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# TOWARD A HISTORIOGRAPHY OF DREAMS: A DISCURSIVE PERSPECTIVE

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## The State of the Art and a New Direction

Historical overviews of dreams beyond religious or natural scientific perspectives are rare and limited to specific issues, time periods, and geographical areas with the exception of a few works that discuss a more nuanced history of dream theory and the evolution of dream studies in different fields.<sup>1</sup> As restricted as the history of dreams is, the historiography of dreams is even worse off. Astonishingly, Google Scholar searches for “historiography of dreams” and “historiography of dreaming” only give fourteen total results!<sup>2</sup> There are many key historiographic changes

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<sup>1</sup> Such as the edited volume *Dreams and History* by Daniel Pick and Lyndal Roper (London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Both accessed September 6, 2023, from the United States. The total number of results was the amount of hits minus duplicate results (different authors from the same edited volume were considered one result) and minus non-English results (which only “hit” because of references to these other results). The best treatment of the historiography of dreams that I have found is the volume edited by Giorgia Morgese, Giovanni Pietro Lombardo, and Hendrika Vande Kemp entitled *Histories of Dreams and Dreaming* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), but with a narrow focus on the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries and the science of dreaming. And others with any significant degree of discussion (which is still very limited), three edited volumes, are restricted to the ancient and early modern periods and to the locales of the Byzantine and the Atlantic world. These include Ann Marie Plane and Leslie Tuttle’s *Dreams, Dreamers, and Visions: The Early Modern Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); George T. Calofonos’s *Dreaming in Byzantium and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315578064>; and Bronwen Neil and Eva Anagnostou-Laoutides’s *Dreams, Memory and Imagination in Byzantium* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2018).

that have yet to be addressed in the study of dreams that are worthy of consideration as they reflect wider intellectual developments underlying academic thought that often appear as tacit knowledge. It is our premodern to post-postmodern epistemes<sup>3</sup> that have impacted the history of dream research via the varying constructs of the “dream” that I will mainly discuss here in a primarily exploratory way to suggest how a historiography of dreams might develop. In order to create a more self-reflective history, these epistemes should be brought to the fore.

Following the thought of Michel Foucault, I examine discourses through a “genealogy” of dream research, which demonstrates dominant epistemes underlying shifts in intellectual thought. “Genealogy” is defined by Foucault as “a form of history which reports on the constitution of knowledge, discourses, fields of objects, etc., without having to relate to a subject which transcends the field of events and occupies it with its hollow identity throughout history,” which has been systematically applied in the field of discourse analysis.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, I will not be defining the term “dream,” which might convey a misleading red thread in history, but rather I will look at how the concept has been historically discursively constructed in dream history and research. Discourses “are to be treated as practices which systematically form the object of which they speak.”<sup>5</sup> This emphasizes the role of language, which, in this article, is English and its historical context in the Western world. Epistemes, according to Foucault, refer to that which “defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge.”<sup>6</sup> Epistemes are the implicit rules of what counts as legitimate knowledge, such as the dictate of naturalism in order to be considered scientific, which change through time. Of course, there have been different narratives within dream history. However, here, I am concerned with *dominant* discourses in historical perspective, which should be kept in mind when I speak in some generalities. And though more complex approaches have developed in dream

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<sup>3</sup> The periodizations of intellectual history are mainly heuristic, of course. The premodern through post-postmodern epistemes simultaneously exist in past and present discourse.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in translation in Siegfried Jäger, “Discourse and Knowledge,” in *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, eds. Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer (London: Sage, 2001), 37–38.

<sup>5</sup> Foucault quoted in translation in Jäger, “Discourse and Knowledge,” 39.

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 168.

studies than those outlined here, these discourses still impact a lot of research today. The line of inquiry is: How has the “dream” as an object of study been constructed in the history of dream research? What are some important dominant epistemes that have impacted these discourses?

### The Localization of Dreams: Internal/External and Subjective/Objective

The ascription or denial of the significance of dreams appears in many historical discussions and primary material. This is closely related to whether dreams are constructed as stemming from external or internal sources and whether those sources are fashioned as objective or subjective forms of knowledge. The external/internal in terms of (meta) physical space (relative to the self) is not consistently mapped onto the objective/subjective in terms of epistemological status, so these things must be considered separately. The localization of dreams and how this is connected to legitimation discourses is the first historiographical aspect that I will explore.

