns in which I am ignored, discriminated against and put at risk—prejudices that interrupt my life. Interrupting the right to be myself, the right to have peace, the right to have a warm home, the right to be treated as equal.

Scouse Republic (2022)

KMA: I created the film *Scouse Republic* (see Figure 1) as a concentrated mushroom body of research in psychedelic, psychotherapy, biology and social sciences. The trips introduced me to memories my brain had not felt safe enough to know before, to continue the act of surviving as a child. Healing as a vocation takes tremendous energy. I have come to see trips as spiritual becoming through spiritual visitation of my psyche. These visitations allowed me to come back with critical



Figure 1 A screening of *Scouse Republic* at Output Gallery; the right-hand wall has a mural of Amanita Muscaria mushroom dreaming of humans, nature, music and dancing
Source: Output Gallery, 2022

knowing about myself, about how deeply entrenched the knots of trauma are, and this inner knowing started the important work of integration that needed to take place in order to bring all my exiled parts into the unfoldment and becoming of myself. This film fundamentally changed me as a person, but also I see this film as a call to the wider community in how we seriously undertake the work of healing intergenerational trauma.



Figure 2 Still from *Scouse Republic*; the still shows a local heron taking flight
Source: Output Gallery, 2022

PS: My first viewing of *Scouse Republic* brought my hazy thoughts around psychedelic healing into sharp focus. The work opened up so many subconscious avenues around diaspora identity, mental health, heartfelt relationship with a land and soil we are told is not ours and a reaching back into history for healing. These words—diaspora, healing, ancestors—had echoed around multiple gallery spaces where I have sat and watched and listened to others grapple with these concepts. Here, it resonated so strongly because Kiara invites the viewer into a journey that is still ongoing (see Figure 2).

KMA: Liverpool is not like any other place in the world, and I don't think if I were anywhere else I'd be producing this work. Unintentionally all my work has been about the Black ancestral history of Liverpool, alongside echoes of my life. I started practising art in 2018; the first film I made was *Black Flowers* (2018) and in that film I asked 'Do you still hear the echoes of your ancestors at the docks?'—and it seems I'm still hearing them and I'm only realising now that I have continued this pursuit. I come from a lineage of Somali nomads; listening to the land and being its loudspeaker is just a continuation of my ancestral purpose and I seem to have embodied that same relationship with Scouse-land too.



Figure 3 Still from *Scouse Republic* showing sacred imaginings and remembering of ancestors; the elders are singing a lullaby to a baby. The artist is seeing his reflection in the water with his offering
Source: Output Gallery, 2022

PS: Liverpool is a city that I have adopted as my own. I am not Scouse, but I am overjoyed to know that this same bit of soil and these streets nurture my friend as much as they do me. We diasporic bodies are told that the host nation doesn't belong to us, but we both know that it does and nobody but ourselves can control that relationship (see Figure 3).

KMA: Liverpool is sacred in its power because ancient powerful bones are lying here. Panashe Chigumadzi (2018) stated that bones buried in the land create a spiritual portal, an access point to siphon power from those who can lend you their strength to keep going—keep dreaming of liberation. I was reading Chigumadzi's book alongside my park visits and felt like I was in direct contact with ancestors who were wanting to comfort me. I got courage from them to keep going, to keep making art and to keep dreaming.

PS: Chigumadzi's notion of bones as spiritual portal draws on ancestral history in a meaningful way. Similarly, the Ancestor Project advocates for healing pathways that allow us to learn from our lineage. As part of their Ancestral Medicine series, they state that 'opportunities for growth from the stories of resilience and strength can also be found when we reacquaint ourselves with our ancestries'. These approaches do not draw on the spirit of those that have statues and plaques dedicated to them, but those that did the real everyday living, surviving and dying. Whilst mine and Kiara's cultural histories are different, it has made me think with more purpose about the traces that our dead leave behind (see Figure 4).



