Global Tribe: Technology, Spirituality and Psytrance

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Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:

- DMT in Culture, Religion and History View project
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Global Tribe
Technology, Spirituality and Psytrance

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1 Transnational psyculture

They occupy the Temple in the thousands. At the dusk of a scorching day, in outfits with vivid fractal designs, alien insignia, symbols and geometric mandala patterns, they arrive in cohorts who’ve journeyed from a multitude of national embarkation points. With utility-belts slinked at the waist and dreadlocks knotted back, imprinted with futuristic glyphs, etched in tribal tattoos and marked by facial piercings, they come bearing gifts of specially prepared decoctions, meads, herbal mixes, ganja cakes, crystal powders, beer and other intoxicants, along with fruits and energy supplements they will share among friends and strangers encountered through the night, and into the day. Entering this vast hexagonal covered arena, the noise of the surrounding festival recedes as occupants are enveloped in “3D sound” controlled from a stage upon which rests a stellated dodecahedron portal within which scheduled DJs perform the hypnotic bass and rhythm patterns of electronic trance music dictating a compulsion on the part of those present to become activated by moves. And as the natural light fades, the Temple is enlivened with psychotropic projections, morphing geometric laser patterns and blacklights triggering ultraviolet reactive designs and illuminating the awestruck appearances of Temple dancers who will carve shapes into the night. At one side of this structure, groups huddle under luminescent Day of the Triffids-like installations crafted from recycled material, and all around the edges the enthused are lost to engrossing acrobatic displays, spinning fire staff and twirling LED poi with stunning light-trail effects. Into the early hours of the morning, the intensity of furious-paced “darkpsy” transits towards uplifting and melodic sounds as the Sun clears the horizon and begins its journey over the sky’s proscenium arch.

It’s mid-summer in Portugal, at the tail end of August 2010, and I’m on one of the most expansive and impressive outdoor dance floors on the planet. The Dance Temple is integral to the biennial Boom Festival held in central-eastern Portugal near the protected area Parque do Tejo Internacional and the village
of Idanha-a-Nova. An eight-day event, Boom is the premiere production in world psychedelic trance (psytrance) and visionary arts culture, with its Temple attracting near 25,000 people holding passports from approximately seventy countries. If there’s a global centre of psyculture, this is it. Inside the Dance Temple, I’m immersed in a soundbath of languages and caught in a blizzard of sensory impressions. Up on stage, an artist is DJing from a laptop and orchestrating a sonic broadside incorporating hypnotic melody lines around persistent and seductive bass-lines. Frequencies amplified through the sound system enervate my whole being. Time passes, and I too pass outside of normal time. And within this prolonged now, the optical grows rhythmic and sounds become visible. The national colour-codes and iconography of Japan, Israel, Sweden, Brazil and Australia, to name a few, blend with expatriate gestures, not dissimilar to those performed by forebears in Goa, India, the birthplace of Goatrance, the formative dance movement from which psytrance and its various subgenres grew. There’s possibly 10,000 people on and around this dance floor at this moment, a vast congregation of fleshy gesticulations, its habitués performing the international hand and foot signals of trance. I feel like I’ve landed among a community in exile. There’s multiple personal, lifestyle and cultural concerns this community’s inhabitants have sought exodus from, and at this moment they’re communicating their desires in the expressive mode of dance. And, as I slide into the groove, I feel like I’ve come home.

As I turn about, I’m face-whipped by a woman with long black dreadlocks. Commanding a wicked stomp, she’s beside herself. Nearby, a Japanese freak in his early thirties stands astride jabbing at unseen soap bubbles up ahead. He’s joined by compatriots in carnage alive on the pulse. An Italian girl in fairy wings swivels gracefully four-stepping in perfect unison with the beat. A German freak, who I recognize by his unyielding grin, is cutting it up inside his own personal smoke cloud. Others clown around, hug their partners in the sublime, prepare a chillum, maintaining form amidst the mayhem. All about me, transnational beat freaks ride the 16th-note loop of psychedelic trance, compelled by its progression, acting as if everything depends on its maintenance, as if a faltering move will cause a collapse in the rhythm and a diminution of the vibe. And as we pass outside of ourselves, it seems to me that everyone has fallen into the slot, that zone which everybody knows though few can articulate – that moment in which nothing remains the same. “This is it”. Grinning under bass pressure, my crazy Russian neighbour shouts something barely intelligible, something about the “mothership” we’ve boarded. Oscillating between self-dissolution and spectacular displays, its passengers are blissful abductees. Many producers have collaborated to steer our ship through the night. In transit, time’s lost and the world is gained. Eventually, I snake my way across this incredible synesthetic stomping ground, idling to absorb kangaroo stilt performers jumping over gales of laughter.
Leaving this dance floor is like finding the best route out of a metropolis. Floating on a wave of exhilaration and the aromas of \textit{chai}, \textit{charas} and \textit{changa}, eventually I emerge out of the Temple and disappear into the wider festival.

