

THE ZIHUATANEJO PROJECT

Timothy Leary's Psychedelic Center In Mexico

NIDIA A. OLVERA AND ZINNIA CAPÓ

Abstract: This article analyzes how and why Timothy Leary established a psychedelic research center in Zihuatanejo, Mexico in the summers of 1962 and 1963. We analyze the reaction Mexican authorities and academics had to this event, the part the press played in public portrayal, the rise of psychedelic drug tourism, and the effect this center had on the local community and wider counterculture. Modern history of psychedelics in Mexico—including Leary's influence—has seldom been studied. We contribute to the history of psychoactive substances by integrating a transnational perspective that focuses on people and events in Mexico and the United States, and on how international travel and the exchange of knowledge jointly constructed a fundamental part of the psychedelic movement. Based on historical and ethnographic sources, we argue that moral panic around drugs, fears over social and cultural changes, sensationalist press coverage, a rigid political system, and rifts with the local community contributed to the closure of the Zihuatanejo Project. More broadly, we note how these factors influenced the Mexican government and society's reaction to the *jipi* movement throughout the 1960s.

Keywords: psychedelics, LSD-25, Timothy Leary, psilocybin, magic mushrooms, drug history, tourism, Zihuatanejo, Mexico

In the summer of 1963, Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert, Ralph Metzner, and more than thirty other North American citizens were expelled from Mexico, and their base—the Freedom Center for Transpersonal Living—was abruptly

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closed. This center had been created to study the “transpersonative” effects of LSD-25 and psilocybin and operated for two summers, 1962 and 1963, in Zihuatanejo, Guerrero, Mexico. This article focuses on this psychedelic Zihuatanejo Project, why and how it existed, the reaction of Mexican political and academic authorities to it, and the causes behind its sudden end. By analyzing this short-lived experimental center, we are able to shed light on Mexico’s connections to the wider history of psychedelic drugs. Knowledge about Indigenous practices in this country brought elite and affluent visitors—mostly from the United States and Europe—hoping to understand and experience “authentic” shamanic practices that could aid in postwar Western society’s search for alternative values. By placing the Zihuatanejo Project experiment in the context of early 1960s Mexico, we can contrast this “search for the mystical” with Mexican government policies that fomented and invested in traditional resort tourism while strongly discouraging budding, so-called hippie tourism. For Mexican authorities, the Zihuatanejo Project brought the wrong kind of visitors. Even though Leary argued that they were conducting serious research, the necessary permits were not filed; this nonorthodox approach to scientific investigation gave Mexican health and immigration authorities the justification needed to shut down the unlicensed business. By weaving together these different threads, we argue that transnational and national political, economic, and cultural trends brought these academics to Mexico, where their flawed conception that Zihuatanejo was an “isolated and free” place contributed to their lack of interest in building ties to local and national communities. This ultimately left the group of psychologists and followers vulnerable to criticism from locals, the Mexican and US press and academic communities, and accelerated unwanted government intervention.

Leary’s incursion into Mexico is well known but not deeply or widely studied in the field of drug history. Leary in Mexico—and the Zihuatanejo Project in particular—has been portrayed in several journalistic and literary writings, though often as lateral information to a wider story about Leary or LSD culture. Few texts (including a play) focus specifically on the experiment in Zihuatanejo.¹ Although plenty of information exists in the press and historical archives about this project, few academic researchers have examined it from a historical

1. José Antonio Aguilar Rivera, “El verano del LSD,” *Nexos*, August 1, 2016, <https://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=29035>; Juan Villoro, “La contracultura,” *Arqueología Mexicana* 95 (2021): 30–35, <https://arqueologiamexicana.mx/mexico-antiguo/la-contracultura>; Nina Burleigh, “A Return Trip to Timothy Leary’s Psychedelic, Day-Glo Mexico,” *New York Times*, May 6, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/06/travel/mexico-timothy-leary-psychedelics.html>; Notimex, “Villorio escribe obra sobre promotor de drogas en los 60s,” *El Universal*, March 8, 2013, <https://archivo.eluniversal.com.mx/notas/908846.html>.

or ethnographic perspective.² This article combines historiographical and ethnographic sources to analyze how changes in Western culture, the tourism industry, and transnational trends in psychology and psychedelic investigation brought Leary and colleagues to the Mexican Pacific coast and the impact of regional politics and national and transnational social anxieties on the outcome. The conversation herein uses eyewitness accounts from Leary's team and inner circle (found in the Timothy Leary Papers in the New York Public Library), newspaper articles from the US and Mexican press, correspondence between Leary and notable writers, and ethnographic information collected on three visits (2021 and 2022) to the town of Zihuatanejo. These field studies consisted of going to the Hotel Catalina and interviewing hotel staff, one of the town chroniclers, and some local inhabitants.

This article contributes to discussions on the history of drugs by highlighting the transnational relations that shaped these early psychedelic practices, specifically the development of an investigation and tourism circuit in which mostly North Americans sought alternative, substance-induced experiences in Mexico. In situating these practices in the context of regional and local attitudes toward drugs, change, and foreigners, we remind readers of the historical importance of the local in understanding social and political reception to these substances and the people associated with them. This local reaction element is sadly lacking in most of the historiography on Leary's experiences outside of the United States and is another contribution of this article.

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2. Of course, there are many scholarly studies that address Mexican drug history in general, from those centered on precolonial and colonial uses of psychoactive plants to those dealing with the phenomenon of drug use, commercialization, and culture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For example, Noemí Quezada, *Amor y magia amorosa entre los aztecas: Supervivencia en el México colonial* (Mexico: Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas-Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México [UNAM], 1975); Mercedes de la Garza, *Sueño y alucinación en el mundo náhuatl y maya* (Mexico: UNAM-Instituto de Investigaciones Filológicas, 1990); Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *Medicina y magia: El proceso de aculturación en la estructura colonial* (Mexico: Instituto Nacional Indigenista-Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992); Alex Dawson, *The Peyote Effect: From the Inquisition to the War on Drugs* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018); Nidia Olvera, "Idolatría, superstición y embriaguez en la Nueva España: 'Delitos' con el peyote y otras hierbas," in *Problemas del pasado americano: Colonización y religiosidad*, ed. Dora Sierra (Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2019), 179–202; Isaac Campos, *Home Grown: Marijuana and the Origins of Mexico's War on Drugs* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2012); José Domingo Schievenini, "La prohibición de las drogas en México (1912–1929)," *URVIO Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios de Seguridad* 13 (2014): 57–68; Ricardo Pérez Montfort, *Tolerancia y prohibición: Aproximaciones a la historia social y cultural de las drogas en México 1840–1940* (Mexico: Colección Debate, Penguin Random House Grupo, 2016); Wil Pansters and Benjamin Smith (eds.), *Histories of Drug Trafficking in Twentieth-Century Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2022).

Exiled from Academia

Leary's formal research into psychedelics began in the early 1960s at Harvard University. In 1950 Timothy Francis Leary, a Massachusetts native, earned a PhD in psychology from University of California, Berkeley. Nine years later, he became a professor in the Psychology Department at Harvard. Along with Richard Alpert, another psychologist at Harvard (later known as Baba Ram Dass),³ he began to explore the effects of psychotropic drugs on the human mind. In 1960 they, writer Aldous Huxley, and other researchers founded the Harvard Psilocybin Project. From this came the 1961 Concord Prison Project, which worked on behavior change program for prisoners using psilocybin.⁴ The Psilocybin Project also led to the 1962 Good Friday Experiment. In this, Walter Pahnke—a physician and divinity graduate student at Harvard—under Leary's advisement, gave twenty of his fellow students psilocybin capsules in an attempt to induce spiritually significant experiences.⁵

Criticism and scrutiny quickly truncated the course of the project. By 1962, colleagues, administrators, and students at Harvard criticized Leary and Alpert's investigative objectivity, pointing out the “unorthodox methodology” of the experiments. Detractors focused on the study's lack of scientific rigor, including “poorly controlled conditions, non-random selection of subjects” and that the investigators—who were supposed to be objective observers during the sessions—were also under the influence of psilocybin or LSD. Leary publicly defended the investigative methods, arguing that scientists researching psychedelics and the mind were obliged to become personally familiar with the substances to understand such an “indescribably powerful tool” and its relation to the subjects' descriptions of their experiences. The public discussion continued when the Harvard press accused Leary and Alpert “of not merely researching psychotropic drugs but actively promoting their recreational use.” Harvard University had bankrolled and sanctioned psychiatric research with these substances;

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3. Ram Dass became a guru of international fame after publishing *Be Here Now* (New York: Harmony Books, 1971).
 4. Timothy Leary, Ralph Metzner, Madison Presnell and Gunther Weil, “A New Behavior Change Program Using Psilocybin” in *Timothy Leary: The Harvard Years*, ed. James Penner (Vermont: Park Street, 2014): 141. In this book, Penner compiles various writings of Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert, Huston Smith, and Ralph Metzner and then analyzes the importance of these texts. Also see Rick Doblin, “Dr. Leary's Concord Prison Experiment: A 34-year Follow-up Study,” *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 30, no. 4 (1998): 419–26, doi:10.1080/02791072.1998.10399715; Io Y. Gilman, Kendall I. Shields, “At Harvard, Psychedelic Drugs' Tentative Renaissance,” *Harvard Crimson*, February 19, 2022, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2022/2/19/psychedelics-tentative-renaissance/>.
 5. Rick Doblin, “Pahnke's Good Friday Experiment: A Long-Term Follow-up and Methodological Critique,” *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 23, no. 1 (1991): 1–28.

they had not expected and did not want uncontrolled use outside the laboratory. During this strained situation, Leary “stopped fulfilling his teaching obligations, often skipping his classes to travel.” Hence, in spring 1963 the university did not renew his contract. In May of that year, Alpert was fired after Harvard administrators learned he had issued psilocybin to an undergraduate student while off-campus, “in violation of university policy that only allowed graduate students” to participate in the psychedelic experiments. In this manner, the Harvard Psilocybin Project ended.⁶ Leary and Alpert did not work in academia again.

