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# The Scent of Sleep: On Night Knowledge and Its Atmospheres

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### Article abstract

What does scent have to say concerning the wider networks involved in the lived experiences of sleep? In this essay, I discuss the connection of scent to sleepers and sleepers to scent, not only in the ways that scent may enter our dreams to change them up but also the ways that technologies and methodologies of air, perfume, breath, or exhaust connect us as sleepers to the worlds of botany, synthetics, and other realms of kinship and sense that exist apace from dominant modes of waking or seeing. If sleep and scent have historically been situated as “empty” and “passive,” this essay aims to show how full, vital, and roomy these spaces can be. In this line, I move scent and sleep through an atmospheric methodology of rooms to unravel their wider relationship to *night knowledge*, an epistemology that seeks alternatives to enlightened knowledges of the day, reaching into secrets and spirits. To do so, my archive involves theory, technology, perfume blogs, artists, dreamers, anthropologists, activists, poets, architects, and botanical, animal, and synthetic elements. Finally, I ask: if sleep had a scent, what would it be?

### Cite this article

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# The Scent of Sleep: On Night Knowledge and Its Atmospheres

SANDRA HUBER

“A common horizon:

smelly shores

under spidery moons”

—Huanani-Kay Trask, *Night Is a Sharkskin Drum* (2002)

“(At dawn, the animal laps up the juice of nocturnal flowers)”

—Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Fall of Sleep* (2009)

## AIRS

Sleep and air are intertwined. Because we are breathers—we wakers, we sleepers, we plants, amphibians, moths, mammals—we are enveloped in a close and changing atmosphere of air and exhaust and volatiles and dust, forming an invisible web of relation and environment that holds us together. Though both sleep and air are essential to our survival, they are often respectively likened to empty or fallow spaces, figured as passive, untidy, irrational, and ready to be filled up by the sanitary light of the waking world and its embellishments.<sup>1</sup> If sleep and air are empty, however, then they must be the most charged emptiness imaginable, for in their interstices we are brought into our most intimate politics, our closest affects, and our most eroded habitats, the spaces where breathing and being and receiving and sensing all materially intersect in the quotidian themes of air conditioning and air pollution, in the allure of perfumes, in the politics of smudging and tear gas, in the intimacy of bedrooms. There are airs and there are airs, and I am not only interested in any air, but fragrant air, reeking air, obtrusive air, whether pleasant or foul, welcomed or avoided. This is absorptive terrain. Accordingly, this essay

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1. See section “Freud, mint, magic” for a wider exploration of these assertions.

aims to make porous interludes into the connections between sleep and scent, thinking them together as a chord, not in an attempt to fill these spaces but to learn their sensuous literacies and enter their entangled kinships of plants and pestilents and monsters and nightmares—to walk their midnight gardens. To do so, I will take us to dream science and magical ritual, to floral calendars and smelly art, to atmospheric engineering and the materials of perfumery, to spoors of lavender, smoke, primrose, mint, trust, and finally to the attempt to capture the scent of sleep itself.

My central argument or direction moves towards what I am terming *night knowledge*, an epistemology that seeks alternatives to enlightened knowledges of the day, reaching into secrets and spirits, which sleep and scent both inhabit with ease. My framework in order to collocate night knowledge with sleep and scent is to move through an atmosphere of rooms and vistas; smell involves interiorities rather than surfaces, as historian Constance Classen et al. tell us,<sup>2</sup> while a person's sleep, similarly, and at least most of the time, takes place in rooms. Atmosphere, as philosopher Gernot Böhme writes, has to do with architecture after all, with "opening and closing spaces."<sup>3</sup> Just as Böhme notes that atmosphere is a poetic phenomenology and a technology of impression,<sup>4</sup> my unfurling of night knowledge through scent and sleep is poetic and impressionistic, more air than earth. I ask: what alternate literacies are called up by the summoning of night knowledge? What is kicked out of, hidden, or undervalued in the registers of knowledges enlisted by the light of day that we can recall under a sky of stars? In each section, I will attempt to pull night knowledge out of its correlatives—such as magic from psychoanalysis and science, atmosphere from material, smudging from air conditioning, smell from sight, and sleep from waking.

The implications of thinking sleep alongside scent are at once sweeping and intimate. Most of us spend one third of our lives asleep, and many of us spend all our lives with the sense of smell.<sup>5</sup> They are parts of our lifeworlds that we may take for granted or leave to hum in the background, and yet every day/night both sleep and scent are mined for their productive and even violent potentials by markets,

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2. Constance Classen, David Howes and Anthony Synnott, *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell*, London, Routledge, 1994, p. 4.

3. Gernot Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, Jean-Paul Thibaud (ed.), New York, Routledge, 2017, p. 5.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

5. Tina Sikka, "The Neoliberalization of Sleep: A Discursive and Materialist Analysis of Sleep Technologies," *Tsantsa – Journal of the Swiss Anthropological Association*, vol. 26, 2021, p. 118.

industries, and tech.<sup>6</sup> Sleep therefore italicizes the need to preserve spaces less legible to productivity and progress rather than translating them into rubrics that must “work” for us and us for them. Similarly, cultural theorist Hsuan L. Hsu, whose relevant work I draw on throughout, asserts that “smell [is] a contested—though often overlooked—tool for sensing the dynamics of atmospheric differentiation that have been vital to capitalism’s processes of colonization, racialization, extraction, industrialization, urbanization, uneven development, and environmental depredation.”<sup>7</sup> As such, Hsu contends that “decolonizing smell is not just a metaphor for changing how one thinks or perceives: it requires material transformation of both land and air.”<sup>8</sup> Having been traditionally perceived as empty, both sleep and air, like land, seek unsettlement; in this case, of the very air we breathe.

To that end, both sleep and scent present a challenge to the work of interdisciplinary cultural studies, inviting more air-born thought and action. Airs, like fluids, involve seepage and, though both fragrance and sleep are heavily sought out, they also bring in issues of containment and consent. How does one guard against air? It creeps under doors, lingers on the skin. How does one guard against sleep? Most of the time sleep is desired, but in hypersomnia, such as narcolepsy, it can catch the waker off-guard in unwanted and intrusive ways.<sup>9</sup> Sleep and scent are not a traditional pairing of topics. But when we speak of them together, we quickly see how consciousness, space, affect, and control utterly lose terrain and become diffuse, at once formally and epistemologically obscure and pervasive. The envelope of sleep is not sealed but rather wafts into waking consciousness just as scent permeates the spaces not only between discrete bodies but also between the inner and outer seams of each one of us. As such, both sleep and scent meaningfully complicate the distinctions between inside and outside, allowing us to seek out more Möbius environs. Thinking scent and sleep together broadens definitions of what it means to be alive, sensuous, feeling beings, and it asks us to stretch the perimeters of our vital alliances with non-human and even non-living kin to foster less individualistic and destructive modes of existing, entering into the unknown and unknowing of the night.

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6. See section “Conditions to breathe, conditions to be” for more.

7. Hsuan L. Hsu, *The Smell of Risk: Environmental Disparities and Olfactory Aesthetics*, New York, New York University Press, 2020, p. 7.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 153.

9. Julie Flygare, *Wide Awake and Dreaming: A Memoir of Narcolepsy*, Arlington, VA., Mill Pond Swan Publishing, 2012.

## FREUD, MINT, MAGIC

The first room I will explore is a clinic. In the 1930s, physician Edmund Jacobson sought to develop a technique for relaxation—in order to induce his patients into this technique, he created a bedroom wherein everything was designed to induce sleepiness and everything was fake (see Fig. 1).