It was my third time at Boom, a world barometer on the state of psychedelic trance music and culture: \textit{psyculture}. Even though it no longer identifies itself as a “psytrance” festival, this music dominates the schedule of its main venue (the Dance Temple). My attendance had been driven by a desire to participate in and observe trends in psytrance and the wider visionary arts culture, a research project that grew from my involvement in this scene since the mid-1990s in Melbourne, Australia. By 2010, this project had taken me to more than a dozen countries, and countless events, festivals and after-parties. Psytrance is a movement rooted in the live music scene of the 1970s flourishing in the former Portuguese colony of Goa, India, which had been overtaken by a seasonal DJ-led electronic music scene in the 1980s. Goa had attracted international travellers, artists and spiritual seekers since the 1960s, becoming an exotic outland of experimentation for musicians and expatriates in subsequent decades. It was the birthplace and proving grounds of a mutant dance music culture, which, by the mid-1990s, became marketed as Goa Trance (or Goatrance as it is denoted in this book). Following aesthetic shifts associated with analog, digital and virtual music technologies along with transitions in taste and demand, Goatrance later developed as psychedelic trance or psytrance, which splintered into numerous subgenres by the early 2000s. While these include progressive psychedelic (progpsy or progressive psy), darkpsy (dark psychedelic trance), full-on, psybreaks and suomisaundi (Finnish trance), a close connection is maintained with psychedelic ambient (sometimes referred to as “psybient”) dub and with a fusional aesthetic sometimes referred to as “ethnodelic”, all signs, sounds and scenes of a voracious “meta-genre” (Lindop 2010) providing the soundtracks and dancescapes for a diverse and contested cultural, or psycultural, movement.

This book is a post-Goa project. That is, it is a study of the Goatrance movement as it mushroomed around the world from the 1990s, attracting the designation “psytrance” by the end of that decade. Goa was the wellspring of this movement, and its role as a marginal cultural centre is unmistakable, but my empirical “field” for this project did not include Goa itself. As many commentators aver, Goa declined, or indeed was arguably destroyed, as a scene destination before Goatrance became a formulated and marketed genre by the mid-1990s. \textit{Global Tribe} was conceived as a study of global psyculture in the early 2000s – that is, as a study of the global movement of Goa, as Goatrance (and then psytrance) was transposed to music, festivals and scenes around the world. Below I will refer to events that are crucial to the story narrated in this book and indelible to my own experience. But re-evaluating my original plans, a “global” project now seems overly ambitious, if not faintly ridiculous, since, as I came to realize, no single researcher can confidently
establish a commanding view over the world of psytrance, whose culture is transnational, emergent and labyrinthine. It’s a frankly impossible task, confirmed while leafing through the latest edition of *Psychedelic Traveller* magazine, a kind of *Rough Guide* for global psytrance enthusiasts with entries on dozens of nations, only a portion of which I have visited. Even the recent anthology *Goa: 20 Years of Psychedelic Trance* (Rom and Querner 2011), to which dozens of participants in the scene have contributed, falls short of global coverage. A collection I recently edited, *The Local Scenes and Global Culture of Psytrance* (St John 2010a), was the first scholarly book to illuminate this global phenomenon. While that publication offered lenses on scenes around the world from a variety of disciplinary vantage points and through multiple methodologies, it could only angle short bursts of light on different aspects of this complex movement, and few details were offered on the music that characterizes its culture. Detailed ethnographic and documentary accounts of the transnationalism of this movement, the culture of its events, and the aesthetics of its music, were needed.

The book you’re reading is the first attempt to achieve these specific objectives. This is performed through a combination of multi-sited ethnography involving my attendance at events (from small parties to large festivals) in over a dozen countries; interviews conducted *in situ* at events and conversations conducted electronically with DJs and other artists, event-organizers and promoters, partygoers, journalists and scholars; the analysis of movement niche and micro-media including magazines, net forums, websites, blogs, social media and promotional material; and a thoroughgoing cultural analysis of the music involving investigation of the vocal material sampled from popular cultural sources – commentaries, script and film scores from TV documentaries, cinema and computer games – and programmed into tracks by the producers of Goa/psytrance (what I call *nanomedia*). While this multi-pronged methodology is not musicological in approach, it has afforded insights across key interrelated areas: the roots of *psychedelia* and its implications for self and culture; the *dance* events (parties and festivals) that are the home of the *vibe* and the paramount rationale of dance *tribes*; the nature of *trance* in the contemporary world; variations on the techno-aesthetics of *transit* given the differing expectations of participants; and the *transnational* character of psyculture.

The book recognizes psychedelic trance culture as a globalized optimization of the post-1960s quest for *experience*, where music production, DJ performance and event technologies form a shifting assemblage dedicated to effecting transition. Rooted in a self-exiled bohemian traveller culture endogenous to radical modernity, travel (the journey, the “trip”) is explicit to the aesthetic of psychedelic trance. Influenced by earlier forms (notably psychedelic rock), and with hermeticist and post-humanist orientations, Goa/psytrance redeploys popular culture to cultivate a *superliminal* context.
Emerging in a period of optimism (late 1980s to late 1990s) which saw the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the dismantling of apartheid, the birth of reconciliation movements, the popularization of MDMA and the introduction of the World Wide Web, a unique and yet diverse transnational movement evolved whose chief expression were parties, ephemeral open-air communities, impermanent-yet-perennial festivals in which ecstatic dancing to electronic music mixed by DJs remained the central activity. This development was achieved as individuals travelled physically from “home” locations and mentally from normative mind states, freedoms of movement enabled by relative disposable wealth and assisted by transpersonalizing digital, chemical and virtual media. Given the multiplicity of sites, expectations and aesthetics, the psychogeographic mobility experienced within this movement is characteristically heterogeneous, a chief consideration returned to throughout this book.