Leary anticipated that his experimental project could not be completely realized in the confines of academia and sought alternatives in Mexico the previous year. In 1962, Leary and Alpert—along with other personalities like Alan Watts, Gunther Weil, Huston Smith, and Walter Clark—founded the International Federation of Internal Freedom (IFIF). The group was consolidated in 1963 with the publication of its statement of purpose, which described the IFIF as an autonomous organization seeking to “support and protect research on psychedelic substances and which will be willing and able to take responsibility for serious studies in the area.”⁷ The IFIF was a charitable nonprofit based in Massachusetts but had the intention of opening other chapters. In the summer of 1963, after the separation from Harvard, part of the group moved to Mexico to continue work they had begun earlier in what they dubbed “the Mexican Psychedelic Center.” Formalized as “an extension of the IFIF manifesto,” this “training center” allowed participants to experiment with drugs and consciousness and taught them how to guide others in such experiences.⁸

Mexico’s Role in Psychedelic History

Like others before them, Leary and his group went to Mexico seeking to explore mythical substances, thus continuing a practice begun in the late nineteenth century and strengthening the country’s historical role in world drug culture. Mexico plays an important role in the world history of drugs, psychedelics in particular. The American continent is the endemic origin of four-fifths of known mind-altering plants, mostly concentrated in Mesoamerica and western Amazonia.

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6. Gilman and Shields, “At Harvard, Psychedelic Drugs’ Tentative Renaissance”; Department of Psychology, Harvard University, “Timothy Leary (1920–1996), The Effects of Psychotropic Drugs,” <https://psychology.fas.harvard.edu/people/timothy-leary> (accessed August 10, 2022); Chris Elcock, “Psychedelic Philanthropy: The Nonprofit Sector and Timothy Leary’s 1960s Psychedelic Movement,” *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 58 no. 1 (2022): 91.
 7. Timothy Leary and Huston Smith, “Statement of Purpose of the International Federation for Internal Freedom (IFIF),” in *Timothy Leary: The Harvard Years*, ed. James Penner (Vermont: Park Street, 2014), 328–33.
 8. Penner, “Historical documents from the Harvard Drug Scandal,” *Timothy Leary: The Harvard Years*, 324.

Among the countries in this continent, Mexico has a vast diversity of endemic psychoactive plants and fungi, including tobacco, cacao, peyote, psilocybin mushrooms, ololiuhqui, *Salvia divinorum*, and some *Daturas*.⁹ As historian Ricardo Pérez Montfort has noted, the presence of foreign travelers, explorers, and scientists interested in Mexico's psychoactive species is not new. Since the nineteenth century, several scholars have carried out research on traditional uses of psychoactive plants in Mexico.¹⁰ The country has been visited by anthropologists (such as Carl Lumholtz, Léon Diguët, and Weston La Barre), chemists (Albert Hofmann), ethnobotanists (Richard Evans Schultes), and explorers (Victor A. Reko) who collected, studied, and personally experienced the power of these endemic natural substances, helping put Mexico on the international psychotropic map.

It was a journalistic article born from scientific and anthropological explorations that cemented Mexico's place in popular alternative culture, encouraging visits from young beatniks and hippies. Specifically, visits starting in August 1953 to Huautla de Jiménez in the Sierra Juárez range in Oaxaca by married couple Valentina Pavlovna and Robert Gordon Wasson directly contributed to the psychedelic stories and legends.¹¹ After taking part in psilocybin mushrooms rituals led by local *curanderos* or healers, Wasson, a banker at J.P. Morgan, wrote an article for *Life* magazine in 1957. This article made the town and Mazatec healer María Sabina famous and revealed to Western culture a long forgotten (but not lost) inter-Oaxaca state mushroom cult.¹² Wasson's article in *Life* helped grow a small but long-running alternative rural tourism. Since at least the postrevolutionary 1920s, "bohemian" travelers had come to inland Mexico seeking traditional medicinal and ritual use of plants and fungi. This trend continued in the 1950s when the country became "part of the beatnik circuit."¹³

Why did this kind of shamanic experiential type of tourism become more popular in the 1950s and 1960s? After World War II, disappointment in technology

9. Paul Gootenberg, "A Long Strange Trip: Latin America's Contribution to World Drug Culture," in *Global Latin America: Into the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Matthew C. Gutmann and Jeffrey Lesser (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 207–8.

10. Pérez Montfort, *Tolerancia y prohibición*, 309–20.

11. Valentina Pavlovna and Gordon Wasson, *Mushrooms, Russia and History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957), 245.

12. Ben Feinberg, "'I Was There': Competing Indigenous Imaginaries of the Past and the Future in Oaxaca's Sierra Mazateca," *Journal of Latin American Anthropology* 11, no. 1 (2006): 113; Peder Clark, "Heroines?: Valentina Pavlovna Wasson and Psychedelic Wives," *Points, Joint Blog of the Alcohol and Drugs History Society and the American Institute of the History of Pharmacy* (September 29, 2020), <https://pointshistory.com/2020/09/29/heroines-valentina-pavlovna-wasson-and-psychedelic-wives/>.

13. Eric Zolov, *Refried Elvis: The Rise of the Mexican Counterculture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 107; José Agustín, *La contracultura en México: La historia y el significado de los rebeldes sin causa, los jipitecas los punks y las bandas* (Mexico: Random House Mondadori, 1996/2004), 74.

and Western values led to criticism of prevailing political and social trends, including a “faith in progress and reason” based on modern science. According to some critics, this faith in progress and reason had contributed to and fueled an ascendant tendency toward “expressive individualism, hedonism [or ‘self-gratification’] and sexual liberation.” Combined with a youth prevalent demography, this led to alternative forms of living and fulfillment being explored, and that exploration included looking toward traditional shamanic practices.¹⁴ Wasson’s article reflected these cultural changes and would help spur visitors to indigenous Mexican communities where shamanic practices have existed for centuries. Specifically to Huautla, where an initial wave of “avant-garde intellectual” tourists was later followed by counterculture travelers who stayed in makeshift camps at the edge of the town.¹⁵ Soon a new phenomenon occurred in seldom visited towns of Cuernavaca, Guanajuato, Guerrero, Jalisco, Oaxaca, Sinaloa, and other states: “outsiders began to seek out powerful natural drug[s] [*Psilocybe mexicana* and other substances] for purely experimental reasons” or, as others put it, “simply to find god.”¹⁶ North American (from the United States and Canada) and European youth began to arrive in Mexico, where they found different substances to experiment with and areas where police surveillance was rare. “Here were the mushrooms, the peyote, the seeds of the virgin, and especially excellent and cheap marijuana,” recalls Mexican literary author José Agustín in his book about Mexican counterculture.¹⁷

As a part of the post–World War II and early Cold War generation, Leary was aware of the psychedelic experiences available in Mexico and sought these, often visiting the country starting at the end of the 1950s. Through his stays, Leary developed fondness for the country. For example, in 1960 he went to Cuernavaca, a tropical town in central Mexico, where, according to his own description, he “ate seven of the sacred mushrooms of Mexico and discovered the beauty, revelation,

14. David Pere Martínez Oró, Ismael Apud, Juan Scuro, and Oriol Romani, “La funcionalidad política de la ‘ciencia’ prohibicionista: El caso del cannabis y los psicodélicos,” *Salud Colectiva* 16 (2020): 7, <https://doi.org/10.18294/sc.2020.2493>; David Courtwright, *Forces of Habit: Drugs and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 45.

15. Ben Feinberg, “Undiscovering the *Pueblo Mágico*: Lessons from Huautla for the Psychedelic Renaissance,” in *Plant Medicines: Healing and Psychedelic Science: Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Bia Labate and Clancy Cavnar (New York: Springer, 2018), 39.

16. Zolov, *Refried Elvis*, 107. It is important to note that though psychedelic tourism was new, “leisure tourism” had existed in the border region since the late 1800s. This type of tourism included those seeking “health activities,” such as swimming in hot springs and organizing outdoor grills, and those seeking to “indulge in vices,” such as gambling or drug consumption (but not psychedelics). See Zinnia Capó Valdivia, “El rechazo simbólico, la tolerancia pragmática y los sistemas institucionalizados de evasión: Análisis del discurso oficial sobre el opio en Mexicali, 1900–1935,” master’s dissertation, Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, 2014.