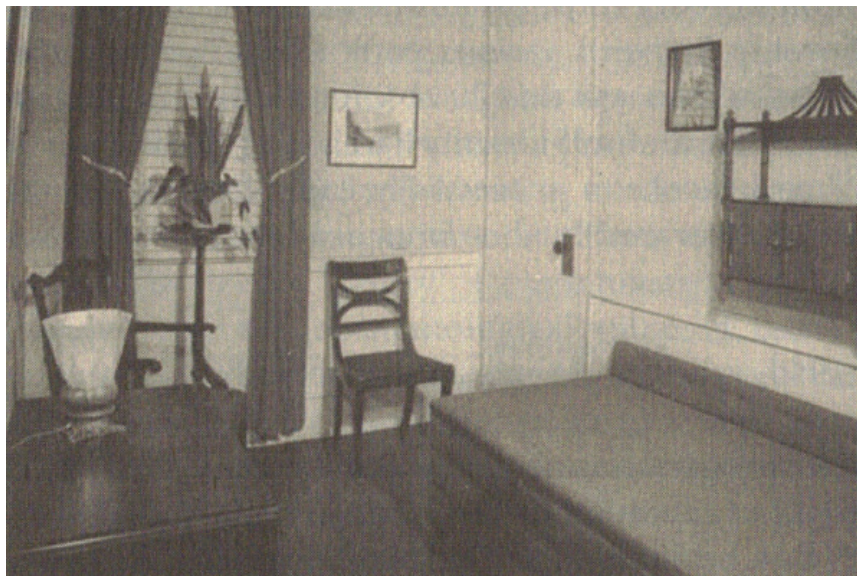


Fig. 1. The clinic of Edmund Jacobson, Chicago, circa 1930s. Edmund Jacobson, *You Can Sleep Well: The ABCs of Restful Sleep for the Average Person*, New York, Whittlesey House, 1938, p. 188. Scanned from Kenton Kroker, *The Sleep of Others*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2007, p. 250.

The plants were fake, the windows were fake, and the walls themselves were a thin disguise for a shield of copper plate that prevented electronic interference.<sup>10</sup> Böhme points to the way that atmosphere often creates a stage set, and that stage sets themselves present the efficacy of atmosphere, which deals in backgrounds and what lies beneath, around, and in excess.<sup>11</sup> Yet in this creation of a relaxing stage, Jacobson missed a key component of atmosphere, especially where fake flowers were of concern: the activation of the senses.

10. Kenton Kroker, *The Sleep of Others and the Transformations of Sleep Research*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2007, coll. "Heritage," p. 250.

11. Böhme, 2017, p. 29.

Below, I will take us into places where scent and sleep mix, sometimes awkwardly, sometimes evocatively, in the rooms of clinicians and psychoanalysts, particularly in the thought and theories of Sigmund Freud and his contemporaries. From there, I will open onto the vista that psychoanalysis obfuscates but never quite escapes: magic, which itself opens onto a meditation and greater consideration of night knowledge as I am exploring it through scent and sleep—somewhere between the sensed and the sensible.

When we look for traces of scent and sleep in the body of psychoanalysis, we come across Sigmund Freud's 1899 *The Interpretation of Dreams*, where he notes the work of two dream researchers interested in scent: physician Alfred Maury and psychologist Mary Whiton Calkins.<sup>12</sup> In the mid-nineteenth century, Maury conducted an experiment on himself where he was given eau-de-cologne to smell in his sleep. His dreams translated the scent into a scene of being transported to Cairo, writes Freud, "in Johann Maria Farina's shop [the perfumer who invented eau-de-cologne]. Some absurd adventures followed, which he could not reproduce."<sup>13</sup> In the late-nineteenth century, Mary Whiton Calkins experimented with stimulating "the lesser senses, smell and taste" in sleeping participants, which yielded little results—"in most so-called taste or smell-dreams," she wrote, "one dreams of seeing food or flowers, not of actually tasting or smelling."<sup>14</sup> In both Maury's and Calkins's experiments, smell proved to be a problem of translation in dreams, either shapeshifting to another register of sense or leading the dreamer into unintelligible forays.

This research is more radical than it may sound, signaled by Calkins's reference to smell as a "lesser sense." Both Maury and Calkins would have been influenced, at least tangentially, by enlightenment thinker Immanuel Kant, who was one among many philosophers to characterize olfaction as "subjective, passive, and chemical," a lesser sense, to be sure, than the more purportedly objective sense of sight.<sup>15</sup> Sleep, too, is historically and philosophically comparable to a lesser state than waking. Philosopher of science Kenton Kroger notes that John Locke not only "set dreaming apart from reason ... but rather the complete absence of thinking."<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, nineteenth-century physician William Alexander Hammond regarded thinking as an action and dreaming as an utterly

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12. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, James Strachey (trans.), New York, Basic Books, 1955, p. 57, p. 52.

13. Alfred Maury, "De certains faits observés dans les rêves," *Annales médico-psychologiques*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1857, p. 157, quoted in Freud, 1955, p. 57.

14. Mary Whiton Calkins, "Statistics of Dreams," *The American Journal of Psychology*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1893, p. 320.

15. Hsu, 2020, p. 15.

16. Kroger, 2007, p. 64.

hopeless lack of will.<sup>17</sup> Kroker notes that for Thomas Hobbes, dreaming was not only passive or empty but, as such, liable to be filled up by “apparition and spirits” and therefore to “encourage belief in... witches, fairies, and the magical power of crosses,” to name a few monstrosities of sleep-inflected thinking.<sup>18</sup> For this reason, sleep was overtly associated with madness or even figured as the suspension of life itself.<sup>19</sup> Passive and mad states all too often collocate with feminized and eroticized states. To grasp as a whole this thorny tangle, one need only recall *The Nightmare* by Henry Fuseli (1781), where a demon crouches over a translucently clad and sexualized sleeping woman, presumably in her bedroom (see Fig. 2). Though both Maury and Calkins dared to breach scent and sleep, their findings were inconclusive, perhaps given their research questions (sleep and scent, maybe, and as a chord, chose not to answer).



Fig. 2. Henry Fuseli, *The Nightmare*, oil on canvas, 101.6 cm × 127 cm, Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, 1781, Founders Society Purchase with funds from Mr. and Mrs. Bert L. Smokler and Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence A. Fleischman, 55.5.A.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 72, p. 75, p. 73.



But what of Freud himself and his own research? Loudly, the sense of smell in the author of *The Interpretation of Dreams*' body of work is an absence that protests too much. Anthropologist David Howes notes that in Freudian theory in general, the nose is "missing from [Freud's] list of bodily orifices"—which include the mouth, the anus, and the genitals—due to the fact that Freud himself had a nasal complex.<sup>20</sup> This arose in part, asserts Howes, from watching Freud's friend, colleague, and otorhinolaryngologist Wilhelm Fliess—who, incidentally, wrote a book entitled *The Relationship between the Nose and Female Sexual Organs* (1897)—botch a nasal operation on Freud's analysand Emma Eckstein, whereupon Freud fainted to the ground and Epstein rejoined, "so this is the strong sex."<sup>21</sup> It is in fact in the spaces of silences and ellipses, in the very spaces of sublimation we could say, where the hidden becomes most visible. In the way that Freud avoids the orifice of the nose, we can also see the way that psychoanalysis as a theory tends to avoid another epistemology it cannot come to terms with yet cannot help but emanate, albeit sideways, marginally, and that is magic.

Anthropologist Alfred Gell, in his 1977 text "Magic, Perfume, Dream ..."—where the cliff-like ellipsis seems both the aura of perfume and the extension of dreams—defines magic as "purposive ritual."<sup>22</sup> Through magic, he writes, we learn something about both scent and dreams, and through scent and dreams we learn something about magic, for all exist in a world that is semiologically ambiguous, caught between the physical and symbolic. The "smell-sign," as Gell calls it, in its liminality between the physiological, chemical, and symbolic worlds, points to the ambiguity of the magical sign itself, "which refers to, and also alters the world."<sup>23</sup> With this, we can return to Freud and smell to observe, as David Howes does, the cultural bias in Freud's categorization of the erotogenic zones of the body—namely, fin-de-siècle Vienna, and, we could say, "the West" in general—when Howes substitutes the anal phase with what he terms the nasal phase by taking us to the Trobriand Islands, which, he states, "are one of the most famous testing grounds for Freudian theory."<sup>24</sup>

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20. David Howes, "Oedipus In/Out of the Trobriands: A Sensuous Critique of Freudian Theory," *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2003, p. 183.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 199.

22. Alfred Gell, "Magic, Perfume, Dream ... [1977]," *The Smell Culture Reader*, Jim Drobnick (ed.), New York, Berg, 2006, p. 409.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 401–402.

24. Howes, 2003, p. 175.



In Trobriand culture, Howes observes, desire does not exist without smell, specifically the smell of *sulumwoya*, a type of mint, and the most seductive scent in the Trobriand olfactory lexicon.<sup>25</sup> Linked to both sleep and magic, the mint is also a spell: boiled with coconut oil and incantated into a love charm, the *sulumwoya* potion is spilled over the breast of a desired woman while she sleeps, inspiring such amorous dreams that, upon waking, she will be taken with an uncontrollable desire for the wielder of the spell.<sup>26</sup> The Trobriand linkage between scent, sleep, and the erotic is also similar to Gell's work, which concerns the Umeda people, also of New Guinea, who concoct a magical perfume called *Oktesap* from zingiber, turmeric, and other secret ingredients to inspire dreams in a pig-hunter so that he will attract game the next day. An auspicious dream for the hunter to have while inhaling *Oktesap*, in a net-bag around his neck, is of sleeping with an attractive woman.<sup>27</sup> Gell's major concern in this text is, however, not necessarily the link between the erotic and the nasal, like Howes's, but between dreams, scent, and magical efficacy.