Among the primary ways that dreams have been constructed in historical accounts is in terms of external supernatural causes. This is because, from ancient to contemporary times, people have often framed dreams as prophetic, carriers of omens, or as messages from supernatural beings. In these contexts, a dream was “received” rather than “had.” Dreams were taken as legitimate sources of knowledge precisely because there was thought to be some external force beyond the self that was operative in their manifestation that gave them a privileged place as knowledge. This is evidenced by the fact that most societies have differentiated between their own, unimportant dreams and significant dreams originating outside the self.<sup>7</sup>

Like externalizing dreams, localizing dreams in the internal is a discourse found throughout time. In modern Western discourse, internalization occurred via localizing dreams first primarily in the mind, associated with the subjective, and then in the body as the objective,

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<sup>7</sup> Patrick McNamara, *Dreams and Visions* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2016), 41.

which fed the delegitimation of dreams as religiously significant. This is intimately related to wider discourses on legitimate knowledge and the modern construction of “science” in the nineteenth century and the establishment of the scientific episteme, placed in a cosmic order of natural, material, and objective knowledge.<sup>8</sup> And this, in turn, was part of a larger process of the secularization of society, which has historically been understood as a separation from religion.<sup>9</sup> As religion and science first became conceptually differentiated, between approximately 1620 and 1830, they were discursively assigned the realms of the subjective and objective, respectively (even though, historically, this is not always so clear cut). This was by no means a given; it was part of a purposeful and self-aware movement to carve out intellectual, political, social, and cultural space for science in a world dominated by religion. And methodological objectivity “became generalized, not only as science, but as *fact* and *truth* and *reason*,” while religion was placed in the conceptual space of internal subjectivity, falsehood, and irrationality, that is, as epistemologically insignificant.<sup>10</sup>

Dreams were first internalized in the psyche, which involved an emphasis on the subjective mind over the objective body on the part of early psychologists. Meanwhile, the physical world was increasingly associated with the “real world,” which was rhetorically situated as the sole domain of science at this time, while the mental portion became not only metaphysically but also epistemologically subjectivized, increasingly thought to have tenuous connections to reality. The rhetorical and discursive reaction on the part of early psychologists was to frame psychology as more scientific, to use more rigorous empirical study, and to objectify the mind localized within the physical world of causal laws (meaning, at this point, that the internal/external division

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<sup>8</sup> For a discussion on how the “cosmic order” or “symbolic universe” serves legitimation, see Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 92–128.

<sup>9</sup> Giorgia Morgese and Giovanni Pietro Lombardo, “History of Dream Research,” in *Histories of Dreams and Dreaming*, eds. Giorgia Morgese, Giovanni Pietro Lombardo, and Hendrika Vande Kemp (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 3–4.

<sup>10</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 235. Emphasis original. For an extensive discussion, see Laura J. Vollmer, [working title] *The Relational Structure of Discourse: The Case of Religion and Science* (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming), chap. 2.

was muddled, and subjectivity/objectivity became the more operative discourse).<sup>11</sup> Dreams were localized in the physical spaces of the brain, the overall nervous system, and sleep posture, for example.<sup>12</sup> The localization of dreams in physical space became particularly salient with Sigmund Freud's publication *The Interpretation of Dreams*, appearing in English in 1913. "Freud's revolution may be viewed as the discovery of a way of locating in the mind objective entities which can be studied like physical things."<sup>13</sup> That said, this was part of the earlier, broader nineteenth-century movement mapping all mental processes onto neural or other physical processes. And demarcating the physical processes of dreams (and other mental phenomena) as mutually exclusive with religious understandings helped the field of psychology gain objectivity and respectability.<sup>14</sup>