17. Agustín, *La contracultura en México*, 74.



Figure 1. Timothy Leary and mushrooms, Mexico, circa 1960, box 83, folder 39; Timothy Leary Papers.

and sensuality, [and] the cellular history of the past, God, the Devil.”¹⁸ (See figure 1.) The Timothy Leary Papers are filled with many of Leary’s “travel memories” where we can see he visited various areas of Mexico, from the capital and its most prestigious restaurants (including Delmonico’s), the National Museum of Anthropology, Diego Rivera’s murals in the National Palace, the Basilica of Guadalupe,

18. Timothy Leary, *High Priest* (Berkeley, CA: Ronin Publishing, 1968/1995), 12.

to more remote areas such as Tehuantepec in Oaxaca, San Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas, and tourist spots like the Great Pyramid of Cholula in Puebla, the village of Tepoztlán, the port of Mazatlán in Sinaloa, the town of Ajijic in Jalisco, and Acapulco.¹⁹

Reflecting on his initial experience with mushrooms in Cuernavaca, Leary wrote,

They tasted worse than they looked. Bitter, stringy, filthy. I took a slug of [beer] *Carta Blanca* and jammed the rest in my mouth and washed them down. . . . Suddenly I begin to feel strange. . . . It was the classic visionary voyage, and I came back a changed man. You are never the same after you've had that one flash glimpse down the cellular time tunnel. You are never the same after you've had the veil drawn.²⁰

Three years later, he described what happened while on mushrooms in Mexico in a lecture delivered at the annual convention of the American Psychological Association in Philadelphia: “During the next five hours, I was whirled through an experience which could be described in many extravagant metaphors, but which has above all and without question been the deepest religious experience of my life.”²¹

Zihuatanejo's Hotel Catalina

Because of his familiarity with Mexico, during Harvard's summer break in 1962 Leary and his colleagues decided to head to Zihuatanejo de Azueta and continue their experiments with psychedelics. Even though they seemed to choose an out-of-the-way location, it was actually in the influence zone of Acapulco, a resort attraction catering to foreign tourists since the second quarter of the twentieth century. In Zihuatanejo, IFIF chose the Hotel Catalina as its headquarters; it was the first hotel to be established in the port and one of the few tourist accommodations that existed. According to “Sige” Amaro Juárez, chronicler of Zihuatanejo, the Hotel Catalina was “located on the beautiful, 1200-meter-long [3,937 feet] beach of La Ropa.” It sat on “the first piece of real estate developed” to accommodate a hotel in 1952. The Catalina's structure was transported entirely from Acapulco to Zihuatanejo (approximately 144 miles away) in the bowels of a ship in 1952. After arriving at its new home, the hotel was put on a wooden base, and a

19. Various boxes, Timothy Leary Papers, New York Public Library.

20. Leary, High Priest, 34.

21. Timothy Leary, “The Religious Experience: Its Production and Interpretation,” in *The Psychedelic Reader. Classic Selections from The Psychedelic Review, the Revolutionary 1960s Forum of Psychopharmacological Substances*, ed. Timothy Leary, Ralph Metzner, and Gunter M. Weil (New York: Citadel Books, 1993), 176.

road between Zihuatanejo and the La Ropa beach was constructed.²² The area of the Costa Grande of the state of Guerrero, where both Acapulco and Zihuatanejo can be found, benefited from the post–World War II economic boom. Regional cultivation of *coquito*, a type of palm tree, and coffee grew as did demand for agricultural products. This agricultural increase was aided with the highway from Acapulco to Zihuatanejo in the late 1940s.²³ When the Catalina journeyed to Zihuatanejo, the area was having economic difficulties as a result of the 1952 *coquito* or “little coconut” massive strike by agricultural workers who processed the fruit.²⁴ Yet Alfonso Galindo Mackintosh, the owner of the Catalina,²⁵ believed tourists would arrive to strengthen the local economy and his nascent business (see figure 2).

The Costa Grande’s economy had long benefited from the presence of the tropical resort of Acapulco, “the most important port on the Pacific Ocean and the center of the most desirable resort area in the nation.” It had been receiving famous North American visitors since the beginning of the twentieth century, and foreign investment was openly encouraged. During his presidency (1946–52), Miguel Alemán Velasco made tourism development a priority. Acapulco and other coastal cities benefited from his policies, which created the Federal Tourism Law (in 1949) and several new government agencies in charge of encouraging tourism.²⁶ Thus, between 1946 and 1958, Mexico’s hotel room availability grew dramatically, from 4,200 to 82,438. Investment in infrastructure increased; between 1958 and 1962 the federal government did maintenance work on the Mexico City–Acapulco highway. Public and private investment in basic infrastructure such as road construction, electrification, and public security helped not only Acapulco but the entire area, including the burgeoning tourist project of Zihuatanejo.²⁷

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22. “Sige” Amaro Juárez, “El Hotel Catalina de Zihuatanejo y Timothy Leary,” n.d. We are grateful to Rodrigo Campos Aburto, who provided a copy of this text during an interview in October 2021 in Zihuatanejo.
 23. Fiscalía Especializada para los Movimientos Sociales y Políticos del Pasado, “Borrador del Informe sobre la ‘guerra sucia’ llevada a cabo en México durante las décadas de los 60s, 70s y 80s,” 2011, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB180/index2.htm> (accessed July 20, 2022).
 24. John Mason Hart, *Empire and Revolution: The Americans in Mexico since the Civil War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 255, 375–76, 411–12.
 25. Amaro Juárez, “El Hotel Catalina de Zihuatanejo y Timothy Leary.”
 26. Government agencies included the National Commission on Tourism (Comisión Nacional de Turismo), the Credit Trust (Fideicomiso de Crédito), and the Autonomous Department on Tourism (Departamento Autónomo de Turismo). Edgar Talledos Sánchez, “La imposición de un espacio: de La Cruzecita a Bahías de Huatulco,” *Revista Mexicana de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales* 57, no. 216 (2012): 122–23.
 27. Talledos Sánchez, “La imposición de un espacio,” 123; Hart, *Empire and Revolution*, 255, 375–76, 411–12; Armando Bartra, *Guerrero bronco: Campesinos, ciudadanos y guerrilleros en la Costa Grande* (Mexico: Era, 2000), 75. Eric Michael Schantz analyzes how public investment in basic infrastructure benefits private tourism businesses in “All Night at the Owl: The Social and Political Relations of Mexicali’s Red-Light District, 1913–1925,” *Journal of the Southwest* 43, no. 4 (2001): 563.

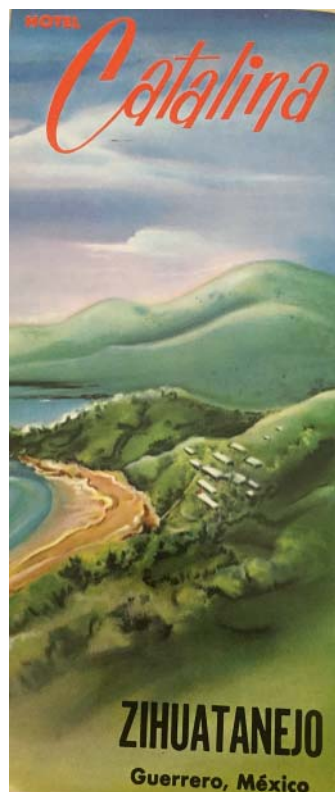


Figure 2. Hotel Catalina flyer, Timothy Leary Papers.



Figure 3. Catalina Hotel (background), La Ropa Beach, 2021, photograph by Nidia Olvera.

Throughout the years, the Hotel Catalina has hosted famous artists and personalities, among them John Wayne, Richard Widmark, Elizabeth Taylor, and George Hamilton. As time went on, the original structure deteriorated, and the necessary reconstruction integrated a concrete structure and brick walls. The hotel still operates (see figure 3). It advertises emphasizing “lush tropical plants,” “a dramatic cliffside,” “pristine white sands”, and how it is “overlooking the bay of Zihuatanejo.”²⁸ Toward the end of the 1950s, the original owner sold the hotel to a group of foreign investors led by Carlos Breuer, a German who later became the sole owner until his death in 2002.²⁹ It was with Breuer that Leary and colleagues had to negotiate after finally deciding where the project of the Mexican Psychedelic Center would locate. Leary recalled, “like spiritual pilgrims of the past, we needed a deserted spot where life would be inexpensive and free from religious persecution. We consulted the atlas. Where on this shrinking planet would a small group of God-seekers find land and liberty?” He remembered “the quiet fishing village on the Pacific ... Zihuatanejo [very close to Acapulco].”³⁰

28. Catalina Beach Resort, “About us,” company website, <https://www.catalinabeachresort.com/about-us/> (accessed July 14, 2022).

29. Amaro Juárez, “El Hotel Catalina de Zihuatanejo y Timothy Leary.”

30. Leary, High Priest, 320.



Sotavento 1965

Figure 4. La Ropa beach, 1965, Hotel Catalina Collection.