What parallels dreams with scent? For Gell, they are closely linked through their *incompleteness*, a feature that points to what lingers at the threshold, what announces itself on the edge of actualization,<sup>28</sup> not unlike how speech works as the analysand unravels what can and cannot be spoken. The connection between sleep and smell runs so deep for the Umeda that the word for dream (*yinugwi*) is similar to the word for smell (*nugwi*),<sup>29</sup> and both smelling and dreaming suggest a single faculty—that of “having cognizance of things at a remove.”<sup>30</sup> In scent, writes Gell, “matter and meaning become miscible fluids, a scandal, of course, from the standpoint of scientific method.”<sup>31</sup> This brings us back to *The Nightmare* by Henry Fuseli, back to Hobbes's fear of the apparition and the spirits lingering at the threshold of dreams, and back to psychoanalysis and medicine. At the end of a session in Edmond Jacobson's highly contrived room of relaxation, we come out into the vista of the night.

The uncanny evacuation of magic from psychoanalysis is, in many ways, the missing scent in Jacobson's room of fake flowers—there but not. In one reading, Freud's

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25. *Ibid.*, p. 186.

26. Classen et al., 1994, p. 124–125.

27. Gell, 2006, p. 407.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 404.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 407.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 408.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 402.

truly ground-breaking theories also present a more conservative, more Westernized, “cleaner” version of what might otherwise fall under the rubric of magic, couched in a lexicon of empiricism and science, and, in this sense, somewhat de-radicalized. In their book *A Critique of Psychoanalytic Reason* (1989), philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers and psychiatrist Léon Chertok take on the problem of hypnosis in scientific thought, a state adjacent to sleep and to trance, framing it as a pollutant to rational science. Hypnosis “eludes the ‘reason’ of the experimenters,” they write, “as well as that of psychoanalysts.”<sup>32</sup> Chertok and Stengers’s assertions surrounding hypnosis can be stretched to indicate the contaminating factor that magical, or let’s say unempirical, practices present to the body of Western scientific reason in general: “who can recognize the impure in the name of the power of purifying,” they ask.<sup>33</sup> Whereas psychoanalysis is the room, magic is the vista, and both can work evocatively together, as Howes’s essay demonstrates and as present-day psychoanalysts such as Willy Apollon gesture towards complicating.<sup>34</sup>

The concatenation of smell and sleep that Howes and Gell point us to amplifies the utterly Western bias in the arrangement and organization of the senses that Freud used to characterize sexual development, for example, and which is inextricably linked with the types of knowledges deemed literate or worthy within a particular cultural frame and context. Anthropologist Anna Tsing brings this issue into the oral realms, as in taste, when she writes that white Americans in general cannot stand the smell of the matsutake mushroom, while in Japan the same mushroom is associated with joy; this changes not only the way each prepare the mushroom—white Americans by pickling it to disguise the smell—but the questions each ask of it, such as what it repels (asked by white American scientists—answer: slugs) as opposed to what it attracts (asked by Japanese scientists—answer: some flying insects).<sup>35</sup> This is key: our perceptions and connections to place, to being, to self-and-other influence the questions we are able to ask in the first place, never mind the answers we deem palatable.

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32. Léon Chertok and Isabelle Stengers, *A Critique of Psychoanalytic Reason: Hypnosis as a Scientific Problem from Lavoisier to Lacan*, Martha Noel Evans (trans.), Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1992, p. xxv.

33. *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

34. See, for example, Willy Apollon, “Vodou: The Crisis of Possession,” Peter Canning and Tracy McNulty (trans.), *Jouvert: A Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 2, nos. 1 and 2, special double issue: “Religion Between Culture and Philosophy,” Kenneth Reinhard and Julia Reinhard Lupton (eds.), <https://legacy.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v3i12/apollo.htm> (accessed 25 April 2023).

35. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2021, p. 51.

The present discussion brings me to night knowledge, which, like all registers of knowledge, has to do with literacy, and literacies are introduced by chosen forms of education. Many of us in the contemporary Western world where I am writing from are sent to institutions by day to learn language and science and art and business. But we do not generally learn divination, or communing with ancestors, or interpreting dreams, or speaking lost languages, or weaving personal lore. These knowledges are mostly left to us to learn with our chosen or inherited communities outside the sanctioned limits of the productive day. They are intimate literacies, and the literacies of scent and sleep are nothing if not intimate alphabets. Night knowledge opens a curtain on alternate ways of recognizing the world, one where sleep and scent are valuable teachers. Hsuan L. Hsu writes that “vision prioritizes a liberal model of putatively disembodied perception,” while “olfactory aesthetics demands a nearly unthinkable shift in what Jacques Rancière calls ‘the distribution of the sensible.’”<sup>36</sup> What better way to redistribute the sensible than through the senses, particularly one that carries a history of being “lower” than the others, where the ground is the air of the sky. Here, the Egyptian god of perfume, Nefertum, meets Hypnos, the Greek god of sleep, and a portal opens between. Night knowledge redistributes the sensible in a kind of affective atmosphere, inviting auras, halos, nimbuses, daemons, and even souls to be part of the atmospheric surplus that surrounds us.<sup>37</sup> Night knowledge carries, in effect, a decolonial emphasis on knowledge-making, and in these rooms and vistas I will go further into the collocations between scent and sleep to pull out their wider political relevancies on contemporary culture and thought within the glow of the hues of the darkness. But first, an interlude on perfumes.

#### FROM ORANGE BLOSSOM TO TRUST TO MATERIAL TO ATMOSPHERE

In 2014, the Festival dell’Olfatto (Smell Festival), which meets yearly in Bologna, Italy to celebrate olfactory culture, curated their gathering around “The Scent of Dreams.” According to organizer Francesca Faruolo, the theme was inspired by her own dreams, which are fragrant, she contends, “especially featuring orange flower, a flower linked to

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36. Hsu, 2020, p. 20.

37. Böhme uses these words, among others, to discuss atmosphere, 2017, p. 14, p. 16.

the heart.”<sup>38</sup> Author Rosalia Cavalieri makes the parallel that “[j]ust like dreams, smells mostly act outside our conscious sphere and nevertheless condition our behaviour.” She continues: “And, just like dreams, smells have an evocative nature which is difficult to express in words.”<sup>39</sup> Smells and dreams share similar elements: they are awkwardly translatable into words, they are evocative rather than grounded, and they are widely influential on our behaviour. These are themes I will continue to emphasize as night knowledge very much has to do with translation, and, as I mentioned, literacy. Yet moving along the resonances of words and thought, it is sometimes easy to forget that scent and sleep pull us into the body. In the interlude that follows, therefore, I’d like to open some vials, whirl into this text some sleepy scents as a motion to embodiment, albeit in words by necessity, of what scent and sleep knot and gift. I will start with contemporary art where scent and sleep meet before moving to the adjacent craft of perfumes, which conjure up the highly materialized and materializing worlds of scent and sleep, respectively. Lastly, I will move into the open vista of trust that lays before sleep and scent as its most intuitive embodiment. This section ends on how sleep and scent, both heavily materialized in the world of commodity and marketplace, can nevertheless be more fully met and discussed through a lexicon of atmosphere. How do sleep and scent exist in, for, and from the body? And how does a framework of atmosphere express and tune into these emanations?

Following from Faruolo’s festival, we continue along the exploration of rooms and come upon artist Bernardo Fleming’s exhibition *Dreaming in Smell* (2021) at the Institute for Art and Olfaction in Los Angeles (see Fig. 3), where he co-produced four fabric sprays to interpret four of his fragrant dreams. These sprays were then incorporated into bed linens and pillows for visitors to interact with: wafts of red wine, orris, and violet to recreate the dreamt smell of a cop’s breath; hues of palo santo, armoise, and sage to create an aromatic dreamt “masculinity”; and the combination of the contaminant skatol, the bacterial smell of indole, and the petroleum-y para cresol to recreate the dreamt smell of feces.<sup>40</sup>

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38. Francesca Faruolo quoted in Dany Mitzman, “Do People Experience Smell in Their Dreams?,” *BBC News*, 28 May 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-27590756> (accessed 7 November 2022).