*Global Tribe* introduces a movement whose chief cause is dance, whose *raison d’être* is dancing, and whose primary vehicle is the dance floor, a sensual, salubrious and soulful drop-zone for expatriates, cultural fugitives and antinomians, a realm charged with the sensibilities of exodus heir to the Goa tradition. Enabling departures from dominant codes of practice and arrivals at alternative modes of being, the dance floor and the community proliferating around its verges, are built according to the design of a radical utopian imagination. In this virtual world, habitués imagine themselves as alien to the popstream, adopting the recombined insignia of ancients and extraterrestrials, the monstrous and the fabulous, the outlaw and outrageous. I call this virtual world *Disctopia*, a concept referring to a distributed place that is not synonymous or coincident with the ethnonational, but which nevertheless incorporates nationalities. Inhabitants of the exodus are participants in a transnational milieu whose common ground is the familial context.
of dance floors that may be inhabited by the same individuals across multiple countries and whose shared history is Goa.

Psyculture has emerged from a tradition in which the cultural exile is ascendant, the estranged figure who had chosen his/her departure from global risk, outlawed practice, existential despair, spiritual disenchantment, cognitive dissonance. Goa freak forebears were able to choose the “out” because their middle-class backgrounds provided the opportunity and the resources for their mobility. The self-exile is a figure in transit, a \textit{freak} dwelling in that state of departure from lifeworld conditions. The life of self-exiles and their cultural progeny is a liminal life, the life of the traveller. Within the techno-spiritual counterculture, technics are adopted to assist mobility across physical sites (alternative regions, enclaves, markets and festivals in local and global circuits) and psychical terrain (the journey into the unconscious via yoga and meditation techniques as well as the use of psychedelics or “entheogens” such as LSD and DMT). While this is the transnational and transpersonal world of the trancer who harnesses artifice in his/her mobility, the freedoms sought and achieved are as multiple as the conditions of risk, constraint and oppression in the lifeworld. The liminality of the Goa vibe is, then, not driven by any singular promise of “freedom”. Despite a standard “progressive” philosophy of unity, wholeness and becoming, the \textit{psychedelic experience} is not an homogeneous social aesthetic. Variant motivations, expectations and figures, from the ecstatic to the visionary, the gothic to the cosmic, the transgressive to the proactive, then populate this movement. As this book demonstrates, one’s freedom-seeking expatriation may conflict with that of other habitués, with members of the wider freak constituency perenniially testing one another’s legitimacy. This vibe of the exiles is in a state of perpetual re-optimization since shared exile assures compromise and collaboration on matters of mutual interest and survival, such as securing freedom from agents of predation (e.g. tourists, police), while in other circumstances disputes trigger the formation of new events and their fledgling vibes.

Initially buoyed by post-Soviet and Cyber Age optimism, and transiting through post-9/11 paranoia, psytrance has evolved over two decades and has been translated in dozens of nations where \textit{psytribes} have adopted the architectonic of psychedelic trance under a variety of local conditions. This book begins to unravel the diversity of this culture while at the same time recognizing commonalities, the search for an enchanted sociality facilitated by technology and counteracting the demise of community amid the isolation, loneliness and privatization of modern life. Where the idealized “tribal” other is raised as a standard under which transnational communities dance, where textile fashions, body modifications, cover art, web designs, and music samples are pixilated, programmed and decaled with the signs of soft primitivism and Orientalism, and where “natives” serve to index “trance” or “shamanic” states for those seeking remedies for their modern
afflictions, this retribalization is not unproblematic. Yet the socially in which habitués are vested is often marked not by derivative and distorted tropes, or cultural theft, but by novel social experimentation with significant intercultural implications, from the regional to the planetary. Neither these social processes nor cultural outcomes will be recognized in approaches safely removed from the field of research and which defend singular predeter-
mained narratives. From BC’s Tribal Harmonix, to Melbourne’s Tribeadelic, to Europe’s Psy Tribe, event crews, production houses, entire scenes, adopt the “tribal” identifier as an expression of their desire to be together, a tendency which is less affectation than an intentional re-creation of community at the heart of which are sensual paroxysms – neither contrived nor borrowed, but lived and shared experiences.