Although not necessarily reflective of reality, others on Leary's team shared the impression that being in Zihuatanejo was akin to being in a restriction-free place. For Metzner, a former graduate student at Harvard and one of the psychologists on the team, "the small Mexican fishing village of Zihuatanejo" was the perfect setting to experiment "with the drugs, away from the social and political pressures of Cambridge, Massachusetts."³¹ The beautiful, calm setting was fundamental to their decision, but so was the idea of freedom from "the jurisdiction of the United States government and the Food and Drug Administration," which they believed the relative isolation and remoteness of Zihuatanejo would provide.³²

How they viewed Zihuatanejo, how locals experienced life there, and how the inhabitants regarded the team of psychologists and psychedelic explorers differed. In Zihuatanejo they choose the Hotel Catalina, situated over the hills, in an area isolated from the village, but close to the beach (see figure 4). Joseph Downing, a psychiatrist who accompanied Leary's group and wrote several reports for the IFIF, described the setting as "unique in the safety, which did not require physical limitation during the psychedelic experience."³³ Of course, he was referring to the safety of the participants while in the hotel. We do not know if they were

31. Ralph Metzner, "From Harvard to Zihuatanejo," in Timothy Leary: Outside Looking In, ed. Robert Forte (Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 1999), 176; Elcock, "Psychedelic Philanthropy," 89.

32. Penner, Timothy Leary: The Harvard Years, 335.

33. Joseph Downing, "Report on the Zihuatanejo center for transpersonative living," 1964, box 83, folder 39, Timothy Leary Papers.

aware that despite the glorious scenery, by the 1960s the state of Guerrero was characterized by political mobilizations of various groups such as peasants and students, which in a few cases would lead to violent repressions.³⁴ In any case, Leary and associates decided to settle in Zihuatanejo in 1962. Because the area mostly relied on North American cold weather tourism, the summer was the off season. Thanks to this, the IFIF was able to book the entire hotel to conduct their experiments in relative privacy. Still, the presence of the psychedelic group did not go unnoticed. As Sige remarked, decades later, toward the end of the twentieth century, people in Zihuatanejo still remembered the 1960s visit from “a very discussed and controversial character who lodged at the hotel with a group of students and disciples. It was the psychologist and Harvard professor Timothy Leary, convinced promoter of the properties of the semisynthetic, psychedelic drug LSD.”³⁵ This event seems to have become part of the town’s folklore.

The Center for Transpersonal Living in Mexico

Leary, Alpert, and fellow psychedelic investigators established the Freedom Center for Transpersonal Living in Mexico, which functioned in Zihuatanejo for two summers, 1962 and 1963. The initial idea was to have a Mexican retreat center, leased for year-round occupancy, where they could provide guided psychedelic sessions. They expected “that groups from different locations [would] use the center for research, study, seminars, and transcendental living.” The plan was to create “The Switzerland of Psychedelics” in continental North America.³⁶ Aware that foreign young people were increasingly visiting Mexico’s central and southern states in search of “transcendental” or life-changing experiences,³⁷ they were confident they would have enough voluntary subjects whose individual behavior and social interactions while under the influence of psychedelics they could observe, register, and analyze.

Envisioning and creating this type of center was possible thanks to the changing perception of the science of psychology and the tools available to it. A burgeoning “psycholytic perspective” allowed for using substances in psychological therapy, with the objective of accessing “a spiritual dimension of existence” and having “mystic experiences” which would allow “the patient to acquire a new

34. Fiscalía Especializada para los Movimientos Sociales y Políticos del Pasado, “Borrador del Informe sobre la ‘guerra sucia.’” (FEMOSPP: México), [https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB180/010_Informe General.pdf](https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB180/010_Informe%20General.pdf) (accessed June 11, 2022).

35. Amaro Juárez, “El Hotel Catalina de Zihuatanejo y Timothy Leary.”

36. Association Agreement IFIF, n.d., box 49, folder 5, Timothy Leary Papers.

37. Feinberg, “Competing Indigenous Imaginaries,” 113, 122.

existential perspective on their life.”³⁸ Consequently, “by the end of the 1950s, researchers in more than a dozen countries had performed thousands of experiments with psychedelic drugs, and more than 1,000 papers on LSD had been published.”³⁹

These changes simultaneously inspired and were affected by transformations in Western culture. For example, in January 1962 Aldous Huxley’s final novel *Island* was published; this book proposed a licit, controlled, constructive, and socially approved use of psychedelics.⁴⁰ As a cofounder of the Harvard Psilocybin Project, Huxley had personal experience with psychedelics and Leary. Huxley’s participation in psilocybin sessions at Harvard, and his previous use of mescaline, shaped *Island*.⁴¹ Once the novel was published, the loop of influence continued when those contributing to the Freedom Center acknowledged the influence of this and other books.⁴² Leary and Huxley exchanged many letters during this time in which they discussed their experiences with psychedelics and spoke about the project in Mexico.⁴³ Leary and cohorts also adapted the “visionary/Buddhist” ideas of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* in their psychedelic sessions and went on to write *The Psychedelic Experience* (1964) based on the Tibetan book’s teachings.⁴⁴

In the different investigations and courses it sought to organize, the Freedom Center planned on having paying members and participants. Yet the center’s financial income was not fee-centered; instead, donations played an important role. During the summer of 1962, thirty-four members of the project arrived, including Ralph and Susan Metzner, Gunther Weil, Tom Hitchcock and his daughter Peggy, Dave Kolb, and of course Leary and Alpert.⁴⁵ The Hitchcocks had helped keep Leary’s projects afloat for years. Their family fortune allowed them to be among his greatest economic backers. Peggy Hitchcock became very involved in the psychedelic movement, partaking in the LSD experiments at Harvard and subsequently becoming the IFIF’s secretary. Alpert, who was also

38. Early proponents of the use of psychedelics in psychology include Humphry Osmond, Abram Hoffer, and Leary. Martínez Oró et al., “La funcionalidad política de la ‘ciencia’ prohibicionista,” 7.

39. Alexander S. Dawson, “Salvador Roquet, María Sabina, and the Trouble with Jipis,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 95, no. 1 (2015): 107.

40. Aldous Huxley, *Island* (New York: Harper Collins, 1962/2009).

41. Chris Elcock, “From Acid Revolution to Entheogenic Evolution: Psychedelic Philosophy in the Sixties and Beyond,” *Journal of American Culture* 36, no. 4 (2013): 297.

42. According to Downing’s notes, the Center for Transpersonal Living in Mexico was greatly influenced by *Island*. “Report on the Zihuatanejo center for transpersonative living,” Timothy Leary Papers.

43. See letters from Aldous Huxley to Timothy Leary, 1961–1963, Aldous Huxley and Gerald Heard, “Letters,” in *Timothy Leary: Outside Looking In*, ed. Robert Forte (Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 1999), 105–12.

44. Timothy Leary, Ralph Metzner, and Richard Alpert, *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead* (New York: University Books, 1964).

45. “Report,” 1962, box 83, folder 39; Timothy Leary Papers.

born into a wealthy family, was able to use his “magnetic” personality, ease of persuasion, and personal connections to get economic donations for the center and other experiments and projects. Leary, described as a persuasive, “seductive, manipulative and narcissistic” “womanizer,” used these characteristics to engage potential benefactors. These different personalities gathered, worked, relaxed, and mixed on the Mexican Pacific coast because of their belief that psychedelics could transform personal and transpersonal relations, as well as cure some of society’s ills.⁴⁶

The summer of 1962 was mostly dedicated to organizing the future activities of the Center for Transpersonal Living (see figure 5) and training the mental health professionals and others who would be involved in the psychedelic sessions. Part of that training included self-experimentation with the substances. Between July 31 and August 27, there were thirty sessions, where a total of ninety-three doses of LSD (of 100–500 micrograms) and about forty doses of mescaline were ingested.⁴⁷ Unfortunately, this is all we know about that first summer.

The second summer of the Freedom Center lasted from May to June 1963. Again, the IFIF rented out the Hotel Catalina for their psychedelic training center. Now they were ready to receive and help others, although the service they offered was accessible only to a privileged segment of society that had the economic means and the social connections. The Freedom Center had gotten hundreds of applications from all over North America, but only had space and capabilities for twenty-nine outside participants and thirty-eight resident members. Members were to use the opportunity of interacting with guests to improve their psychedelic guiding and investigative skills and carefully “study the ‘transpersonative’ effects” of the consumption of LSD-25 and psilocybin. These members were expected to eventually be able to replicate the project on their own. The guests or outside participants acquired the service of being taught how to “expand their awareness with powerful new aids, [while] in a protective and supportive environment.” For this they paid “200 dollars a month for food and lodging in one of several bungalows” and an additional \$6 for every psychedelic dose they took.⁴⁸ Considering that in 1963 in the United States the hourly minimum wage was

46. Elcock, “Psychedelic Philanthropy,” 89–93, 98; “Psychedelic Pioneers Peggy Hitchcock and Susi Ramstein,” *Token Woman*, September 2017, <https://tokenwoman.blogspot.com/2017/09/psychedelic-pioneers-peggy-hitchcock.html>. Interestingly, among other potential uses, it was suggested that LSD could help people break free from heroin addiction.

47. Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert, and Ralph Metzner, “Rationale of the Mexican Psychedelic Training Center,” in *Utopiates: The Use and Users of LSD 25*, ed. Richard Blum (New York: Routledge, 2017), 185; Sessions in Zihuatanejo, 1962, box 50, folder 9, Timothy Leary Papers.

48. In this sense, these people differed from the frugal and disorganized tourists starting to flock to the Mazatec mountains in Oaxaca. Zolov, *Refried Elvis*, 108.

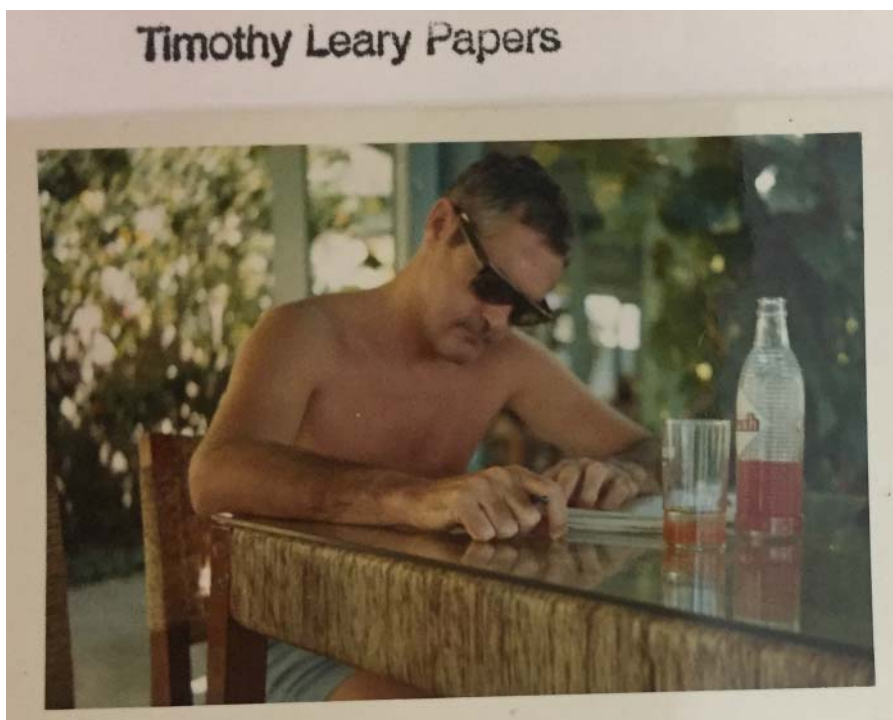


Figure 5. Timothy Leary, Mexico, circa 1960, box 83, folder 39, Timothy Leary Papers.

\$1.25, and that a refrigerator had an average price of \$500, we can conclude that access to an experience such as that provided by the Freedom Center was out of reach for working class North Americans.⁴⁹ The accessibility gap was even wider for working-class Mexicans earning an average minimum salary of 17.64 pesos a day, the equivalent of US\$1.41.⁵⁰ Thus only foreigners at or those above the upper

49. See Dollar Times, "Minimum Wage and Inflation," *Dollar Times* <https://www.dollartimes.com/inflation/items/1963-united-states-minimum-wage> (accessed December 1, 2022); American Advisor Group, "Cost of Living in America," <https://www.aag.com/1963-vs-now/> (accessed December 1, 2022).

50. In 1963 in Mexico City, the medium price for a kilo of beans was 2.8 pesos and a liter of milk cost 1.9 pesos. "Precios," *Estadísticas Históricas de México* (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, 2014), cuadro 18.3, https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/productos/prod_serv/contenidos/espanol/bvinegi/productos/nueva_estruc/HyM2014/18.%20Precios.pdf (accessed December 5, 2022); Mauro Ernesto Cárdenas Ojeda, Carlos Peralta Alamilla, and Mauro Cárdenas Hernández, "Salario mínimo en México," Instituto para la Seguridad y la Democracia (March 2008), 37, http://insyde.org.mx/pdf/seguridad-y-reforma/salario_minimo_en_mexico.pdf; "Salarios," *Estadísticas Históricas de México* (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, 2009), cuadro 6.3, https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/productos/prod_serv/contenidos/espanol/bvinegi/productos/integracion/pais/historicas10/Tema6_Salarios.pdf (accessed December 5, 2022); "Salario mínimo general promedio de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos, 1964–2014," Comisión Nacional de los Salarios Mínimos (Secretaría del Trabajo y Prevención Social), http://www.conasami.gob.mx/pdf/salario_minimo/sal_min_gral_prom.pdf (accessed December 5,

middle class could attend. The descriptions of those present at the center confirms this: “The large majority were mature business and professional people; all were white, US citizens,” between the ages of twenty and sixty, and “most were Protestant.” They were predominantly from Boston, New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco.⁵¹

How were the psychedelic sessions conducted? Organizers took special care to create an atmosphere that was “very open and very relaxed,” “casual and friendly”, and generally described as “lovely.”⁵² Those who partook in the psychedelic experiment had two or three sessions per week. According to Downing, the only substances available to the guests were psilocybin, LSD, and methedrine (used to increase the LSD effect). A ban on marijuana and other drugs was strictly enforced, but moderate alcohol consumption was permitted. Sessions were conducted indoors and outdoors. Leary and colleagues transformed one of the hotel rooms, decorating it “with India print drapes and equipped [it] with pillows and candles, and incense.”⁵³ Apparently,

every morning two to five persons would gather in a room, with Hindu prints on the wall and Hindu woven prints on two double mattresses and box springs on the floor. The LSD companions, including one member of the IFIF staff, would swallow liquid LSD and plunge into the dream world of visions, mind-expansion, self-awareness, and mystical ecstasy.⁵⁴

Session participants would often leave this room and go outside, taking advantage of the beach and beautiful landscape. This was meant to aid in the therapy or “transpersonative” experience. The IFIF team believed that “letting the waves wash over you, rolling the body across the sand, merging into the eternal currents of air, ocean, sun and earth, seemed to clear away much fear, suspicion, frustration, and other emotional baggage.”⁵⁵ Liberation, loss of anxiety, and an increase in creativity were also reported as positive results of the LSD sessions.⁵⁶

2022); “Daily U.S. dollar-MXN exchange rate historical series (1954–present day),” Sistema de Información Económica (Banxico), <https://www.banxico.org.mx/SieInternet/consultarDirectorioInternetAction.do?accion=consultarCuadro&idCuadro=CF373§or=6&locale=en> (accessed December 10, 2022).

51. Metzner, “From Harvard to Zihuatanejo,” 189; Joseph Downing, “Zihuatanejo: An Experiment in Transpersonative Living,” in *Utopias: The Use and Users of LSD 25*, ed. Richard Blum (New York: Routledge, 1964/2017), 144; “Paradise Lost by Mexico LSD Colony,” *San Francisco News*, July 2, 1963, box 45, folder 5, Timothy Leary Papers.
52. “Paradise Lost by Mexico LSD Colony,” *San Francisco News*, July 2, 1963.
53. Downing, “Report on the Zihuatanejo center for transpersonative living,” Timothy Leary Papers. Metzner, “From Harvard to Zihuatanejo,” 189–190.
54. “Paradise Lost by Mexico LSD Colony.”
55. Metzner, “From Harvard to Zihuatanejo,” 189–91.
56. Downing, “Report on the Zihuatanejo center for transpersonative living.”

Leary described the incorporation of the waterfront and nature into the sessions:

There's a lot of rain in the Mexican summer and almost every afternoon, late, and every evening a brief thunderstorm would pass over the bay, lightning would crack, go down and the beach, the ocean, and the surrounding hills would flash into a lighting view. The night sessions usually ended in the water as the LSD voyagers would float out to watch the first rays of the sun.⁵⁷

To fully benefit from the natural setting, "Tim's creative inspiration" led him to propose and communally construct a "tower-platform on the beach, where one person would be on a trip." On this structure participants seemed to "feel they could fly and jumped into the water." If they were not actively in a session, the guests were encouraged to join in other outdoor activities, including yoga, walks on the beach, or swimming. At night participants came together for small group discussions, and once a week there was a party with dancing.⁵⁸

Wednesday, May 15, 1963, is a good example of a typical day at the Center for Transpersonal Living. Following an afternoon sunset cruise to the nearby beach of Las Gatas, "Rolf and Sally take LSD, spend eight hours on beach and water whooping and learning; at midnight we turn on Pamela; she struggles for eight hours; we have placed candles along porch; flickering, shimmering magic passageway; hung print across porch before 16; really magical."⁵⁹ The project seemed to be going well, and Leary, Alpert, and colleagues were happy with the results. One of their main successes was to get half of the group members to express active interest in directly helping continue the psychedelic movement after leaving Mexico.⁶⁰ For Leary, "in addition to being a sensory paradise and a spiritual oasis, the Center in Mexico productive and profitable."⁶¹ Alas, this psychedelic utopia did not last.