39. *Ibid.*

40. The Institute for Art and Olfaction, “Dreaming in Smell by Bernardo Fleming,” exhibition, 12 November–2 December 2021, <https://artandolfaction.com/exhibitions/dreaming-in-smell> (accessed 26 April 2023).

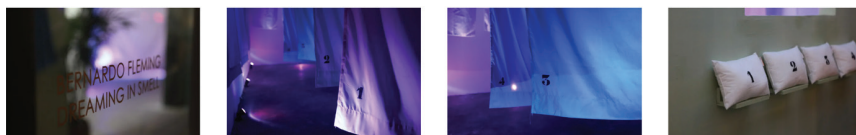


Fig. 3. Photo of Bernardo Fleming's exhibition *Dreaming in Smell*, linens and perfumes, Institute for Art and Olfaction, Los Angeles, 2021. Photo© Saskia Wilson-Brown

Into this room I drag artist Tracey Emin's *My Bed* (1999), a complete replica of her own bed that she herself dragged into the Tate following a bout of depression, replete with "rumpled and stained sheets .... Cartons of cigarettes and other trash. A pair of panties soiled with menstrual blood. A container of birth control pills. Condoms"<sup>41</sup> (see Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. *My Bed*, 1998 © Tracey Emin / DACS London / CARCC Ottawa 2023. Image courtesy of Saatchi Gallery, London. Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd 2023.

41. Morgan Meis, "The Empty Bed: Tracey Emin and the Persistent Self," *Image, Art, Faith, Mystery*, no. 90, <https://imagejournal.org/article/empty-bed-tracey-emin-persistent-self> (accessed 25 April 2023).

One can hardly encounter this bed without its imagined or actual aura of smell that evokes restless nights and other behaviours adjacent to sleep and scent that happen in bed—sex, drinking, gossiping, menstruating, smoking. Already we see how atmosphere is a fitting framework to think of and with work involving scent and sleep, for, as Böhme writes, a theory of atmosphere opens an approach to art that is more about experience than information.<sup>42</sup> Scent, however, bridges both, carrying both meaning and phenomenon in one breath.

The latter interpretations of scent and sleep from visual art lead into more forthright encounters: perfume, a form and force that crosses art, craft, science, trade, psychology, and industry. We could stay in the room of perfume for days, for there is no lack of its interpretations of sleep, many of them found on blogs, such as Neil Chapman's *Black Narcissus*, where he writes of "Sloth" by Zoologist (2020), "Nocturnes" by Caron (1981), and "Lavincense" by Hermetica (2021), to name a few, each giving off their respective traces of feral cinnamons, buttery cocoas, chamomile, hay, moss, vetiver, and lavender (see Fig. 5).<sup>43</sup>



Fig. 5. Images of three sleepy perfumes: "Sloth" by Zoologist (2020), "Nocturnes" by Caron (1981), "Lavincense" by Hermetica (2021). Google image perfume bottles, copyright free.

42. Böhme, 2017, p. 6.

43. "A Total, Lazy Fuck: Sloth by Zoologist (2020)," *The Black Narcissus*, blog, <https://theblacknarcissus.com/2020/04/30/a-total-lazy-fuck-sloth-by-zoologist-2020>; "Sin Garden," *Ibid.*, <https://theblacknarcissus.com/2017/05/20/sin-garden-rose-de-nuit-by-serge-lutens-1993-reve-indien-by-fragonard-2006-nocturnes-by-caron-1981-boudoir-sin-garden-by-vivienne-westward-2007-ferre-by-ferre-1991-rose-musc>; "Lavincense by Hermetica (2021)," *Ibid.*, <https://theblacknarcissus.com/2021/12/06/lavincense-by-hermetica-2021/> (all accessed 7 November 2022).

Perfume, too, is a whole atmosphere, or what Gell refers to as a context, a situation, one that evokes a spell, a charmed universe, no less than “the transcendence of the sweet life.”<sup>44</sup> To psychiatrist Hubertus Tellenbach, who was the first to use atmosphere in an aesthetic sense in his 1968 text *Geschmack und Atmosphäre*, perfume was not only cosmetic, but connective; it “extends the fragrance of the skin,” while a bad smell, by contrast, may work against a sense of togetherness, closeness, and kin-making.<sup>45</sup> We could say that seeking out sleepy scents is a form of communication between human and plant realms that exists in the wide expanse of our desire to be at peace.

As I invoke the atmospheres of perfume to more fully bring us into sleep and scent, it is hard to ignore how both have been heavily materialized, made into matter, crafted, exhorted, and wrung into the world of objects. Elsa Schiaparelli’s “Sleeping de Schiaparelli” (1940), which is a “night perfume” that was “meant to be sprayed the moment before falling into bed,” is a vivid example of this (see Fig. 6).<sup>46</sup>

As we take in its notes of bergamot, galbanum, rose, jasmine, ylang-ylang, and patchouli, we notice that even its form evokes the night, with a glass bottle shaped like a candle and outer packaging possessing a colour created specifically for the scent called “Sleeping blue.”<sup>47</sup> Packaging has a lot to do with creating an atmosphere—Böhme notes this by writing that with the transformation of capitalism into an aesthetic economy,<sup>48</sup> commodities took on stage-value in addition to use-value.<sup>49</sup> Part of this stage-value is invoked by Kenton Kroker’s words as he writes that “sleep has been ... rendered into an object in myriad ways,” going on to list some of these ways in mattresses, sleep enhancements, and biomedical laboratories where sleep is measured, controlled, and surveilled, mainly for its pathologies.<sup>50</sup> Technoscience researcher Tina Sikka focuses on (the less material but equally pervasive stage-value of) apps meant to track how well/badly we sleep, part of the mHealth industry and the Quantified Self that makes up a portion of “somnolent capitalism,” whereby sleep accumulates

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44. Gell, 2006, p. 406.

45. Hubertus Tellenbach, “Tasting and Smelling—Taste and Atmosphere—Atmosphere and Trust,” *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, vol. 12, no. 2, Fall 1981, p. 222.

46. Elsa Schiaparelli, “Sleeping de Schiaparelli,” Perfume in glass, metal, paper and synthetic, The Met, 1940–1950, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/156098> (accessed 7 November 2022).

47. *Ibid.*

48. Böhme, 2017, p. 5.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

50. Kroker, 2007, p. 4.





Fig. 6. Sleeping de Schiaparelli advertisement, featured in *Harper's Bazaar*, 1940..

an emphasis on the productivity of the body in a “profit-driven marketplace.”<sup>51</sup> Both sleep and scent are part of massive multi-billion dollar industries, respectively,<sup>52</sup> which would not exist without their utter manifestations in the object sphere.

The highly materialistic ways that sleep is extracted both in sleep laboratories and via sleep apps, furthermore, parallel the highly materialistic ways that scent is extracted. Perfumes are composed of raw materials, such as “flowers, grasses, spices, fruit, wood, roots, resins, balsams, leaves, gums, and animal secretions—as well as resources like alcohol, petrochemicals, coal, and coal tars”; these materials are heavily manufactured and pulled out in processes such as steam distillation, enfleurage, maceration, and expression.<sup>53</sup> Perfumes are materialized not only by the transformation of raw materials but in the worlds of bureaucracy and marketing as well. Social scientists Nadia Endrissat and Claus Noppeney followed the making of an artistic perfume by Humiecki & Graef around the emotion trust and found that perfume is as much influenced by the world of flora and fauna as it is photographers, packaging designers, and desks.<sup>54</sup> The keyword “trust” is not irrelevant to sleep: we must trust our environment, we must feel safe, in order to fall asleep in the first place. And yet in the midst of all these materializations, we cannot escape or ignore the ephemerality of either trust, an affect, or sleep, a behaviour, or scent, a chemical interaction with air.

Trust is the vista to the room of perfume—it points outwards to our sense of being at ease in the world, and it is the emotion that Tellenbach used to describe atmosphere in relation to scent in the first place: it is the “most subtle of games,” he wrote, whereby a child learns to recognize home in the smell of their mother or

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51. Harry Barbee, Mairead Eastin Moloney and Thomas R. Konrad, “Selling Slumber: American Neoliberalism and the Medicalization of Sleeplessness,” *Sociology Compass*, vol. 12, no. 10, 2018, p. 6, quoted in Sikka, 2021, p. 106, p. 110. Sikka defines the Quantified Self as a “Silicon Valley based social movement turned cognitive worldview in which technologies are used to self-surveil life processes and produce numerical outputs that can then be productively manipulated and/or hacked in ways that facilitate normative behavioural change.” *Ibid.*, p. 110.