Deviating from the anthropological invention and political recognition of “tribe”, psytribes are characterized by freedom of choice, experimentalism and a polycentric fluidity of identification, all hallmarks of “neotribes” outlined by Michel Maffesoli (1996). Notably, these psytribes deploy a technics of remixology, shared with other techno-tribes of electronic dance music (EDM), which provides not only a common artifice but is a principal means of identification for cosmopolitan communities fusing diverse sonic influences and creating new cultural forms in the mix. Denoting a prevalent “mixillogical” sensibility, Kodwo Eshun offered insight on this via his take on George Russell’s Electronic Sonata: a “fleeting friction of timbral incongruities [and] incompatible sound blocs rubbing against each other” (1998: 01[003]). The profusion of electronic music styles impacting and influencing populations who themselves continuously cut ‘n’ mix from this profusion speaks of the “compositional sensibilities” of the last few decades (Bennett 1999: 610), and of the “cosmopolitan emotion” (Rietveld 2010) felt by citizens of global cities who seek attachments outside ethnonationalism, circumstances oiled by post-1960s psychedelia, amplified by post-1980s electronic arts scenes, and virtualized by post-1990s–2000s net culture. Distanced from those aspects of “tribalism” associated with traditional or colonial contexts – e.g. hierarchies, homogeneity, ethnocentrism, hostility – psychedelic tribalism can at least partially be recognized by what Ronald E. Rice identified in his foreword to Electronic Tribes (2008: viii) as those formations which “encourage individual identity”, are based “primarily on frequency of interaction”, possess fluid boundaries, and “heterarchies (webs, networks) instead of hierarchies (strict vertical subsets)”. While psy “tribes” are not primarily “e-tribes”, the electronic tribalism enabled by social networking platforms, and membership in e-tribes relating to genre, event promotion and management, label, and file sharing are integral. Not unlike other EDM technotribes, in psytrance, electronic sound media, psychoactive compounds and internet communications media are assembled and purposed to maintain independence, with control over the means of production, distribution and perception established in ways only imagined by forebears.
The book identifies six interfaces, dynamics and tensions: (1) local and global; (2) self and tribe; (3) spiritual and technological; (4) transgressive and progressive; (5) roots and novelty; and (6) commercial and independent. At the first interface we witness the formation of scenes in which local (regional and national) party organizations, producers and DJs adapt technics, sample popular culture and remix aesthetics circulating as a result of globalization. Developments in electronic music production and performance since the 1970s, the revolution in digitalization in the 1980s–1990s and the networked virtualization of the 1990s–2000s, all cause and are effected by this “glocal” (Robertson 1994) process, and facilitate a translocal imagination (Appadurai 1996). Individual genius, vernacular translations and regional innovations feed back into the global milieu where experimentalism, syncretism and remixology ensure the reproduction of psyculture. Global cities and cosmopolitanism have been instrumental, overseeing these translocal flows but also contextualizing distinct modes of being together, or more accurately, being altered together, in the radically reflexive contexts of late modernity. The book adopts the tribal as an appropriate designation for these intensely social contexts, where formations are considered “global tribes” not only since they’re rocked by the flows and infused with the products of globalization, but that they are also transnational, or trance-national, social formations, and self-consciously “global”, a circumstance most evident in events such as Boom which promotes itself as a world-summit of visionary arts and trance, a “united tribe of the world”. The “globality” that is of interest here is not simply a recognition of the “whole Earth”, but a recognition of a world haunted by the threat of ecological apocalypse, economic collapse, humanitarian disaster and psychological turmoil.

The simultaneity of local and global elements within psytrance events yields a sociality where the term “tribe” designates both a distinct form of identification and the obliteration of difference, a dynamic native to neotribalism. This then introduces the second interface. In radical modernity, the disenchanted seek sensation, difference, expatriation in the radical immanence of the dance party, whose freak sociality potentiates the dissolution of difference (ethnonational, class, gender, sexuality, age). With the operation of what I call the difference engine, assembled technologies of the senses dubbed “psychedelic” – psychoactive compounds, music and audio systems, lighting and visual projections, décor, etc. – facilitate the (enduring) expression of difference via the (temporary) liquidation of differences via optimized and prolonged alteration of normative spatio-temporal conditions, a circumstance replicated across EDM, though hyperactivated in psychedelic trance.

In the third interface is found the formation of what I identify as spiritechnics – that is, technologies and techniques (analog, digital, chemical and cyber) that are purposed to spiritual ends. Researchers have noted the significance of spirituality to psytrance participants. For instance, Greener and Hollands (2006: 403) report that 75.2 per cent (351 people) of their
survey respondents described themselves as “a spiritual person”, and over a half of their respondents believed they are “on a spiritual path in life”. These figures offer an important contrast to earlier attitudes towards “subcultures”, where Paul Willis (1978: 86), for instance, referred to hippies’ “illusory” goals of “transcendence and fuller states of awareness”. Yet these figures prompt inquiry about the nature and variation of the “spiritual” experience of participants as they transpire in situ. Demonstrating influence from romanticism and transcendentalism, inflected with the turn to Eastern metaphysics, as well as traditions of shamanism in which, for example, psilocybin mushrooms, DMT and ayahuasca use are prominent, and heir to cross-esoteric and occultic currents – mystery cults, hermeticism, theosophy, ecologism and cybernetics – we approach a fuller understanding of what spirituality means for individual participants.

This leads to the fourth tension: activities associated with the extremes of transgression and the evolution of consciousness constitute contrasting expectations, disparate liminalities, with different purposes, logics and sources of prestige. That is, psytrance would become a cultural repository for heterogeneous causes and demands, definitions of “psychedelic”, ideas of the holy, and mission objectives motivating its constituency. Psyculture thus inherits the dynamic tension between the ecstatic and proactive dispositions that is the legacy of a counterculture possessing its formative moments in the 1960s and 1970s. Countermanding causes, controversial aesthetics and different means of accomplishing transcendence generate quarrels, trigger schism and provoke modification of the festal interstices that are the chief cultural expression of this movement. For many crews, the party is designed according to the principal of pleasure, perhaps even coloured by a nostalgia for past events and whose outcome may be the desire to hold more parties. In some circumstances, party organizations are motivated to protect local scenes from the ever-present risks posed by state intervention, commercialization and popularity, while in other contexts events are vehicles for campaigns for alternative futures. They may become a platform for social movements concerned with drug reform and cognitive liberty, well-being practices, sustainable energy use, planetary culture, peace. Therefore, events become vehicles for the performance of a host of local and global agendas beyond the dance floor, and in many cases disparate agendas meet and are negotiated on those same floors.