"Freedom" Cut Short

Six weeks into the second summer of the Freedom Center, Mexican judicial police and immigration authorities investigated the activities of the IFIF and ultimately shut it down at the end of June 1963. Different circumstances came together to produce this outcome. First, a dismembered body was found along

57. Timothy Leary, "Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out," recorded 1966, released 1967, Mercury Records; <https://youtu.be/78WvMFKc4hM>.

58. Metzner, "From Harvard to Zihuatanejo," 189–91; Hotel Catalina workers S. and C., interviewed by the author, Zihuatanejo, August 2022.

59. Note, unsigned, May 15, 1963, box 83, folder 39, Timothy Leary Papers.

60. Downing, "Report on the Zihuatanejo center for transpersonative living."

61. Leary, "Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out."

the Acapulco–Zihuatanejo highway. Although “police said no connection [was] established between the [‘Psychic Drug’ Research Center] and the slaying,” it brought additional unwanted attention to the area and the group. Before the gruesome discovery, “federal officers were known to have been investigating” the center.⁶² Technically, a center for researching the use of LSD was possible in 1963 Mexico. LSD, psilocybin, mescaline, and other psychedelic substances were not prohibited.⁶³ Despite this, experimentation with them was only allowed for those who had a special health license issued by the federal government.⁶⁴ The IFIF had not petitioned for one of these licenses. These factors helped justify a police search of the center. According to Leary, officials were searching for drugs such as cocaine and marijuana, which they did not find.⁶⁵ Mexican immigration authorities belonging to the Department of State argued that the group of mostly US citizens had a “conduct not compatible with that of a tourist,” as they had entered the country as tourists, but were instead running a profitable business. Because they did not have business or research permits and initially represented themselves as tourists, Leary and associates were given “only five days in which to pack their bags and get out of Mexico.”⁶⁶ (See figure 6.)

After federal authorities issued the ultimatum, Leary went to Mexico City to “appeal to immigration authorities,” asserting the center was a “serious research endeavor.”⁶⁷ His efforts were fruitless. Years later, Leary lamented the abrupt ending of the Freedom Center: “Eventually this gentle and harmonious way of life came to the attention of the police, a group of people who are not especially dedicated to growth, pleasure and spiritual discovery. The Center was closed, and the group dispersed.”⁶⁸

62. UPI, “Murder Starts Action,” *Brownsville Herald*, June 14, 1963.

63. Mexican law did not change until 1976, when the United Nations Convention on Psychotropic Substances (ratified in 1971) came into effect. The judicial change took so long because Mexico had certain reservations about fully applying the new international control system due to the presence of Indigenous groups that use plants containing psychotropic substances in traditional magical-religious rituals. “Tratados Internacionales,” *Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores*, https://aplicaciones.sre.gob.mx/tratados/muestratratado_nva.sre?id_tratado=295&depositario=0 (accessed September 2022).

64. Dawson, “Salvador Roquet, María Sabina, and the Trouble with Jipis.”

65. Manuel Arvizu, “Los alucinados esperan seguir sus experimentos con drogas,” *La Prensa*, June 16, 1963.

66. David Weber, “Mexico Halts ‘Happiness’ Tests,” *Kansas City Star*, July 1, 1963.

67. UPI, “Murder Starts Action.”

68. Leary, “Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out.” In Mexico, starting in the 1930s, Federal Police were officially in charge of investigating drug trafficking. Yet especially for smaller infractions, local police often intervened. Force and intimidation were drug control strategies. Prejudice and aggression from the police toward drug consumers during this time are well documented, as well as a tendency toward corruption. See Carlos A. Pérez Ricart and Nidia A. Olvera Hernández, “Ascenso y declive de la Policía de Narcóticos del Departamento de Salubridad Pública en México (1917–1960),” *Historia Mexicana* 70, no. 4 (2021): 1661–714, <https://doi.org/10.24201/hm.v70i4.4240>.



Figure 6. Art Kleps, *History of the Psychedelic Movement* (Orlando, FL: OKNEOAC, 2019).⁶⁹

The expulsion of the group immediately became a scandal, for both the IFIF and the Mexican government. The incident was fodder for the national and international press (see figure 7), echoing concurrent concerns over social changes. As soon as the presence of the psychedelic investigators was publicly known, rumors circulated in the media associating the group with the recently discovered murder. Despite a lack of evidence and an ongoing investigation, headlines and leads such as “The Hallucinated in Crime?” and “Police Suspect the Hallucinated” suggested a connection.⁷⁰ In his analysis of 1960s drug culture, David Courtwright notes that fear over a changing culture contributed to the press’s portrayal of Leary and other “gurus” as dangerous “vice entrepreneurs.”⁷¹ This was the case with the sudden closing of the Center for Transpersonal Living. Newspaper portrayals of the event included: “20 Drug Addicts Were Expelled from Mexico”; “Paradise Lost by Mexico LSD Colony”; “‘Queer People’ at the Psychic Drug Center”; “Paradise for Narcotics”; “Heaven for Beatniks”; “The Hallucinated People Hope to Continue Their

70. “Sospecha la policía de los alucinados,” *La Prensa*, June 16, 1963.

71. According to Courtwright, the media “magnified” Leary’s and others’ activities, thus unwillingly helping to turn them into international vectors for North American–style drug consumption. *Forces of Habit*, 44–46.



Figure 7. “The Hallucinated People Hope to Continue Their Drug Experiments in Mexico,” *La Prensa*, June 16, 1963.

Drug Experiments”; “They Are Drug Addicts, Not Wisemen”; “Vegetarians in Zihuatanejo: They Consume Weeds and Mushrooms,” and others.⁷² Some authors have insinuated that as a result of this coverage, “the United States ambassador to México lobbied the Mexican government to expel Leary and his followers.”⁷³ These kinds of stories in the press helped to link LSD and other psychedelics to drug abuse in the public perception. As historians Erika Dyck and Lucas Richert have pointed out, by the mid-1960s LSD leaped from the medical field into popular culture, where it began to be considered a problem, fueling the “acid panic” of the following years.⁷⁴

Not all the press coverage was scandalous. A few journalists in Mexico sought a more nuanced depiction and reached out to IFIF members for interviews. For example, Manuel Arvizu published a series of reports for *La Prensa* describing “the strange drug world” of the “hallucinated North Americans.” Through a conversation with “Tim, *el gringo*,” he confirmed that the group ritually consumed LSD. Leary told Arvizu that LSD, hallucinogenic mushrooms, and peyote were all “revolutionary drugs” because “the revolution is a revolution of consciousness.” Clarifying that the center was for consciousness training, Leary stated that LSD was part of a “new science” that helped preserve peace through the mental

72. “20 drogadictos fueron expulsados de México,” *La Prensa*, June 18, 1963; “Paradise Lost by Mexico LSD Colony,” *San Francisco News*, July 2, 1963; Weber, “Mexico Halts ‘Happiness’ Tests”; “Los alucinados esperan seguir sus experimentos con drogas,” *La Prensa*, June 16, 1963; “Son drogadictos y no sabios los de Zihuatanejo,” *Diario de la Tarde*, June 17, 1963; “Vegetarianos en Zihuatanejo: Le hacen al hongo y a la yerba,” *Diario de la Tarde*, June 17, 1963.

73. Penner, *Timothy Leary: The Harvard Years*, 336.

74. Lucas Richert and Erika Dyck, “Psychedelic Crossing: American Mental Health and LSD in the 1970s,” *Medical Humanities* 46 (2020): 184; Erika Dyck, *Psychedelic Psychiatry: LSD on the Canadian Prairies* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2012), 103.

clarification of those who consumed it.⁷⁵ Likewise, reporter Iván Cordero of *El Día* visited the Zihuatanejo center; in addition to speaking with Leary and others, he immersed himself in the psychedelic experience by consuming LSD while there. In an attempt to portray the scientific investigations of the IFIF, Cordero summarized for his readers previous studies on the use of psychoactive plants in Mexico and especially Leary and Metzner's work on psychedelics.⁷⁶ But he was forced to publish this article under the pseudonym Anibal Palafox because, as he mentioned in a letter to Leary, he had been contacted by authorities at the Mexican Department of State. They had made it "difficult" for him and *El Día* to publish the article and "warned me to be careful in the publication," making sure to "emphasize that you did not leave the country because of drugs (as the Mexican press published) but because you worked with a tourist visa."⁷⁷ In Mexico during the 1960s, it was not uncommon for representatives of the government to attempt to censor the press, especially when dealing with political dissidence, student protests, and, as in this case, drug consumption.⁷⁸ Because the matter of Leary and the IFIF was playing out in the national and international press, the federal government was especially interested in controlling the optics surrounding it, actively downplaying the "drug" aspect.