52. Perfume was estimated to have a \$32.8 billion industry in 2020 and sleep a \$12 billion+ industry in 2022. See “Perfume Industry: Trends, Growth, and Challenges,” *440 Industries*, 6 December 2021, <https://440industries.com/perfume-industry-trends-growth-and-challenges/>; “The \$12B+ sleep industry, explained,” *The Hustle*, 16 February 2022, <https://thehustle.co/02162022-sleep-industry/> (both accessed 7 November 2022).

53. Evelyn S. Dorman, “Perfume,” *How Products Are Made*, vol. 2, <http://www.madehow.com/Volume-2/Perfume.html> (accessed 7 November 2022).

54. Nada Endrissat and Claus Noppeney, “Materializing the Immaterial: Relational Movements in a Perfume’s Becoming,” Paul R. Carile et al. (eds.), *How Matter Matters: Objects, Artifacts, and Materiality in Organization Studies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 59. The perfume eventually materialized as “Blask” by Humiecki & Graef.

a baby bird its nest.<sup>55</sup> The smell of trust, this subtle game, this intrinsic connection, and perhaps this sense all on its own, seems distinctly animal rather than vegetable, an assertion that can be made, too, for the smell of sleep. Referencing historian Alain Corbin, David Howes notes that animal scents progressively became replaced by a proclivity for vegetable scents in Western modernity, which “laid the foundation for ‘the bourgeois control of the sense of smell and the construction of a schema of perception based on the preeminence of sweetness.’” The result of this, writes Howes, was to replace an elaborate premodern olfactory semiotics with a binary olfactory hedonics of pleasing/displeasing scents.<sup>56</sup> Joining scent with sleep within the realm of night knowledge brings the animal smell back to scent while placing it in the realm of what archaeologist and aromatherapist John J. Steele characterizes as smell’s “direct intuition,”<sup>57</sup> an emanation or extension, perhaps, of scent and of dreams themselves; the tangle between the two as an airier form of sense and knowledge-making.

Though heavily materialized in perfume and sleep industries, respectively, both sleep and scent are amorphous and at times ineffable behaviour and media; therefore, reading them as atmospheres rather than objects helps us experience their inflections. Atmosphere, as Böhme writes, very much has to do with airs: the airs of the upper atmosphere in meteorology, the airs that hang in the mood of a place.<sup>58</sup> An atmosphere is what hinges between subject and object and never quite closes the gap; it is a *tuned space*, as Böhme characterizes it, and moves in the verbs *to imbue*, *to bathe*, *to unify*, and in the nouns *surplus*, *aura*, *emanation*, *attunement*, and *resonance*; an atmosphere is always “something more.”<sup>59</sup> Sleep, too, is a *tuned space*, to use Böhme’s description, one that is the “something more” of our waking world. What this tangle of scents—from orange flower to menstrual blood to vetiver to trust—speaks is the enlivened environment that captures us in a surplus net of experience beyond the more obvious, enlightened worlds of sight and day. With that, I exit these rooms and vistas of perfumes and enter the more complicated, volatile, and contested realms that scent and sleep bring in order to further draw out the lessons that they have to impart

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55. Tellenbach, 1981, p. 230, p. 229.

56. Howes, 2003, p. 201.

57. John J. Steele quoted in conversation with Jill Cloutier, “Fragrance and Transformation with Aromatherapist John J. Steele,” *Sustainable World Radio*, podcast, 3 January 2017.

58. Böhme, 2017, p. 2.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

about less extractive, more potently fallow (“fallow” as de-sown rather than unsown) ways of communicating and extending.

### CONDITIONS TO BREATHE, CONDITIONS TO BE

If “the West” were a room, what would it smell like? What behaviours would be enacted and acceptable? Who would be awake, who asleep, who in the sensory twilights of all the motions between? John J. Steele opens a text on *perfumeros*—a South American shaman who uses perfume to heal—by asserting that the West is experiencing an olfactory renaissance with a renewed interest in aromachology, the ways that behaviour and scent intersect.<sup>60</sup> “The West has been nose-blind too long,” he writes.<sup>61</sup> Classen et al. bring this observation further by asking: how “could heightened olfactory consciousness be dangerous to the established social order in the West?”<sup>62</sup> The West, as used in their text, is not only a place but an entire context, an atmosphere, an ethos “not confined to the ‘developed’ countries” but anywhere consumer capitalism has infiltrated.<sup>63</sup> In the words of Sylvia Wynter, one of the most significant (decolonial) philosophers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this geography is largely dominated by “our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself.”<sup>64</sup> Another way to phrase the opening question, then, is: what does capital-M man smell like? Whatever the aroma may be, I would rather smell the demon of Fuseli’s nightmare. Below, I will attempt to envision what other techniques of air and behaviour are able to both heal and dishevel harmful settler-colonial, extractive technologies of the West—this will involve examinations of tear gas and air conditioning, the “civilizing process” of deodorization, the exhaust of pollution, and the violence implied in who can and cannot breathe. Finally, I will venture into vistas of more ancient atmospheric conditioners and conditions of sage, spirits, and rites of passage.

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60. John J. Steele, “*Perfumeros* and the Sacred Use of Fragrance in Amazonian Shamanism,” Jim Drobnick (ed.), *The Smell Culture Reader*, New York, Berg, 2006, p. 228.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 234.

62. Classen et al., 1994, p. 4.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

64. Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol. 3, no. 3, Michigan State University Press, Fall 2003, p. 257.

I begin in a quotidian room: an air-conditioned bedroom. The politics of air are intertwined with the politics of sleeping. In a 2021 Sleep Salon talk hosted by The Sociability of Sleep, literary researcher Benjamin Reiss noted that sleep, though often depicted as unproductive, manages nevertheless to exhaust resources, with a particular focus on the use of air conditioning to encourage better sleep in hot seasons and climates.<sup>65</sup> In using a methodology of rooms, it is hard not to recognize that rooms, too, pollute and exhaust. In his book *The Smell of Risk*, Hsu locates “the atmospheric turn” in the work of philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, who, as Hsu writes, “identifies the deployment of mustard gas during World War I as the beginning of a contemporary era marked by ‘the principle of air conditioning.’”<sup>66</sup> To Sloterdijk, the atmosphere is not only literally being exhausted but also progressively more weaponized, leading to situations where we “simply cannot breathe.”<sup>67</sup> In her article, “Settler Atmosphericities,” Southern Paiute anthropologist Kristen Simmons focuses on those who suffer most from weaponized atmospheres. Noting the use of tear gas at the Dakota Access Pipeline Protests at Standing Rock as well as the use of Odortec’s Skunk water, a weaponized malodorous, by Israel Defense Forces on Palestinians and by police on Black protesters in Ferguson and Baltimore, Simmons writes that “the conditions we breathe in are collective and unequally distributed .... settler atmosphericities are the normative and necessary violences found in settlement—accruing, adapting, and constricting indigenous and black life.”<sup>68</sup> What do these instances of violence have to do with something as quotidian as air conditioning? As Hsu points out, atmospheric engineering relates to “deodorized settler architectures” that played a role in “the civilizing process.”<sup>69</sup> This civilizing process includes where we sleep, how, and with whom—for example, Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate technoscience scholar Kim TallBear points to “compulsory monogamy and state-

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65. “Sleep Salon 2: The History (of the Future) of Sleep,” presentation and discussion hosted by The Sociability of Sleep, 13 October 2021, <https://sociabilityofsleep.ca/sleep-salons> (accessed 7 November 2022).

66. Peter Sloterdijk, *Foams: Spheres III: Plural Spherology*, Wieland Hoban (trans.), Los Angeles, Semiotext(e), 2016, p. 95, quoted in Hsu, 2020, p. 7.

67. Peter Sloterdijk, “Airquakes,” Eduardo Mendieta (trans.), *Environment and Planning D Society and Space*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2009, p. 41, quoted in Kristen Simmons, “Settler Atmosphericities,” *Society for Cultural Anthropology*, 20 November 2017, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/settler-atmospherics> (accessed 7 November 2022).

68. *Ibid.*

69. Hsu, 2020, p. 173.

sanctioned marriage” as “settler sexuality.”<sup>70</sup> Sex, sleep, and scent are tied together by the senses and by critical kinship; the three share a (bed)room, an atmosphere, as Tracey Emin’s *My Bed* waftily demonstrates.