Figure 4 Still from *Scouse Republic* showing an imagined portal in Princes Park, Liverpool; this being an opening to enter deeper into understanding of oneself in time and space
Source: Output Gallery, 2022

KMA: Trauma splinters the self (Levine, 2010), and I felt the splintered self through disassociation and not having access to large chunks of childhood memories due to severe trauma. In the film, the viewer is shown greenery, distorted images of lampposts and a kaleidoscope of selves jumping into the hole that is in search of wholeness through a portal. I had several nervous breakdowns and needed to be physically taken care of. I filmed with my phone since I was already going out to parks to do my meditation. I started meditating to come to terms with PTSD, general anxiety and depression. I would go to the parks around Liverpool to do this and I felt deeply held and comforted by the spirit of the land. *Scouse Republic* is my offering to the process of 'conscientização', to others as well as to myself. 'Conscientização' is a term that Paulo Freire (2000 [1970], p. 57) coined, referring to the learning of being able to perceive social, political and economic contradictions but also to take 'action against the oppressive elements of reality'. It is our right as human beings to see where we have been dehumanised, name how we have been dehumanised and understand what we need to do in order to start the working of humanising and making a whole of the self. I create art that works towards Black liberation and Black dreaming that is anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, anti-cis-heteronormativity.

PS: Here I think of a quote from Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974, p. 301): 'You cannot buy the revolution. You cannot make the revolution. You can only be the revolution. It is in your spirit, or it is

nowhere'. There are structures of oppression outside of ourselves that we can work to dismantle but there are also structures inside ourselves that we can work to rebuild if we are to stay in the fight for life, not just survival.

towards psychedelic liberation

We call for a psychedelic liberation rooted in working-class, Black, disabled, trans, queer and feminist politics, not one that perpetuates Western cis-heteropatriarchy, telling us we should go to Indigenous lands to extract knowledge from shamanic rituals. A liberation that encourages us to 'fight (and trip) where we stand' because this could be how we heal. Bayo Akomolafe (2020) writes that 'we live in fugitive times, and fugitive times require fugitive epistemologies, or ways of knowing'. We argue that psychedelics open us up to ways of knowing that disrupt capitalist, patriarchal, white supremacist systems and if we allow ourselves to be changed, psychedelics facilitate and move us into a deeper space of inner knowing and noticing. Akomolafe (2022) tells us that 'knowing is always a corporeal, embodied, tactile way of relating in the world. Performing knowing is always risky, political, experimental and speculative. If we are to engage in dismantling of oppressive systems then we must cultivate and nurture knowledge of ourselves and our place in it'. Furthermore, he argues that 'knowledge is proprioceptive, it is how we move in the world, meet the world and how the world meets us in return ... how we move'. For Kiara, he knows that being open to using psychedelics is a risk. Knowledge is risky and the method in which this knowledge was sought was risky but, as Akomolafe (*ibid.*) states, 'fugitivity is a political on-project that is about a conjuring, a calling to lose our way'. For now, psychedelics move those who use them for healing into fugitive roles—we are now cultivating knowledge outside of oppressive systems.

Each of us is linked to the past, a library of stories, carrying records of our triumphs and devastations. Our DNA is the codex in which the residue of the past alchemises with the present to create an unactualised future that has the potential to be transformative, powerful and radical. Psychedelics seem to crack open the codex in which the unconscious mind has kept buried all the pain that was too much to bear during waking hours (Maté, Read and Papaspyrou, 2021). If psychedelics expand consciousness and connect us to our wholeness, then it makes sense that we are humanised by them. We are opening a doorway to self-reflection and self-actualisation, to the radical reclamation of a self that has been denied life. It changes individuals, it creates new knowledge, integrates old knowledge and allows us to move through the world and make knowledge—a fugitive knowledge with which we can continue the work of liberation. Emancipation and psychedelics have world-building at the centre and it is from this centre that we can engage in the dismantling of oppressive systems.

author biographies

Kiara Mohamed Amin is a trans, Somali multidisciplinary artist based in Toxteth, Liverpool. His work focuses on what it means to live at the intersections of marginalisation and still choose joy, healing and community as an act of radical living and dreaming. He uses different mediums to explore intergenerational trauma and looks to see where we are in eternity through astrology, somatic movements and divination.

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