This is because scientific advances in the nineteenth century were largely communicated as negations of religious beliefs in order to frame science as authoritative, reacting to the premodern religious episteme.<sup>15</sup> As for dreams, a considerable amount of scientific research has its origins in translating psychological states to physical ones in a direct attempt at refuting "superstitious" and "popular" beliefs,<sup>16</sup> labeling that stigmatizes and delegitimizes religious notions. Correlations between internal, often physical, understandings of dreams and a negation of religious notions (though not always religion in total) can be found in Walter C. Dendy's *On the Phenomena of Dreams and Other Transient Illusions* (1832) and Robert Macnish's *The Philosophy of Sleep* (1834), for instance. In another example, W. Newnham, in *Essay on Superstition* (1830), states that dreams (and other "morbid states") "consist not in variety of spiritual essence, but of the material medium through which

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<sup>11</sup> Doris Kaufmann, "Dreams and Self-Consciousness," in *Biographies of Scientific Objects*, ed. Lorraine Daston, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 70; Vollmer, *The Relational Structure*, chap. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Kaufmann, "Dreams," 75, 80, and passim.

<sup>13</sup> Lawrence Friedman, "Reasons for the Freudian Revolution," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 46, no. 4 (1977): 623, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21674086.1977.11926818>.

<sup>14</sup> On dreams as such, see, e.g., Morgese and Lombardo, "History," 248. On religion and science conceptualized in this way, see Vollmer, *The Relational Structure*, chap. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Vollmer, *The Relational Structure*, chap. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Morgese and Lombardo, "History," 248.

*its manifestations are made.*<sup>17</sup> These correlations continued through the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth until religious explanations of dreams did not feature in general scientific discussion so often. Freud, for example, explained his view on dreams in specific contrast to “pre-scientific” concepts of dreams in terms of the supernatural and spiritual.<sup>18</sup>

Ian Hacking notes that “dreams are made ‘objective’ (...) by embedding them in place,” and via this discursive construction, “dreams are ruthlessly excluded from real life, and cease to be signifiers at all.”<sup>19</sup> Of course, the premodern religious episteme and religious takes on dreams did not disappear from mainstream society overnight, and books on revelatory and other spiritual dreams—like Mrs. Blair’s *Dreams and Dreaming* (1843)—appeared alongside scientific ones. Situated in this tension between a declining religious episteme and a rising scientific one, nineteenth-century people “considered dreams to be meaningless and meaningful, mere physiological artifacts and messages from the great beyond.”<sup>20</sup> By the twentieth century, psychological factors were largely regarded as “explaining away” religion and dreams as “illusions”; Freud positioned both as forms of wish fulfillment, for example.<sup>21</sup> As the naturalist, objective paradigm came to dominate interpretation, dreams were denied the religious import that they had previously enjoyed. The scientific episteme set the rules for what counted as legitimate knowledge, guiding the historical construction of the “dream” in a particular direction: localized in internal processes, associated with the natural, objective, and physical, and communicated as a refutation of religious understandings. This discourse systematically formed the object labeled “dream.”

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<sup>17</sup> William Newnham, *Essay on Superstition* (London: J. Hatchard and Son, 1830), 146. Emphasis original.

<sup>18</sup> E.g., Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1931), 5.

<sup>19</sup> Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 228 and 254.

<sup>20</sup> Jonathan C. Glance, “Revelation, Nonsense or Dyspepsia,” Mercer University, April 29, 2001, [http://faculty.mercer.edu/glance\\_jc/files/academic\\_work/victorian\\_dream\\_theories.htm](http://faculty.mercer.edu/glance_jc/files/academic_work/victorian_dream_theories.htm).

<sup>21</sup> On religion as wish fulfillment, see Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1961), 30–31, 35, 42–43, 52; on dreams, see Freud, *The Interpretation*, *passim*.

## The Imagined Spaces of Dreams: Communication Models and Social Realms

The objectification of dreams places dreams in an impersonal social and communicative space, and this and other imagined spaces of dreams make up another evolving discourse that has shaped the “dream.” Hendrika Vande Kemp, for instance, notes particular historical phases of dream studies based on the spaces of the “transpersonal/superpersonal,” placing the cause of dreams as supernatural; the “interpersonal/extrapersonal,” in which dreams are thought to originate with others who are sending a message; the “impersonal/nonpersonal,” with dreams constructed as an epiphenomenon reducible to physiological and objective factors; and the “intrapersonal,” with the dream understood as a message from the self.<sup>22</sup> We can consider these imagined spaces as they relate to source/cause and “communication forms” (as in the field of communication studies), similar to what Vande Kemp does, but also as metaphysical, epistemological, and/or social spaces. As I have already discussed the philosophical spaces of the internal/external and objective/subjective above, I am primarily thinking of these dimensions as social here, which are sometimes communicative and sometimes simply thought to “occupy” social realms or other imagined spaces. I use “imagined space” to refer to a discursive representation of space experienced through the world of ideation, a subjective demarcation, such as in Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities” or Edward Said’s “imagined geographies.”<sup>23</sup> The imagined space of dreams is the perceived place they occupy, such as the communicative space of the impersonal when scientists “distance” themselves from the object of study or the social realm of religion or the religious world as such where the transpersonal dream is sometimes located.