Drawing on work by poet Brandy Nālani McDougall and scholars Vicente Diaz, Kēhaulani Kauanui, Elizabeth Povinelli, and others, Hsu observes that colonizers have not only instilled a hierarchy of the senses through the cultivation of olfactory shame but, at the same time, and as an extension thereof, abraded Indigenous spiritual life, including connections to memory, place, and kin.<sup>71</sup> There is an insidious relation, therefore, between air deodorants, climatized air, disrupted climates, and disrupted kinships in the name of colonization and capitalism, eerily and tragically encapsulated by Eric Garner’s last words, when he was murdered at the hands of police officer Daniel Pantaleo, “I can’t breathe.”<sup>72</sup> Who can’t breathe, and why? When did this start being okay? Breath and air, as I opened on, tie us all together, us as in humans, inhumans, atmospheres, environments, creatures. In *The Fall of Sleep*, Jean-Luc Nancy suggests that sleep, as a behaviour, makes us vegetal ourselves, even mineral,<sup>73</sup> while Anna Tsing notes that “[s]mell is the presence of another in ourselves.”<sup>74</sup> The way that scent and sleep move among and between us points towards co-creating a more expanded sense of justice and responsibility that ensures, at the very least, that one must trust that one can breathe.

Hsu asks: “[w]hat would an equitable and/or decolonial practice of air conditioning look like—or, perhaps more importantly, what would it smell like?”<sup>75</sup> We do not need to look too far to find out. Here: the smell of sage, sweetgrass. Hsu defines smudging as “a spiritual healing ceremony practiced by numerous Indigenous nations [that] challenges us to rethink ... ‘air conditioning’ and olfactory aesthetics.”<sup>76</sup> Smudging is a type of atmospheric engineering that arrived long before marketed air conditioners and long before the mustard gas of World War I; it is a sacred and

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70. Kim TallBear, “Identity Is a Poor Substitute for Relating: Genetic Ancestry, Critical Polyamory, Property, and Relations,” *The Critical Polyamorist*, blog, 13 April 2020, <http://www.criticalpolyamorist.com/homeblog/identity-is-a-poor-substitute-for-relating-genetic-ancestry-critical-polyamory-property-and-relations> (accessed 7 November 2022).

71. Hsu, 2020, p. 155.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

73. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Fall of Sleep*, Charlotte Mandell (trans.), New York, Fordham University Press, 2009, p. 6, p. 44.

74. Tsing, 2021, p. 45.

75. *Ibid.*, p. 154, p. 155, p. 159.

76. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

purifying Indigenous practice, which decolonizes smell, asserts Hsu, by asserting olfaction as a valuable, place-based, and embodied knowledge practice as well as a way of “transforming settler smellscape,” thereby instantiating Indigenous sovereignty.<sup>77</sup> In this way, the scent of sweetgrass, rising and filling the air with its lithe coumarin smoke, is not only a redolent scent but a radical one. Cree/German/Polish artist Cheryl L’Hirondelle collaborated with Plains Cree elder and storyteller Joseph Naytowhow to bring the smell of sage into the night with their work *Yabkâskwan Mikiwahp* (light tipi, 2022), which used hand-held lights scaffolded by the smoke of Prairie sage to create an atmosphere for storytelling, teachings, and song, not for the sake of a stand-alone art piece but to beckon in and nurture spacious behaviours and modes of being (see Fig. 7). This is a way of working with scent and smoke in order to enter into dialogue with the night and its communal, extensive possibilities.



Fig. 7. Cheryl L’Hirondelle (with Joseph Naytowhow), *yabkâskwan mîbkiwap* (light pole tipi), mixed media/performative and community engaged participatory action, Bush Gallery, 2016. Photo© Aaron Leon.

77. *Ibid.*, p. 192–183. The scent industry, too, has begun to take the decolonization of smell more seriously. The Scent and Society program at The Institute of Art and Olfaction, for example, is involved in “unlearning the Euro-centric narrative of perfumery by presenting research and practices from around the world.” They provide a link to a map where one can find perfumery resources not only in Europe but globally. “Scent and Society,” The Institute of Art and Olfaction, <https://artandolfaction.com/scent-and-society> (accessed 7 November 2022).



Sociologist Vanessa Watts notes that smudging does not only open relationships between humans but also presents “a place-based ... method of exchange between humans, non-humans and the spirit world.”<sup>78</sup> L’Hirondelle and Naytowhow’s piece, plus Watts’s observation, are profound olfactory thinking, which has the power to affect relations between environments, histories, legacies, futures, and the living and the dead. Tellenbach picks up on this when he notes that no other sense detects death as much as smell does when encountering the putrefaction of a corpse, an animal smell indeed.<sup>79</sup> The way that scent and sleep cross our boundaries by bringing in unwanted smells also speaks to the boundary-crossing nature of rites of passage, such as funerals.<sup>80</sup> For Gell, a dream is always a clue to the hidden and therefore to the spirit world, while the tenuous nature of scent links it to the tenuous nature of spirits themselves.<sup>81</sup> Crossing boundaries is perhaps terrifying but also necessary, especially under the harmful, wasteful practices of late capitalism where the toxic smell of the air, and the exhaustion our bodies feel, tells us it is time to crossover into different ways and worlds apart from the linear mandates of the West to “develop” and “progress.” We need more, not less, rites of passage.

In addition to artists and scholars, poets are working on the decolonization of air. Kanaka Maoli poet Haunani-Kay Trask’s poem “The Broken Gourd” that prefaces this essay intertwines the stench of ecocide with the “spidery moon,” a phrase that succinctly calls into play other beings affected by slow atmospheric violence that we may not consider, such as spiders who spin kinetic, dewy webs, or the watching eye of the moon, the open iris of the night.<sup>82</sup> What we release into the atmosphere returns, for the atmosphere is in constant conversation with us—our skin, our pores, our hair—it permeates our minds and spirits and hearts, just as our words and materials and exhausts collect in the atmosphere and are reintroduced into our bodies, and the bodies of others, in turn. This leads me to exit a method of rooms and vistas altogether in order to enter another register of both scent and sleep, adjacent to the methodology of space I’ve been so far applying: time.

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78. Vanessa Watts, “Smudge This: Assimilation, State-Favoured Communities and the Denial of Indigenous Spiritual Lives,” *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2016, p. 151, quoted in Hsu, 2020, p. 184.

79. Tellenbach, 1981, p. 228.

80. Classen et al., 1994, p. 123.

81. Gell, 2006, p. 407, p. 404.

82. Haunani-Kay Trask, “The Broken Gourd,” *Night Is a Sharkskin Drum*, Talanoa: Contemporary Pacific Literature, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2002, p. 12.

## NIGHT/TIME

Maybe night is not the opposite of day, but its closest kin. Twinned, the two also diverge, each bringing its own sensuous habits and habitats. In his 1888 essay “A Midnight Ramble,” naturalist William Hamilton Gibson writes, “[m]y first midnight walk was a revelation, and a severe shock to my comfortable self-conceit.”<sup>83</sup> Among these shocks are creatures and phenomena specific to the night, such as the evening primrose, whose same phosphorescence is found also in “luminous moulds, mushrooms, and toadstools.”<sup>84</sup> Night-blooming flora such as honeysuckle, orchids, and tubular flowers all open up to attract a creature of the night: the moth. The night world presents a smellscape and landscape different from the day while continuous to it. Two things especially pique my curiosity about Gibson’s walk and the way he writes with the midnight: first, how Gibson frames the flora and fauna of the night as kin, and secondly, how the night recalls underworlds, bringing in a register of defamiliarity and secrecy; just as there is “olfactory epistemology,” as Hsu suggests,<sup>85</sup> there is an epistemology of the night. One way to see the nuances of the night is to enter its rhythms. As such, I will take us further into the midnight garden, not so much as a space but as a timescape.

It seems natural to many of us that when we want to tell the time, we use our eyes: we look at a clock or we look at the dimming day. Would it be possible to locate time with other senses? Our circadian rhythm, following a roughly 24-hour cycle, posits sleep as a pause from the daytime metronome and a keeper of looser hours. Could smell, too, be used to detect not only atmosphere and space but time itself? Classen et al. discuss exactly this when they note how Adaman Islanders, located between India and Myanmar, measure seasons in the odours of flowers, where distinct periods of the year are named after flowers that fill the air with their aroma during a specific time, making, in effect, a calendar of scents.<sup>86</sup> This addresses a seasonal calendar, but what about an hourly calendar more in line with the bodily circadian rhythm that regulates sleep and waking? Here, flowers, too, have been deployed. In a 1907 article entitled “How to Make a Floral Clock,” botanical journalist S. Leonard Bastin

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83. William Hamilton Gibson, “A Midnight Ramble,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, 1 December 1888, p. 140.