In the fifth interface, we find the simultaneous commitment to the origins to which participants lay claim and the original work produced. This is the dynamic of originality. On the one hand, participants harness symbolic resources in the claiming of roots and heritage, the revival of tradition, the return to the primordial. On the other, they pursue innovation, iterating technique in novel formations. While protagonists return to nature, their identity becoming infused by that which is recognizably authentic, native
and Earth-centred, identifications are also shaped by techno-ascensionist and extropian narratives. While some wish to claim a “revived” tribalism in which a romantic sensibility fuels festal life, others are motivated by the prospects of novel associations forming from the promethean promise of “cutting-edge” techniques. These “electribes” have been celebrated as new identifications, “new tribes forming with new codes and languages, out of zeros and ones, and electronic pattern forming devices” (Austin 1998). While the dance party may be timeless and familiar, it is also infused by strangeness. Across regions and continents, the psytribes forming to reproduce trance dance events, along with music producers, regularly enact hybrids of the congress of these aesthetics. The artifice of electronic music performs the dynamics of originality since works of origin are recognized at the same time as they are transmuted into original works. Remastering is performed in iterations whereby the “originals” are often lost in the appropriation, a process consistent with the growth of digital remix culture. Portmanteau terms like “technoshamanism”, “technopagan”, “psycorroboree” and “modern primitive” connote this mutability. The trance experience itself marks the simultaneity of the familiar and the novel, heritage and innovation, stasis and change. Under optimal conditions, the effect in trance is that nothing changes, the paradox inciting outrage and ridicule among “trance” detractors, and yet fuels the convictions, compulsions and devotions of the trance formed. While participants may sentimentalize reconnection with the past, the body and nature, the trance event occasions the re/fashioning of identifications deploying the optimizable assemblage of technics at the disposal of its habitués.

In the sixth and final tension, the psytrance milieu is rooted in dramatic and sustainable quests for independence facilitated by a DiY music industry, the accessibility of electronic instruments and production technologies, and the technics of remixology central to the arts of DJing. The internet has been integral to production, distribution (e.g. netlabels), promotions and discussion on webforums and social networking platforms. Within psytrance (as with other EDM industries), economic capital takes a back seat to informal cultural capital ensuring the estimation of artists and producers as “psychedelic”, “conscious” or “visionary”, and therefore noteworthy. Yet, while there is resistance to the economic popularization of music and culture, there exists an ambivalent collusion with proprietary forces commoditizing production and ensuring livelihoods. This is a common cause of concern within a countercultural milieu that is nevertheless reliant on reflexive capitalism. Thus the response to commercialization is facilitated, as Anthony D’Andrea (2007a: 3) recognizes, through global processes of hypermobility, digitalization and neoliberalism. It is also the case, however, that unscrupulous, unsustainable and unimaginative event management, in addition to onerous licensing laws, police intervention and the curtailment of autonomy, incite responses among experienced operators and fledgling crews to improvise or recreate psychedelic culture.
Notes on method and technique

The moon was full on the night of 10 June 2006. I was outside Tullamore, Ireland, at the psytrance festival Life, organized by Neutronix. I was zipped inside my tent in the shadow of Charleville Forest Castle. I’d just smoked a strong hit of *Salvia divinorum* and had been lying back for I don’t know how long. Had I been screaming? Was “I” present at all? For how long had I been holding my breath? Previous experiences on lower strengths of this “teacher plant” taken for millennia by the Mazatec of Oaxaca, Mexico, to divine spiritual truths, had precipitated a cartoon-like spin cycle of patchworked memories. Those were ludicrous times. Now, however, it was no laughing matter. I finally remembered to breathe, a surfacing concurrent with a Category Five realization that everything I had known, all my memories, my identity, the history of the world as I knew it, and my own physical body, was design. All code. Many female voices were heard during this rupture, from around the festival, seeming to will me out of my coma, the grand deception called “life”. While the precise meaning of this deception was unclear, the sensation of immortality was overwhelming. And it was terrifying, as while an eternity was exposed, it was one in which I was absent. My soul was not destined to comfortably terminate (with death) – even though “I” was. I had taken a glimpse across the final frontier, and I wasn’t there. The wild screams and clamour of the festival outside my tent appeared like the confused response of the coders to my awakening, and while the precise nature of this revelation was unclear, the feeling of knowing was transfiguring. Eventually, dripping, I zipped from the tent-womb and moved towards the Gothic castle, guided by oak trees, psychedelic lights and an insistent bass-line.
My life rupture came more than ten years following my initial exposure to the sounds, sensibility and sociality of psychedelic trance music, in my homeland, Australia. Over Easter, 1995, I participated in an impromptu and unofficial doof at the alternative lifestyle festival ConFest, near Moama, New South Wales. On the end of its earliest wave in Australia, filtered through experimental arts communities in Melbourne and Byron Bay in particular, on that night, Goatrance was detonated mid-festival by DJ Krusty – hours before someone spiked the generator with sugar. I was twenty-six years old. Not unlike countless converts, I spent years attempting to become reunited with the sounds punctuating that night – which had included tracks on releases from labels TIP, Dragonfly, Transient, Matsuri and Psy Harmonics. What I later recognized as psychedelic trance had an extraordinary power to unite people in dance, and would become the seamless anthem to an odyssey of backyard blitzkriegs, one-night stands and weekend festivals stretching across several thousand kilometres (and five states). Earthcore and Rainbow Serpent festivals, along with the earliest Earthdance events in Melbourne, Exodus in northeast New South Wales, and later Earth Freq in Queensland, became part of my annual cycle of events. In early December 2002, I attended the total solar eclipse festival, Outback Eclipse, near Lindhurst in South Australia. Over successive events and successive years of being animated, possessed and punished by this sound, and befriended by those gravitating to it, I was moved to understand what George Carlin meant when he said “those who dance are considered insane by those who cannot hear the music”. But the music wasn't simply being heard. It was felt intensely, and networked communities were acting in the interests of its perpetuity. Immersion in this music culture connected me to a milieu that stretched around the world. Ten years following that fateful Easter, I experienced the first of many parties outside Australia (Sonica, Italy, 2005), and over the next six years I pitched my tent in temperate forests and in scorching deserts at festivals on several continents. Journeying across country, making camp in the direct firing line of gargantuan sound rigs or in chilled groves of gentle repose, a host of people came into my life, many of my closest friends, my family, lovers, interlocutors turned mates, mates becoming interlocutors: a cast of characters, pioneers and freaks whose many voices and sensitivities are found in this book.