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<sup>22</sup> Hendrika Vande Kemp, “The Dream in Periodical Literature,” *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 17, no. 1 (1981): 88–113, [https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6696\(198101\)17:1%3C88::AID-JHBS2300170111%3E3.o.CO;2-W](https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6696(198101)17:1%3C88::AID-JHBS2300170111%3E3.o.CO;2-W). I discuss Vande Kemp’s more recent research in the conclusion.

<sup>23</sup> There are many, varying uses of the term “imagined space” and related ideas, typically drawing upon Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992) and/or Edward W. Soja’s *Thirdspace* (Cambridge, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 1996).

The transpersonal space of dreams involving the spiritual or supernatural realms evident in religious reflections has, as already mentioned, occupied a lot of historical accounts of dreams. The impersonal space has also received disproportionate attention in the history of dream studies as it relates to natural scientific studies. As we have seen, the religious and scientific epistemes dominated how the dream was constructed in terms of metaphysical and epistemological space, and the same can be said of these social and communicative spaces.

However, psychoanalysts also ascribed significance to dreams because they offered internal insight, an intrapersonal exchange between the conscious and unconscious mind. Even though psychology distanced itself from ideas of religious significance, as discussed above, the notion of intrapersonal dreams was enthusiastically taken up in the New Age and is a theme that still appears in many new religious movements. The importance placed on the intrapersonal space of dreams could be read as a reflection of the rise of “spirituality” as an alternative discursive form of “subjective religiosity,” and New Age religion certainly exhibits this tendency to relocate the sacred at the individual level, often invoking discourse on “spirituality,” as well as positioning dreams as sources of intuition.<sup>24</sup> “Spirituality,” as a term, has historically emphasized interior and experiential knowledge to situate it in a world that rationalized and naturalized religion, as seen in Romanticism and Transcendentalism and continuing as an important discursive strand in contemporary religion. We might interpret the spiritual turn to constitute an episteme of its own in the sense that it has its own rules for what is considered legitimate knowledge, an “epistemological mode” that attributes meaning to life and finds personal significance when scientific epistemology fails, as some have argued.<sup>25</sup> In this way, placing dreams in an intrapersonal, spiritual space serves to relegitimate dreaming in the form of

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<sup>24</sup> Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman, eds., *Religions of Modernity* (Leiden: Brill, 2010); Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture* (New York: SUNY, 1998).

<sup>25</sup> See Simone Schröder, *The Nature Essay* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 111 for the quote and 111–73 for a discussion; and Michal Izak, “Spiritual Episteme,” *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 25, no. 1 (2021): 24–47, <https://doi.org/10.1108/09534811211199583>. Spirituality is also increasingly considered an important discourse in the post-postmodern episteme, also positioned as a reaction to scientific materialism. Alan Kirby, *Digimodernism* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 25.



self-knowledge as distinct from universal scientific knowledge, which is in line with New Age emphasis on antiauthoritarianism and its critique of reductive epistemology found in the sciences.<sup>26</sup> This discursive reading is supported by the many popular publications exhibiting this New Age vibe that position dreams in terms of personal and spiritual growth while drawing upon the natural sciences but ultimately challenging the hegemony of their materialist philosophy, such as Andrew Holecck's *The Lucid Dreaming Workbook* (2020), Julie Loar's *Symbol and Synchronicity* (2021), and Athena Laz's *The Alchemy of Your Dreams* (2021), to name but a few from recent years.