84. *Ibid.*, p. 152.

85. Hsu, 2020, p. 6.

86. Classen et al., 1994, p. 95–96.

outlines a method dating from eighteenth-century Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus, who devised a clock based on different flowers arranged in a circle that opened their petals at different times of the day during the summer, allowing time to be marked by which flower had bloomed last, starting with Hawkweed at 6 am and ending with Catchfly (*Silene noctiflora*) to mark 5 pm (see Fig. 8).<sup>87</sup>

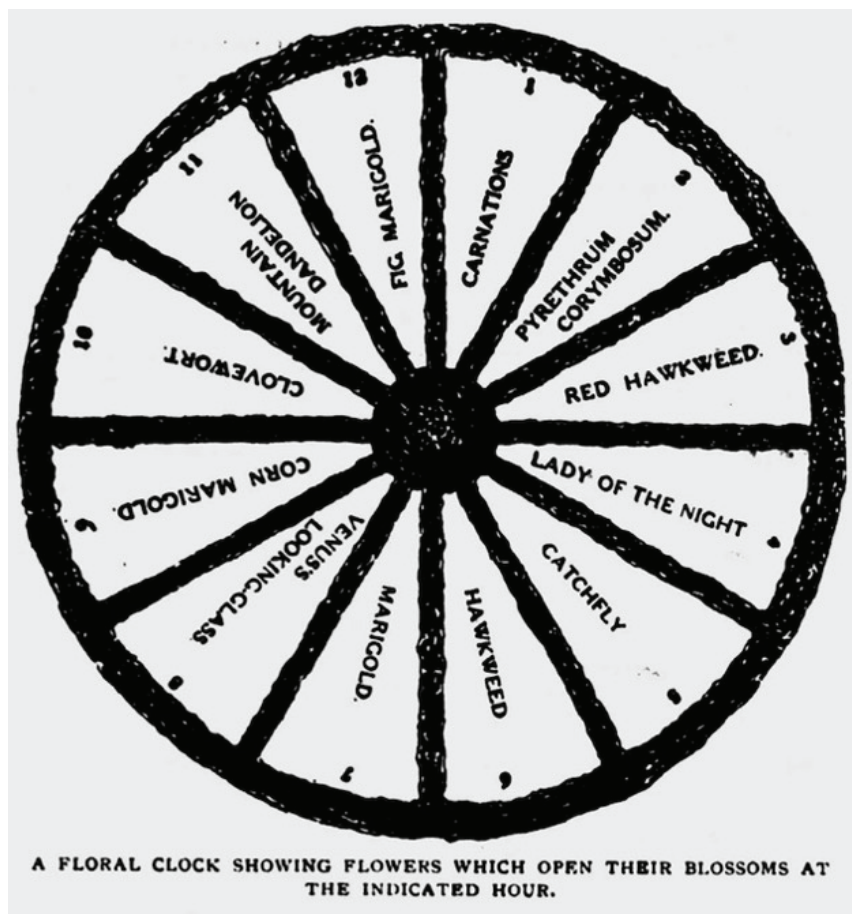


Fig. 8. A Floral Clock, image from S. Leonard Bastin, “How to Make a Floral Clock,” *Strand Magazine: An Illustrated Monthly*, London, vol. 31, no. 186, June 1906, p. 712.

87. S. Leonard Bastin, “How to Make a Floral Clock,” *Strand Magazine: An Illustrated Monthly*, London, vol. 31, no. 186, June 1906, p. 712–713.

The difference between the Adaman Islanders' clock and the eighteenth-century European floral clock, however, is not only the different increments of time they measure but what senses do the measuring. For the Adaman Islanders, it is scent, but for the floral clock it is the sight of the petals as they unfurl. I would be curious to sense a floral clock that uses open petals as a more olfactory trace. In both clocks, however, we notice how, according to Tellenbach, fragrance allows us to enter "the dominion of the moment"<sup>88</sup>—similarly, sleep does exactly this, as it interjects its own continuous present, brimming over into waking with the ash of dreams.

Fragrance and dreams teach us about how registers not only of knowledge but of time are significantly mixed: "a fragrance can forecast something," writes Tellenbach, and is therefore "a sensorium of premonition and expectation,"<sup>89</sup> not unlike dreams that have been used all over the world as a mode of divination or magical attraction, including the Trobriand and Umeda methods discussed previously. For Gell, "where the historian reconstructs the past, the diviner tries to re-establish contact with it directly as an eternal present."<sup>90</sup> The atmosphere that scent and sleep creates may, in fact, be best described by how they constantly ask us to come into and be in trust with the knot of time/s we exist within as relations. For Böhme, a way to characterize both the tones and emanations of atmosphere are to talk about them in terms of *ekastases*, which have less to do with form or substance than the ways that things go forth from themselves: the ways in which time becomes a presence.<sup>91</sup> He writes that "for this the ancients had the beautiful expression *parousia*. Thus, for Aristotle, 'light is the parousia of fire.'"<sup>92</sup> The moon is the parousia of night. The difference between properties and *ekastases*, notes Böhme, is the difference between convex and concave: the former is in relation to the body it encloses and the latter is an outwards movement in relation to the surrounding space.<sup>93</sup> Both scent and sleep, as we have sensed throughout, open us to the ways we go forth from ourselves into more defamiliar incantations of presence, space, and time, and how all of this can be rearranged and met again on its own terms.

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88. Tellenbach, 1981, p. 223.

89. *Ibid.*, p. 224.

90. Gell, 2006, p. 409.

91. Böhme, 2017, p. 19.

92. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

93. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

## THE ABSOLUTE

To conclude this foray into scent and sleep, I have one last question to ask, and perhaps it is the most obvious one. Nancy suggests that the sleeping self is the “absolute” self, “*ab-solutum*, it is a detachment from everything.”<sup>94</sup> In this detachment, sleeping also connects us to the other sleeping bodies around us, the presence of absence, and therefore is perhaps the ultimate link and connector in that it demands nothing, offers nothing, but just is. In scent speak, an “absolute” is the most concentrated form of a fragrance material, such as jasmine processed by means of enfleurage or extraction.<sup>95</sup> If we take Nancy’s assertion at face value and add scent, we could ask: what is the scent of sleep?

To unfold this question, we must address the theme of translation. Through this essay, I have been translating both sleep and scent to waking and words, unfamiliar territories to both, as I have pointed out, but this exercise reveals its own monsters. Translating both serves to presence (as in *parousia*) reems of strange and fascinating descriptions—one need only look to dream journals or to scent blogs and perfume reviews, which can never totally equate the momentary, singular experiences of sleep or scent. The literature of mulsemmedia—“multiple sensorial media”—reveals the difficulty of translating scent not only to words but also to the world of tech, such as gaming and videos, a problem that requires synaesthetic solutions.<sup>96</sup> Scentee Balloon, for example, is a device that attaches to smartphones, using soundwaves to deliver scent to its user.<sup>97</sup> These translations themselves, especially as works in progress, are their own feats. As Gell writes, “[s]omewhere in between the stimulus and the sign a place must be found for the restricted language of smells, traces which unlike words only partially detach themselves from the world of objects to which they refer.”<sup>98</sup> Where is this place and how do we know when we hold the key to its lush alphabets?

I have been advocating for night knowledge throughout this essay in part for its potential to explore more intuitive avenues. Putting together two themes like scent and sleep, that may otherwise appear askance, brings in intimacies, chords, and

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94. Nancy, 2009, p. 15

95. “Fragrance Terminology Guide,” *Belle Aire Creations*, 7 January 2016, <https://belleaire-creations.com/fragrance-terminology-guide> (accessed 7 November 2022).

96. Estêvão B. Saleme et al., “Mulsemmedia DIY: A Survey of Devices and a Tutorial for Building Your Own Mulsemmedia Environment,” *ACM Computing Surveys*, vol. 52, no. 3, June 2019, p. 1.