Research for the book saw my attendance at events with a diversity of styles, sizes and populations, and with a variety of agendas. From small warehouse parties to spectacular multi-staged mega-events such as that which celebrates Germany’s reunification (Fusion Festival, where the Trance stage is one among some twenty sound stages). From small regional bush doofs in Australia to various manifestations of the annual Earthdance Carnival which in late September transpires simultaneously in hundreds of global locations. From a nomadic desert carnival through Central Australia (Earthdream, 2000) to the annual Burning Man Festival in Nevada’s Black Rock Desert...
(on three occasions from 2003) to a one-off extravaganza in Israel’s Negev (Holy Rave). From a festival in the grounds of a Gothic castle (Life, 2006) to a beach festival south of Agadir, Morocco (Rhythms of Peace) to a gathering held among magnificent sequoia trees in California’s Yosemite National Park (Symbiosis, 2009). From small events such as a party held near Germany’s Schwarzwald operated by the Institut für Sinnestäuschungen Schwarzwald (ISS) in 2006, to long-running events that are the cream of national scenes (e.g. Australia’s Rainbow Serpent). From Goa Gil’s annual birthday party in California to global gatherings descended upon by thousands from dozens of nations like Ozora in Hungary and Portugal’s Boom. From events held with specific intent, such as Australia’s Tranceplant (where native trees were planted) and Australia’s Freedom (which celebrates Albert Hofmann’s “first trip”), to events celebrated on cycles of the moon (e.g. California’s Moontribe). And from these seasonal events to irregular festivals such as those mounted on the line of totality celebrating a total solar eclipse (e.g. Australia’s Outback Eclipse and Turkey’s Soulclipse).

While participation in, interviews conducted and contacts made at these events were important to this study, it is a project that I had been formulating unconsciously for years. This is not an unimportant aside. Given the guarded and sometimes paranoid temperament of participants making empirical research difficult for those who are not scene participants, my experience, friendships and connections in the scene were integral to the project. Interfacing with the frequencies shared at volume in the Australian bush shaped my desire to effect an approach that does not abnegate the experience of dance itself – the experience which, when optimal conditions are met, transforms a party into an irresistible conflagration. How dance is approached is crucial for scholars of EDM, which is hardly possible without being there, and all the more essential where questions of religion and spirituality constitute research directives. While a disciplined research agenda was essential – in my case one that did not privilege any among the heteroclite narratives, voices and agendas that comprise psychedelic trance – shuffling at a safe remove from the grounds of experience was hardly appropriate. While in her Club Cultures, Sarah Thornton admitted to being “an outsider to the cultures in which I conducted research”, and who had “intents and purposes alien to the rest of the crowd” (1996: 2), such distancing is as unacceptable in this project as it has been in discographies subsequent to Thornton’s where dance is recognized as primary to vitality, pleasure, identity, belonging. While Thornton’s approach privileged scene niche and micro media (as well as major newsprint media), the research of scene media can no longer be isolated from dance music production and reception, since the music is the medium. As this book attempts to illustrate, psychedelic electronic musicians produce narratives by remixing popular culture, and psychedelic trance has evolved subgenres with distinctive techniques of immersing the body-in-dance in
reflexive storylines which echo and effect de/subjectification. If dance is the *raison d'être* of the field in question, from the bump and grind of the front-of-the-floor to transcendent states that may involve the ingestion of psychoactive substances (which may or may not be illicit), and which may involve the programming of *nanomedia*, then suitable ethnographic methods must be adopted. I understand implicitly that the techniques of “radical empiricism” (Jackson 1989) include rhetorical techniques shaped by experience in the field – which is complicated by the fact that, since the advent of the Web, the “field” became indistinguishable from the “non-field”. While the “field” for researchers of media has been complex from the inception of cultural studies, the “field” of EDM has transformed since Thornton’s research as a result of developments in cyber-culture and advancements in, for instance, digital sampling technics.