Backlash against hippies elsewhere in Mexico also contributed to the negative light that fell on the Center for Transpersonal Living. In his report, IFIF collaborator Downing asserted that two "upper class ladies" who lived in Oaxaca had somehow intervened, motivated by concerns over what was happening in their state with the influx of foreign tourists in search of "magic mushrooms." It is not clear where Downing got this information, but he described how these supposedly "highly connected women," with "considerable influence among the governing class," had reached out to authorities to get the IFIF group deported.⁷⁹ Real or fictionalized, these women represent part of Mexican society's reaction to the growing presence of *jipis*, particularly in Huautla, María Sabina's hometown. In the early 1960s, people living in the Oaxaca Valley began to have a negative reaction to "scandalous" and "disrespectful" tourists who were there to consume

75. Arvizu, "Los alucinados esperan seguir sus experimentos con drogas."

76. Anibal Palafox, "En Zihuatanejo, LSD 25. Los hongos alucinógenos," *El Día*, July 6, 1963.

77. Iván Cordero to Timothy Leary, August 19, 1963, box 50, folder 9, Timothy Leary Papers.

78. For examples, see Jaime Pensado, *Rebel Mexico: Student Unrest and Authoritarian Political Culture During the Long Sixties* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013); Paul Gillingham and Benjamin Smith, *Dictablanda: Politics, Work and Culture in Mexico, 1938–1968* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Lorenzo Meyer, "La guerra fría en el mundo periférico: el caso del régimen autoritario mexicano. La utilidad del anticomunismo discreto," in *Especiosos de la guerra fría: México América Central y el Caribe*, ed. Daniela Spenser (Mexico: Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, Miguel Ángel Porrúa, 2004), 95–117.

79. Downing, "Report on the Zihuatanejo center for transpersonative living."

“god’s flesh”—type mushrooms as drugs instead of “to cure disease or to see the future.”⁸⁰ Downing’s notes explain that these women wanted to protect native religious customs by putting a brake on the growing commercialization of traditional healing practices. Supposedly concerned that the Zihuatanejo center would become a haven for hippies looking to get high, and that this would in turn contribute to more of them visiting Oaxaca, they petitioned for the center’s closure.⁸¹ As drug historians have noted, “modernizing elite responses to [drug cultures or practices] reveal much about the anxieties, prejudices and intellectual influences of the” time.⁸² The 1960s was a period of great social, cultural, and political changes in Mexico, and people were worried that this would mean a transformation of the family structure and a loss of reverence for a conservative patriarchal system.⁸³ These women’s fears were not without basis: “hippies and beatniks” who had not been accepted at the Center for Transpersonal Living or who were unwilling or unable to pay the fees, had started to “set up their camps” nearby “and stayed there smoking marijuana, which did not benefit the reputation of the center among area inhabitants.”⁸⁴

The Mexican Psychedelic Center was attacked from another angle as well—the academic one. Leary and colleagues had not established solid relations with the Mexican scientific community. Some in the IFIF believed that their casting out was due to medical and academic hostility.⁸⁵ For example, Downing thought that “the academic antagonism developed in the United States [had been] transferred to the Mexican setting where certain academic psychiatrists were seen as intolerant, self-serving, pseudo-experts, who, for personal prejudice and out of wounded vanity, refused to give a favorable report to the Mexican Health Department and Sanitation” (Secretaría de Salud).⁸⁶ Indeed, criticism began in the United States pertaining to a lack of scientific rigor and fears that “the effects of the drug are not well enough established to make it safe to use”⁸⁷ were echoed in the Mexican mental health and research community. Doctors Dionisio Nieto and Manuel Velasco were particularly vocal in their criticisms. Nieto was a Spanish

80. Feinberg, “Competing Indigenous Imaginaries,” 126–128.

81. Downing, “Report on the Zihuatanejo center for transpersonative living.”

82. Paul Gootenberg and Isaac Campos, “Toward a New Drug History of Latin America: A Research Frontier at the Center of Debates,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 95, no. 1 (2015): 9.

83. See Zolov, *Refried Elvis*.

84. John Cashman, *El fenómeno LSD* (Barcelona: Plaza & Janes, 1972), 91.

85. Devin R. Lander, “‘Legalize Spiritual Discovery’: The Trials of Dr. Timothy Leary,” in *Prohibition, Religious Freedom, and Human Rights: Regulating Traditional Drug Use*, eds. Beatriz Caiuby Labate and Clancy Cavnar (Berlin: Springer, 2014), 167–68.

86. Downing, “Report on the Zihuatanejo center for transpersonative living.”

87. “Two Tell of Using ‘Conscious’ Drugs,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 11, 1963.

exile interested in studying the effects of psychotropics on consciousness and had conducted experiments with psilocybin and other substances at Mexico's National Academy of Medicine.⁸⁸ Newspapers in the United States reported that Nieto seemed to have resented the Freedom Center for not consulting with him or considering his previous work in the field.⁸⁹ Velasco also distrusted the psychedelic researchers. He had publicly stated that Leary and his team hadn't come to Mexico for serious, responsible, scientific research and instead were "only looking to get intoxicated and get crazy for a while." Velasco's critique carried significant weight because he oversaw the Neurology Department at the Secretary of Health.⁹⁰ In addition, there is no evidence in the archives that IFIF members contacted biologist Teófilo Herrera of the National University, who had already begun cultivating psilocybin mushrooms at the Institute of Biology there.⁹¹ Thus, despite trying to establish a scientific center for the study of the effects of LSD and psilocybin in Mexico, they made no attempt to contact the Mexican scientific community. The strained relationship between the IFIF and influential members of the Mexican scientific community could have added to the government's decision to "put an end" to what others described as "a curious and, in many ways exciting attempt to enhance human happiness through chemistry."⁹²

Leary and colleagues infringed Mexican immigration laws and sanitary codes by declaring on federal forms they were mere tourists, not psychedelic researchers or a health business. Had they wanted to legitimately continue researching the effects of LSD and psilocybin on human subjects, they could have registered with the Health Department and Sanitation. Had they wanted to set up a psychological retreat and training center, they could have filed for a business visa. In part because they believed they would not be able to conduct the participant experiments they had designed within the confines of academia and under the watch of

88. César Pérez, *Dimensiones de la psiquiatría contemporánea: Libro homenaje al profesor Dionisio Nieto* (Mexico: Fournier, 1972).

89. Weber, "Mexico Halts 'Happiness' Tests."

90. "Son drogadictos y no sabios los de Zihuatanejo," *Diario de la Tarde*. Manuel Velasco (1914–2001) was a prominent Mexican doctor and politician who specialized in the areas of neurology and neurosurgery. He studied medicine at UNAM and specialized at Harvard during the 1940s. He held various public positions and was the founder of the Department of Neurology of the Health Department (Secretaría de Salud). "Semblanza inhistórica del Dr. Manuel Velasco-Suárez," Honorable Congreso del Estado de Chiapas, https://www.unach.mx/images/documentos/semblanza_dr_manuel_velasco_suarez.pdf (accessed July 27, 2022).

91. Teófilo Herrera (1924–2020) is one of the most important Mexican mycologists. In 1958 he achieved, along with biologist Martha Zenteno, the first cultivation of *Psilocybe cubensis* in Mexico and by the mid-1960s he collaborated with Roger Heim. Gastón Gúzman, "Semblanza del Dr. Teófilo Herrera Suárez," *Revista Mexicana de Micología*, 23 (2006): 1–3.

92. Weber, "Mexico Halts 'Happiness' Tests."

the government, they chose to represent themselves as tourists. Both the sanitary and immigration infractions justified expulsion from the country. Although the state originally set its gaze on the Freedom Center for Transpersonal Living because of worries over uncontrolled drug consumption, fueled by a moral panic, driven by the press and elites, supported by suspecting health officials and skeptical academics, the state ultimately decided to proceed with the immigration violation. As evidenced in Cordero's letter, Mexican government officials did not want issues of drug tourism or investigations to be a central part of the narrative around the expulsion. Hoping to lessen journalistic accounts that portrayed Mexico as a "drug paradise," especially in the international press, the Mexican state found in the immigration issue the perfect justification for the group's ejection.

Forced to move on from Mexico, Leary and what remained of the group traveled to the Caribbean (Dominican Republic and Antigua) that summer and attempted to establish a similar retreat. They failed. The group returned to the United States; Leary, Alpert, Metzner, and others used a house on a recently bought estate owned by the Hitchcock family, in Millbrook, New York. The Hitchcocks' generosity—including a \$20,000 donation earlier in 1963 and charging an annual rent of \$1 for access to the estate—allowed Leary and others to establish a new research center named the Castalia Foundation in September. It too was a "training center for consciousness expansion and for advocacy concerning psychedelics" and continued to operate for four years until it was shut down by government authorities.⁹³ After that, Leary continued in his efforts to proselytize psychedelics, moving further away from the academy and approaching the religious and the mystical.⁹⁴

Leary's relationship with Mexico was further strained in December 1965, when he, his daughter, and others attempted to cross into the United States by car on the Laredo International Bridge. Especially thorough border agents detained them after finding a marijuana seed.⁹⁵ Yet Leary remembered Mexico and his psychedelic experiences there fondly, aware that they had helped change his sense of consciousness. "In the seven years since eating seven mushrooms in a garden in

93. Metzner, "From Harvard to Zihuatanejo," 194; Elcock, "Psychedelic Philanthropy," 91–92. Interestingly, according to their website, the Castalia Foundation still operates psychedelic "laboratories" in Florida and Europe. See more at <https://castaliafoundation.com/> (accessed December 15, 2022).