97. *Ibid.*, p. 10

98. Böhme, 2017, p. 401.

connections that we may not have realized before stepping into their full, luscious, awkward, and difficult-to-translate worlds. This, too, is part of the tricky literacy that night knowledge suggests. If I could write a sequel to this essay, I would fold in work on the specific herbs used in dream incubation in ancient Greek Aesculapian cults as a knowledge of scent-and-sleep; or the development of the opiate laudanum in Early Modern medicine, which is indicative of how sleep and scent, when combined, not only mix animal and vegetable kingdoms but various registers of knowledge-making, including esoteric writings, folk knowledge, and know-how passed among women and those historically excluded from institutional power.<sup>99</sup> Not only topics but other methodologies are rife for exploration in this area, such as the bawdy methodology suggested by Indigenous studies scholar Vicente Diaz as he proposes a particularly redolent scent, the anus, as a historiographic model for Oceania in a turn both absurdist and provoking—"the *Anal*s School of Pacific History, or the long *derriere*," writes Diaz—a cheeky, let's say, and counter-intellectual challenge to modes of thought and sense that are colonial, heteronormative, or patriarchal.<sup>100</sup> The above sit alongside the already roomier synaesthetic methodologies of transcription and translation suggested by mulsemia and the volatility of unsettling airscapes with smokes such as sweetgrass. Further studies on scent could help point towards ways of refiguring who and what counts as agential altogether, a theme brought forward in a study by biologists Ayumi Nagashima et al., which found that plants not only give off odor but can sense odor as well: whereas animals have particular membrane receptors to do this work, plant olfaction works more on a molecular level.<sup>101</sup> According to John Steele, scent is an extension of touch as it is of taste, and developing synaesthesia is one way to enter alternate awarenesses such as clairvoyance, which, Steele indicates, is the capacity to sense extra octaves of perception,<sup>102</sup> ones that very much have to do with time, with the dominion of the moment that stands outside of itself in the *ekstasis* of

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99. Elizabeth K. Hunter, "'To Cause Sleepe Safe and Shure': Dangerous Substances, Sleep Medicine and Poison Theories in Early Modern England," *Social History of Medicine*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2021, p. 479.

100. Vicente M. Diaz, "Sniffing Oceania's Behind," *The Contemporary Pacific*, vol. 24, no. 2, Fall 2012, p. 329, p. 337.

101. Ayumi Nagashima, et al., "Transcription Regulators Involved in Responses to Volatile Organic Compounds in Plants," *Journal of Biological Chemistry*, vol. 294, no. 7, 15 February 2019, p. 2256–2266.

102. "Fragrance and Transformation with Aromatherapist John Steele," 3 January 2017, <https://sustainableworldradio.com/fragrance-and-transformation-with-aromatherapist-john-steele/> (17:30).

what's to come. Sleep, for its part, still remains a mystery to science.<sup>103</sup> Perhaps this is because we are trying to figure it out from the perspective of waking. Perhaps to know sleep, just as to know scent, we have to enter it and surrender our quest for knowledge on its own ground. It is exactly the monsters and visions that early philosophers so dreaded within sleep that make it most rich.

The question still hangs in the air: what is the scent of sleep? When I began contemplating this, I immediately found that Dreamscentz by Givaudin is trying to literalize this otherwise poetic thought game. Still in the making, Dreamscentz conducts extensive research into the links between sleep and scent to purportedly help us sleep better through the power of aromatherapy.<sup>104</sup> Givaudin uses Headspace technology to capture not only the scents of particular plants but whole atmospheres. Already, they are attempting to unlock the scentscape of forests with their Phytogaia project and the scentscape of oceans with Thalassogaia.<sup>105</sup> Sleep is next. Headspace technology is wild. Thomas Dunkley, aka The Candy Perfume Boy, notes that “Headspace acts as a fragrant camera that captures and decodes the molecules in the air,” using a hollow sphere that forms an airtight seal around the desired material to read and reproduce its exact chemical make-up (see Fig. 9).<sup>106</sup>



Fig. 9. Headspace technology moodboard: the scent of a rose, Headspace apparatus, night sky. Collage author's own.

103. Antonio Zadra and Robert Stickgold, *When Brains Dream. Exploring the Science and Mystery of Sleep*, Prince Frederick, MD, HighBridge, 2021.

104. “Changing the Way We Sleep with Dreamscentz,” *Givaudan*, <https://www.givaudan.com/fragrance-beauty/fragrance-technologies/health-and-wellbeing/dreamscentz> (accessed 7 November 2022).

105. “Innovating with Nature,” *Givaudan*, <https://www.givaudan.com/fragrance-beauty/innovating-with-nature> (accessed 7 November 2022).

106. Thomas Dunkley, “So...Headspace Technology is Pretty Cool...,” *The Candy Perfume Boy*, <https://thecandyperfumeboy.com/2015/02/23/so-headspace-technology-is-pretty-cool> (accessed 7 November 2022).



This technique is in fact more absolute than an absolute, which always changes the smell of the thing itself through the process of making it a scent. Headspace, by contrast, is direct and unmetaphorical, flawless, harmless, and completely awake. A perfect translator. But I prefer to go to the place where scents sleep. Where all the pores are open. Where the stars are vocal and real.

Scent is about many things that are not scent. Orange flowers are about the sun and waking; lavender is taking in the night; vetiver remembers everything that came before; and the moonish jasmine is as luminous as it is lusty. In ode to the mess of scent and sleep, I am ending with less perfected methods. For I see the scent of sleep as parenthetical, where the parentheses face outwards rather than in, concave rather than convex, a change that would make the quote by Nancy that prefaces this essay both social and stellar.<sup>107</sup> Scent like sleep drifts off—it dissipates from the skin as waking dissipates from the body, gone too fast to know. In all these relations that leave too soon, too fugitive to want to stay, scent and sleep are wild blooms that practice the literacy of less material realms, redistributing the sensible and sensate in our atmospheres, webs, and ways. We only have to close our eyes and open outwards to breathe the night.

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107. Nancy, 2009, p. 27.

# The Scent of Sleep. On Night Knowledge and Its Atmospheres

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## ABSTRACT:

What does scent have to say concerning the wider networks involved in the lived experiences of sleep? In this essay, I discuss the connection of scent to sleepers and sleepers to scent, not only in the ways that scent may enter our dreams to change them up but also the ways that technologies and methodologies of air, perfume, breath, or exhaust connect us as sleepers to the worlds of botany, synthetics, and other realms of kinship and sense that exist apace from dominant modes of waking or seeing. If sleep and scent have historically been situated as “empty” and “passive,” this essay aims to show how full, vital, and roomy these spaces can be. In this line, I move scent and sleep through an atmospheric methodology of rooms to unravel their wider relationship to *night knowledge*, an epistemology that seeks alternatives to enlightened knowledges of the day, reaching into secrets and spirits. To do so, my archive involves theory, technology, perfume blogs, artists, dreamers, anthropologists, activists, poets, architects, and botanical, animal, and synthetic elements. Finally, I ask: if sleep had a scent, what would it be?

## RÉSUMÉ :

Qu'est-ce que l'odeur a à dire sur les réseaux plus larges impliqués dans les expériences vécues du sommeil ? Dans cet essai, je discute du lien entre l'odeur et les dormeurs et entre les dormeurs et l'odeur, non seulement de la manière dont l'odeur peut entrer dans nos rêves pour les modifier, mais aussi de la manière dont les technologies et les méthodologies de l'air, du parfum, de l'haleine ou des gaz d'échappement nous relient, en tant que dormeurs, aux mondes de la botanique, de la synthèse et à d'autres

domaines de la parenté et du sens qui existent en dehors des modes dominants de l'éveil ou de la vision. Si le sommeil et les odeurs ont été historiquement considérés comme « vides » et « passifs », cet essai vise à montrer à quel point ces espaces peuvent être pleins, vitaux et spacieux. Dans cette ligne, je déplace l'odeur et le sommeil à travers une méthodologie atmosphérique de pièces pour démêler leur relation plus large avec la connaissance nocturne, une épistémologie qui cherche des solutions de rechange aux connaissances éclairées du jour, en atteignant les secrets et les esprits. Pour ce faire, mes archives impliquent la théorie, la technologie, les blogs sur les parfums, les artistes, les rêveurs, les anthropologues, les activistes, les poètes, les architectes et les éléments botaniques, animaux et synthétiques. Enfin, je pose la question suivante : si le sommeil avait un parfum, quel serait-il ?

#### **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:**

Sandra Huber is a writer, researcher, and educator. She currently teaches in the Fine Arts department at Concordia University and holds a PhD in interdisciplinary humanities, where she focused on the media and techniques of contemporary witchcraft. Sandra wrote *Assembling the Morrow: A Poetics of Sleep* (Talonbooks, 2014), based on a collaboration with sleep scientists in Lausanne, Switzerland. She currently lives in Tio'tia'ke/Montreal and is trying to find more time for fresh air, astrology, cats, and sunsets. [sandrahuber.com](http://sandrahuber.com).