

Neşe Devenot // With the premier of *the goop lab* on Netflix last month, the wellness industrial complex officially descended on the psychedelic renaissance. Although some in the field interpret this development as a sign of progress, the psychedelic retreat model embraced by *Goop* provides minimal safety infrastructure in order to increase “access” and—ultimately—profits. *Goop*’s specific brand of capitalistic anti-intellectualism scrubs nuance from psychedelics and unnecessarily exacerbates the risk of harm for vulnerable individuals in search of healing.

Writing in defense of *Goop* in a convoluted *New York Times* editorial, Elisa Albert and Jennifer Block attribute “all the overwhelming, predictable, repetitive critiques” of *Goop* to the paternalistic hubris of Western medicine, which seeks to demolish anything it can’t understand:

*Throughout history, women in particular have been mocked, reviled, and murdered for maintaining knowledge and practices that frightened, confused and confounded ‘the authorities.’ (Namely the church, and later, medicine.) Criticism of Goop is founded, at least in part, upon deeply ingrained reserves of fear, loathing, and ignorance about things we cannot see, touch, authenticate, prove, own or quantify. It is emblematic of a cultural insistence that we quash intuitive measures and ‘other’ ways of knowing — the sort handed down via oral tradition, which, for most women throughout history, was the only way of knowing. In other words, it’s classic patriarchal devaluation.*

Elisa Albert and Jennifer Block

In its embrace of all things “woo,” however, *Goop* elides the profound gulf between underresearched topics and outright pseudoscience. Albert and Block suggest that the medical establishment has a problem with “consenting adults seeking self-knowledge, vitality and emotional freedom.” Although it is undeniably true that medical institutions have extensive histories of disenfranchising gender and racial minorities, it does not follow that the medical establishment ostracizes all non-traditional ideas because of entrenched ethnocentrism and misogyny.

It is indisputable that psychedelic research was hindered by widespread popular biases during the second half of the twentieth century, including skepticism about the value of non-ordinary states of consciousness and the “extraordinary phenomena” commonly attributed to psychedelic experiences. The fact that the medical mainstream is only now—belatedly—expressing interest in psychedelic medicine does not mean that psychedelic researchers spurn evidence-based practices.

*Goop* has platformed an anti-medication activist who “believes that HIV/AIDS treatment is a Big Pharma scam” and a doctor who downplayed the seriousness of postpartum depression. As journalist Karen Fratti emphasized, “[W]omen should be told to seek psychological help, and possibly get a prescription to treat her depression and anxiety.... If a new mother is despairing and thinking about ‘putting a baby in a microwave,’ a little yoga and some more B12 injections might not be strong enough to do the trick.”

For the Netflix show, *Goop* opted to visit a psychedelic retreat center in Jamaica—one node in a burgeoning industry of psychedelic “wellness” centers, which are profiting from the reputational sea change unleashed by the “psychedelic renaissance” in medical research. Although these retreat centers are expensive, they lack the standard infrastructure described in the published literature on therapeutic use, which places a premium on extensive psychological support in the weeks before and after dosing sessions.

The same week that Netflix premiered *the goop lab*, Vice journalist Shayla Love released a lengthy article on the psychedelic retreat industry, titled “I Went to a High-end Psychedelic Retreat to Address My Anxiety.” Love’s difficult experience at the Synthesis retreat center in the Netherlands highlights the dangers of *Goop*’s uncritical and incautious approach to psychedelic wellness trends.

In service of shareholder profits, the psychedelic retreat industry largely operates with understaffed and inexperienced support teams. As the decorated psychedelic researcher Katherine MacLean warned, the fragility of these support systems poses unnecessary risks, including the danger of lasting physical and psychological harm. As MacLean wrote on Facebook in response to the Vice article, in which she was quoted:

*I can't keep up with all the strangers who are continuing to reach out for help after attending retreats in Jamaica. I thought improvements had been made, including better staff and medical care, but it's not enough. I'm so saddened that people are still getting violently ill or are having unpredictable and sometimes dangerous changes in physical and mental health when they return home.*

Katherine MacLean

Despite longstanding recognition of the importance of context (“set and setting”) for the psychedelic experience, the rosy, “woo” version of psychedelic wellness downplays the relational component involved in psychedelic healing. The “bang it out” model of psychedelic wellness retreats—especially when they involve expensive international travel—precludes the stability of being somewhere safe and familiar with people you trust. In light of this structural limitation in the wellness model, MacLean suggests an alternative approach:

*I believe that the safest place to have a mushroom experience is near your home, with people you know and trust, and with plenty of community (and professional) support before and after. We have to focus on education, community building and changing laws HERE, so that*

*vulnerable and ill people are not tempted to spend tons of money to travel far away to experience unpredictable and dangerous outcomes.*

Katherine MacLean

In the absence of meaningful education about psychedelic harm reduction, the “gooping” of psychedelics is not something to celebrate. On the contrary, I’m reminded of the amazement I felt in 2016 when—as a newly-minted PhD working in a little-known field—I noticed that an episode of the X-Files reboot incorporated the psychedelic renaissance as a plot point. At first, I thought this development signaled a positive change in public awareness—until the plot devolved into an anti-vaxxer conspiracy fever dream. Since the subject of psychedelics is only now emerging from a shroud of mistrust and misinformation, actual evidence and best practices are more empowering than blind faith in a capitalist empire and its latest flavor of the week.