94. For example, in 1967 Leary and Alpert founded a new religion called the League for Spiritual Discovery. Erika Dyck, *Psychedelic Psychiatry*, 107.

95. Leary was convicted of transporting and attempting to import marijuana, sentenced to thirty years in prison and fined \$30,000. However, he appealed the sentence and was released on parole. See Neil K. Chayet, "Aspectos sociales y legales del uso del LSD," in *LSD: Individuo y sociedad*, ed. Richard C. Debold and Russell C. Leaf (Mexico: Joaquín Mortiz, 1970), 104–5; Chris Elcock, "High New York. The Birth of a Psychedelic Subculture in the American City," PhD diss., University of Saskatchewan, 2015, 134–35.

Mexico, I have devoted all my time and energy to the exploration and description of these strange deep realms.”⁹⁶

Reverberations

Those in the IFIF may not have known, but their presence in Zihuatanejo had a far-reaching impact on the local people, who observed the strange foreigners on their shore. In 1962 and in 1963 people living in the small fishing and tourist town quickly noticed the group of mostly US citizens who had a “tendency to walk naked on our beaches and disrespect local customs.” In a 2021 interview, an inhabitant of Zihuatanejo—present while Leary ran the Center for Transpersonal Living—complained that the foreigners hadn’t attempted to create ties with the community and instead had “simply arrived with typical ‘gringo arrogance’ without considering how their actions might be received in our community.” According to witnesses, locals were less upset with the use of psychedelic substances than they were with the “disrespect [to] local customs.”⁹⁷ Distrust of foreigners, especially those coming from the United States, might have contributed to these attitudes. Since the early twentieth century, people in the state of Guerrero were familiar with North Americans who invested in hotels, casinos, and other leisure businesses that catered specifically to their own compatriots. Particularly “prominent,” “wealthy,” and “ostentatious” US citizens had occasionally been the target of “anti-foreign epithets” circulated in the press.⁹⁸

In the case of Leary, local distrust seems to have gone beyond anti-American sentiment and outrage over nudism and touched on the odd experiences shared by the Zihuatanejenses and the psychologists. Other accounts of those two summers claim that IFIF members did try to interact with the people of Zihuatanejo. Local chronicler Sige tells of at least two encounters. In one, the psychedelic researchers contacted a group of local fishermen and tried to give them “(without their consent) at least one dose of LSD [to] observ[e] and register the effect it caused those people.” The other encounter, a bit more credible since Sige claims to have been an eyewitness, was when the Zihuatanejo Sports Club was invited to play a friendly, early morning baseball game with Leary’s group. The local team won and was “invited to an evening party in the dining room of the hotel.”⁹⁹ Following eating, drinking, and listening to music, “we were invited to the beach”

96. Leary, *High Priest*, 34.

97. Resident couple R. and L., interview with the author, August 2021, Zihuatanejo. For other impressions about the Zihuatanejo project, see “Tim Leary’s LSD cult in Zihuatanejo,” *ZihuaRob’s Servicios Internet*, <http://www.zihuatanejo.net/tablero/thread/151285.html> (accessed September 5, 2022).

98. Hart, *Empire and Revolution*, 273, 375.

and sat in a circle. “Suddenly out of who knows where came a pair of fuming pipes that started to go around.” After being shown how to smoke and pass the pipes, “almost none of us who were sitting there did what they wanted us to do, that is smoke the pipes.” Sige considered that this made the meeting a “failure for Timothy.” “The party ended there!,” he added. Further interaction between Leary and the locals was not possible since the police arrived a few days later.¹⁰⁰

The expulsion of the IFIF was the beginning of the Mexican federal government’s efforts to get rid of so-called hippie tourism. This type of alternative tourism grew throughout the Western-influenced world in the 1960s and into the 1970s, fueled by “middle-class youth who used cannabis and other drugs” and who could travel extensively “thanks to parental affluence, study-abroad programs, cheap fares, and easy hitchhiking.”¹⁰¹ In Mexico, efforts to eliminate this tourism culminated in July 1969 when local officials, in conjunction with the Department of Internal Affairs and the army, entered Huautla and arrested eighty-six *jipis* (sixty-four Mexicans and twenty-two foreigners). “All were officially charged with trafficking drugs,” and the foreigners (from the United States, Canada, and England) were quickly deported.¹⁰² The press’s reaction to this event was similar to the portrayal of Leary and his group in the first years of the 1960s. Newspaper accounts of the mass expulsion from Huautla described it as “a place of decadence and witchcraft, led by a ‘diminutive’ [mayor], where the rampant immorality and vice of the gringos was easily indulged by shamans described as ‘filthy poisoners.’” The Mexican entertainment magazine *Novedades* informed on the incident, underscoring “the large number of women and the fact that these unmarried people were having sex (which [it] emphasized was against God’s law).”¹⁰³ Here again we see how public fears over vice practices, the mixing of foreigners with traditional rituals and Indigenous beliefs, and changes in societal interactions and values prompted authorities to act and the press to react.

Beyond the 1960s, the legend of Timothy Leary and his psychedelic-inspired messages found their way into Mexican counterculture. With certain admiration,

99. Locals who were said to the present included Ángel Tellechea “Chamberina,” Daniel Bravo, Luis Pano, Sige Amaro Juárez, Amado Sotelo, Javier Rodríguez “El Prieto,” Balta Pineda, Ramón and Felix Maganda, Roberto Pineda, and José Sánchez “El Zurdo.”

100. Amaro Juárez, “El Hotel Catalina de Zihuatanejo y Timothy Leary.”

101. Courtwright, *Forces of Habit*, 45.

102. Zolov, *Refried Elvis*, 141. The strategy of rounding up and deporting large quantities of “vice” and “leisure” tourists had been employed in Mexico’s northern border region since at least 1915. See Schantz, “All Night at the Owl,” 568.

103. Feinberg, “Competing Indigenous Imaginaries,” 114, 127–28; Dawson, “Salvador Roquet, María Sabina, and the Trouble with Jipis,” 121.

José Agustín portrayed Leary as someone who “liked heavy doses, just like María Sabina and who would bring friends off bad trips by giving them DMT!”¹⁰⁴ Likewise, writer Parménides García Saldaña, a representative of the 1970s literary movement *la onda*, reflected on those seemingly wild days of drug experimentation and the role Leary played. Because of Leary’s activities in and out of Mexico, García Saldaña characterized him as a “messiah” who helped fuel generational change by bringing the “word from heaven,” “a teacher” who showed “how to live in paradise.” Combining truth and legend, he praises Leary for his role in psychedelic counterculture in Mexico and beyond; he extols, “Alleluia *maese* Timothy Leary! The great alchemist . . . with the philosopher’s stone! And the messiah speaks again to his disciples: ‘*Turn on, drop out!*’”¹⁰⁵

The experiment of creating a psychedelic utopia on the Mexican Pacific coast ultimately failed. Still, it was possible to conduct the test here. The arrival of Leary, his team, and his followers are linked to Mexico’s contribution to Western psychedelic culture and these North Americans’ skewed perception that Zihuatanejo would be a place to find “freedom from jurisdiction.” A growing tourism industry, prompted and supported through various government agencies, was particularly friendly to the US market. This helps us comprehend why the IFIF decided to establish its first out-of-the-country psychedelic research center in Mexico. The federal government wanted tourism’s place in the national economy to grow, but they did not want the new hippie and psychedelic tourism and did not expect visitors to conduct LSD experiments.

Once authorities intervened, the academic community, regional elites, the press, and some locals publicly expressed their discontent over the psychedelic center. Discontent over a changing society, professional disagreements, social and political pressure, and fear over growing drug consumption contributed to the abrupt end of the Freedom Center. However, the Mexican government argued that Leary and colleagues had been expelled because they were running a business without the proper immigration status. This was the legal strategy to justify the quasi-deportation of the psychedelic researchers and their subjects/clients since psilocybin and LSD weren’t prohibited in Mexico at the time. Policies aimed at diminishing drug production, commerce, and availability had been part of the government’s agenda for decades; these policies, in combination with a sensationalizing press, and regional and intellectual elites seemingly scandalized by what they considered was rampant, disrespectful drug use, shaped a context in which the Zihuatanejo Project could not last. Perhaps creating strong ties with the

104. Agustín, *La contracultura en México*, 64.

105. Parménides García Saldaña, *En la ruta de la onda* (Mexico: Jus, 1972/2014), 54–55.

local community could have helped Leary and his group, but for lack of interest, empathy, or time, they did not. What was for IFIF members an odd couple of summers in an idyllic “lost fishing town” in southern Mexico was for the people of Zihuatanejo an event that sparked legends and is still talked about today. Leary long lamented the lost potential of that psychedelic research center; for him, the Zihuatanejo Project always represented “the Mexican paradise lost.”¹⁰⁶

106. Leary, *High Priest*, 319.