“Technique” is, of course, dependent on various factors, including language skills, and remaining alert to new developments across various intersecting fields – music, genre shifts, event trends, drug effects and usage trends. Many events with roots in the Goa psychedelic diaspora accommodate a diversity of styles, both electronic and non-electronic, and psytrance has illustrated a voracious capacity for style absorption, principally techno, and ambient, but also funk, electro, house, breaks, dub and industrial styles have been pulled into its orbit, circumstances which make the study of psytrance notoriously perplexing. Psychedelic trance has itself evolved amid the circulation of substances and “research chemicals” which have impacted this culture considerably. One of the lasting impressions I have is the advanced relationship participants have with drugs, whose pharmacologies and effects are often researched and compared studiously. Many style themselves as “psychonauts”, for whom participation in the culture amounts to assaying their experience on a range of substances recognized as potentially beneficial to their spiritual well-being. In fact, participants often stress their disapproval of the word “drug” and embrace other terms like “psychedelic” and “entheogen”. The sentiment is noted by Serbian psy-prog act Middle Mode (Jovan Tot and Ivan Jovicic), who sample psychonaut and philosopher Terence McKenna on “Deep Habits” (John 00 Fleming & DJ Bim – *Goa Culture III*, 2011):

> “Drugs” is a word that has polluted the well of language. Part of the reason we have a drug problem is because we don’t have an intelligent language to talk about substances, plants, psychedelic and sedative states of mind, states of amphetamine excitation. We can’t make sense of the problem and the opportunities offered by substances unless we clean up our language.

The comment was lifted from a 1996 interview with McKenna in Mexico where he aired his desire for cognitive liberty – i.e. the right of individuals to
use mind-altering compounds based on informed decisions – a chief preoccupation within the psychedelic movement where participants have actively searched for an “intelligent language”. In the face of academic discourse that robs life from its subject matter (see Jordan 1995), ethnographers of EDM cultures also need to find an intelligent language shaped according to research agenda and the specific field under consideration. In a study of a culture where the liminal experience associated with extraordinary psychoactive-assisted states of consciousness is pivotal, familiarity with available technologies of the senses adapted to these ends should be among the priorities of ethnographers. This is in no way simple or uncontroversial. To begin with, psytrance is a liminal underworld, where participation involves a techno-organic mixed-media collusion by which the sampling (consumption) of psychoactive substances and the sampling (digital production) of sound and vision are interrelated. What’s more, it is a sensitive research field. In the possible disclosure of activities outside or ambiguous with regard to the law, researchers (often working under the auspices of the state) may endanger both their interlocutors and themselves – yet where such ambiguity is native to a culture (as it is with EDM – see St John 2012a), suitable strategies need to be adopted.

The issue of reflexivity in dance and club drug research is approached by Measham and Moore (2006) who, observing the prevalence of a “reluctant reflexivity” among researchers, note that the history of dance research and club studies (in the UK) is characterized by a distant objectivized approach which conceals researcher vulnerabilities, separates the knower from the known, and rarely identifies the researcher’s relationship with the researched, generating a “hygienic” approach. In recent times, in efforts to overcome the limitations of specific methods – i.e. quantitative, epidemiological, phenomenological – and to become sensitive to the practices of risk and pleasure within the consumer settings of EDM events, researchers have sought an adequate distribution of cross-methodological approaches to make sense of their fields of study (e.g. Hunt et al. 2009; Demant et al. 2010). While Newcombe (2008) expressed the merits of a “psychonautic” model in which the researcher observes his/her own subjective experience of drugs, others (Demant et al. 2010) suggest a “socionautic” approach which recognizes the social setting of EDM contexts and incorporates ethnographically informed interviewing based on experiences shared by the researcher and the researched, including that which is informed by psychonautics. This roughly describes my approach, with the addition that psychonauticism is recognized to include cross-media practice, such that assemblages of sensory technologies (analog, digital, chemical, cyber) and popular cultural resources are programmed, synthesized and remixed to affect altered states of consciousness within the optimized design framework of a dance party. This is a crucial point. Radical empiricism includes personal knowledge of the effects of media assemblages, their sources of simulation and how they are experienced in situ.
Book outline