Some other imagined spaces that deserve historiographical consideration relate to “dream engineering” (techniques that alter dreams). Dream engineering—through drug use or lucid-dream-induction techniques, for instance—has been around since antiquity or earlier and can involve various communicative spaces. In contemporary times, this has taken a novel, interpersonal direction in oneirology. In this context, dream engineering sometimes occupies interpersonal space not only because of an exchange between the scientist inducing the state in the dreamer but also because it is used as a tool for social change via creative production, healing, and even advertising. Regarding drugs, there is active research in medicine and quantitative science on the effect of various pharmaceuticals on dreaming.<sup>27</sup> And marketing specialists are testing the modification of purchasing behavior through “targeted dream incubation” and other dream hacking, such as Xbox's Made from Dreams project aimed at inducing dreams about video games.<sup>28</sup> Dream engineering is a relatively new natural scientific approach to

<sup>26</sup> Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman, “Silicon Valley New Age,” in *Religions of Modernity*, eds. Aupers and Houtman (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 165; Aupers and Houtman, *Religions of Modernity*, passim.

<sup>27</sup> E.g., Alain Nicolas and Perrine M. Ruby, “Dreams, Sleep, and Psychotropic Drugs,” *Frontiers in Neurology* 11 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fneur.2020.507495>; and Kamalanand Krishnamurthy and Mannar Jawahar Ponnuswamy, “A Mathematical Exploration into Manipulation and Control of a Bifurcative Dreaming Process,” *International Journal of Dream Research* 6, no. 2 (2013): 110–13, <https://doi.org/10.11588/ijodr.2013.2.9977>. For the history of dream-related drug use, see Gianluca Toro and Benjamin Thomas, *Drugs of the Dreaming* (Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 2007).

<sup>28</sup> Dustin Marlan, “Branding Dreams,” Bill of Health, Harvard Law, October 4, 2022, <https://blog.petrieflom.law.harvard.edu/2022/10/04/branding-dreams/>.

dream studies, which can be seen, in part, as a product of the technological epistemic turn, constituting a technology itself in the sense of applied knowledge. In this context, the historical object “dream” is not “received” nor “had” but “made.”

Current directions in intrapersonal dream engineering also display a technologizing turn. The MIT Media Lab has developed a device called a Dormio to not only induce dreams but direct them according to words or images selected by the dreamer “to augment human creativity,” displaying the personal-growth trope.<sup>29</sup> In this intrapersonal context, the dream is democratized by placing the power of its making in the hands of the individual. While dream engineering has been around for a long time in general history, in the scientific study of dreams, these new developments constitute a shift from a focus on theory and analysis to application that involves reshaping the historical *scientific* object “dream” from impersonal to interpersonal and sometimes intrapersonal spaces.

Another interpersonal aspect contributing to the “dream” construct is dream sharing, used for self-assertion, building a persona, and forming social connections.<sup>30</sup> This has displayed a technologizing turn as well with dream sharing occurring in a new imagined space—cyberspace—which provides further opportunities for such individual and group transformation.<sup>31</sup> Joseph B. Walther’s research on virtual space led him to develop a new communication model, referred to as the “hyperpersonal.”<sup>32</sup> This is characterized as strategic development and editing for optimiz-

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<sup>29</sup> MIT, “Dormio,” accessed September 21, 2023, <https://www.media.mit.edu/projects/sleep-creativity/overview/>.

<sup>30</sup> Ann Marie Plane and Leslie Tuttle, “Introduction,” in *Dreams, Dreamers, and Visions*, eds. Plane and Tuttle (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 8; Jacques Le Goff, *The Medieval Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 229.

<sup>31</sup> E.g., see Shulamit Geller et al., “Dreams Shared on Social Networks During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 20, no. 4 (2023): 3534, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20043534>.