The following offers brief outlines of each of the book’s chapters. Chapter 2 explores the career of the spiritual experience animating psyculture, from its earliest period in Goa. From the late 1960s, Goa attracted the disenchanted and the decadent, those whose disparate expatriations gave life to a “state of mind”, a mental mosaic which became integral to the evolution of the “trance dance” experience in seasonal Goa, infusing the subsequent psychedelic trance movement. Figures instrumental to psyculture are introduced and benchmark incidents are explained, with the chapter also examining the themes of “authenticity”, “freedom” and “liveness”, as well as the psychedelic Orientalism inhering in the “Goa” sound. In Chapter 3, the idea that the Goa “state of mind” is schizoid is taken up in an examination of the transnationally transposable “vibe” of the exiles. Goatrance may have emerged as a formulaic genre, but the psychedelic diaspora is animated by a cultural noise, dances to different tunes, with the emergent psyculture echoing with tension. The chapter addresses how this seasonal exile socio-aesthetic was rocked by waves of innovation flowing from global cosmopolitan hubs of EDM. Attention is directed to instrumental scene broker Goa Gil whose hybrid project spans historical psychedelias and whose mission to ritualize the “end of the world” has had varied reception, illustrating the heterogeneity of psychedelic trance – a contested music and culture. In its exploration of Goa/psytrance music, Chapter 4 regards this music as an assemblage of technics that have been sampled, remixed and repurposed to the variable transit of the self in reflexive modernity. The assemblages I call spiritechnics are guided by differing modalities of “consciousness”, shaping practices with varying means and ends: progressive and transgressive, nihilistic and gnostic, self-directed and planetary. Using a spectrum of sampled content programmed within psytrance releases and promotions, the chapter demonstrates how its sonic fiction orchestrates the departure from, connection with, and evolution of, consciousness. Whether concerned with the unconscious, outer space, virtual reality or the wilderness, re-mediated liminality is adapted by the psychedelic mystics and media shamans of psytrance to facilitate these conditions of transit. Popular culture, psychoactive (or more accurately “entheogenic”) compounds, and the experience of revelation are the media and the means remixed by the technicians of transition. Chapter 5 follows with an exploration of the events designed to facilitate these varied and interacting modes of consciousness. With specific attention to Boom, total solar eclipse festivals, and other events, parties are recognized as spiritual technologies accommodating multiple transitional pathways, a circumstance amplified by their psychedelic praxis and aesthetic. At the world’s biennial summit of psychedelic trance (Boom), its Liminal Village contrasts with the main floor, the Dance Temple, as the head does to the body, yet their synergetic relationship is pivotal to a movement where integralism is programmed into
its festival culture. Additionally, total solar eclipse festivals, such as Soulclipse in Turkey (in 2006), are recognized as pinnacle achievements in post-Goa psychedelic mysticism – the visionary arts platforms of a planetary culture.

Chapter 6 approaches the vexing subject of trance dance itself, the *raison d’être* of psychedelic trance culture. Dissatisfaction with the term “trance” inspires a heuristic acknowledging a range of activity within the “weekend societies” of psyculture. The contemporary Goatrance party is rooted in the *cosmic carnival*, which is shown to augment the carnivalesque with a Space Age psychedelic aesthetic. In the music and the events downstream from its Goa origins, progressive and ludic sensibilities are demonstrated to comprise the trance experience. The trance culture that fomented within these recurrent events has given rise to what may more accurately be named *neotrance*, an ecstatic/theatrical dynamic where surrender to the funky flow and freak performance are integral to the mix. In Chapter 7 I pay attention to two national scene developments. Comparison of global psyculture in Israel and Australia serves to demonstrate the diversity of post-Goa culture as it became translated in countries with disparate cultural, historical and geographical conditions. These examples show how aspects of Goa/psytrance have been pressed into the service of religious, spiritual and intellectual agendas in the respective regions, and how national and cultural climates have shaped a mix of agendas, from the rebellious to the proactive. While no singular narrative prevails, amid the carnivalesque noise of psyculture, the dance floor is the ultimate grounds for a *religious experience* recognized by participants across these diverse national scenes. That psyculture is a movement context for the establishment of identity, prestige and cultural capital through a range of transgressive and reflexive behaviours is examined in Chapter 8. The performance of risk and the arts of consciousness are polar intentions dramatized in psytrance events, the study of which is assisted through the application of Bourdieu’s “cultural capital” to a complex cultural movement. In psytrance and visionary arts cultures, distinction is accorded not only to those who perform lifestyle risks but to those committed to identifying and reducing risks based on ecological and humanitarian concerns. In a revision of Turner’s concept of liminality by way of a detailed examination of intentional ritualization within the psytrance movement, Chapter 9 completes this study. Downstream from Goa, a hyperliminal noise of risk-laden and reflexive commitments characterizes festivals whose differential *logics of sacrifice* are explained. As the paramount expression of this movement, its festivals are vehicles for transgressive and disciplined concerns articulated in rites of risk and consciousness. Rooted in the experimental adulthood/extended adolescence of the 1960s–1970s, psytrance is then recognized as a complex *liminal culture* which knows no bounds.
Notes

1. Transnational psyCulture

1. Official figures for 2010. In previous years, official figures had the event attracting those from in excess of eighty countries.
4. I later completed a doctoral dissertation in social anthropology on the festival (St John 1999).
5. Various individuals and event promoters chose not to be referred to in this book.
8. While privileged in that my only fluent language is English, the lingua franca of global psytrance, this advantage dissipated in the face of the many Europeans I encountered in command of several languages.

2. Experience, the Orient and Goatrance

1. While this status may have typically derived from one's ability to select and mix fresh and exotic sonic product imported as a result of extensive international travel and an émigré lifestyle, with the advent of file-sharing networks, by 2000, the internet was facilitating virtual mobility, offering artists within electronic music genres unprecedented exposure to rich sources of fresh product – enabling the virtually experienced to establish credibility independent from the physical travails necessary to establish scene credibility in more traditional DJ cultures.
2. With AreUpeyoted? (1999), psychedelic ambient artist Don Peyote offered a further iteration on the theme. In another link to the earlier period, the mask-like human face with three sets of eyes and dancing hair (the Shpongle motif) featured on Are You Shpongled? and other albums, bears resemblance to the cover art of releases of Pink Floyd's Relics: A Bizarre Collection of Antiques and Curios (1971), which features a masked face with two sets of eyes.
3. And part of a vast library of bootleg reproductions circulating on the internet.
Bibliography, discography and filmography

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