<sup>32</sup> Joseph B. Walther, “Computer-Mediated Communication,” *Communication Research* 23, no. 1 (1996): 3–43, <https://doi.org/10.1177/009365096023001001>. The hyperpersonal is considered a form of interpersonal communication here, but given that reciprocal communication may be delayed or removed altogether (as not every electronic communication receives a response) in addition to the fact that there is the intrapersonal aspect of identity building, it might be considered its own communicative mode.

ing self-presentation, specifically enabled by computer-mediated communication. Research is scarce, however the hyperpersonal has assuredly constructed the dream in a new way, the potential for revision and selective presentation making the hyperpersonal dream specifically mutable, destructible, and biased. That is, a dream shared online can be edited, deleted, or censored for the purposes of self-image, self-promotion, or other self-serving motives that skew presentation, making for a dream that is largely unique to electronic communication. Indeed, online dream sharing has been shown to fulfill such individual goals as bonding, coping, and belonging, with the motives—among other things—of emotional relief, entertainment, to “make oneself more interesting,” or self-expression and the tone of the shared dream reflecting the motives for sharing it, suggestive of the hyperpersonal dream.<sup>33</sup>

The multiple authorship and instability of the narrative along with the decentering and decontextualization of the self in cyberspace may also contribute to another communication model: what might be called the “metapersonal,” by which I mean that it is beyond the bounds of the personal with no single individual or group determining the course of the communication though all can contribute. For instance, Shulamit Geller et al. approach dreams as “both individual creations and group property.”<sup>34</sup> We might ask what a metapersonal dream might look like. Because discourse also features a simultaneously individual and collective communicative mode, we could say the metapersonal dream is the discursive dream, that is, specifically constructed in its variety (as done here). Typically, when we examine a given text, the discourse surrounding a word like “dream” is (at least somewhat) internally coherent. Approaching the internet as text, though, we instead get encyclopedic incoherence (think a Wikipedia entry outlining the various understandings of the “dream”). This collective, incoherent, and remarkably democratic discursive perspective

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<sup>33</sup> For the quote, see Daniel Graf, Michael Schredl, Anja S. Göritz, “Frequency and Motives of Sharing Dreams,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 175 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2021.110699>. See also Geller et al., “Dreams.” The former study does not focus on what is off- or online, but rather general motivations for dream sharing; the latter is specifically regarding dream sharing on social media.

<sup>34</sup> Geller et al., “Dreams.”

is itself discursively constructing the object. And with the technological turn and the explosion of discourse in cyberspace, the metapersonal dream has become ubiquitous.

### Theoretical Paradigms of Dreams: Essentialism and Contextualism

Another historiographical consideration is the different theoretical paradigms applied to the nature of dreams, including essentialism and contextualism, respectively situated in modern and postmodern epistemes, which, like in the other cases, are sometimes connected to discourses of authority and power. The discussion on the contextualism and essentialism of dreams, as noted by Daniel Pick and Lyndal Roper, is part of a wider historiographical debate on these paradigms as they relate to human nature more broadly.<sup>35</sup> But it is even bigger than that. Essentialism is an ancient philosophy, and it has been a defining feature of the modern episteme, of Western histories, and even of the formation of academic subjects, making theoretical paradigms a key historiographical consideration in the history of dreams and dream studies.

An essentialist paradigm persisted in the academic study of religion for some time in that religion was treated as something *sui generis*, such as put forth by Mircea Eliade. As Russell McCutcheon explains: "A dominant aspect of the modern discourse on religion is (...) established and maintained by such ideological and rhetorical strategies as dehistoricization, universalization, and decontextualization."<sup>36</sup> Essentialist accounts of religion bled into analyses of dreams. For example, as Eliade puts it, "it has been found that dreams (...) may present (...) a 'religious aura' (...) homologous with the experience of the sacred."<sup>37</sup> Edward Burnett Tylor similarly presented "dreams" and "religion" in essentialist terms, universalized across cultures when he suggested the former was the source of the latter. Andreas Nordin and Pär Bjälke-

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<sup>35</sup> Daniel Pick and Lyndal Roper, "Introduction," in *Dreams and History*, eds. Daniel Pick and Lyndal Roper (London: Routledge, 2004), 15.

<sup>36</sup> Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 28.

<sup>37</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), 17.

bring challenge this predominant historical narrative of dreams, instead emphasizing how “religion” is not a monistic, universalized thing but rather made up of heterogenous parts—exemplifying the contextualist turn—and, as such, argue “religious dreaming” should be approached as “fractioned,” “comprising a range of phenomena.”<sup>38</sup>

This theoretical transition can be seen across the humanities. In anthropology, the overemphasis on cultural continuity eventually gave way to increasing concern of cultural contingency, agency, individuality, and counterculture in an approach to dreams as cultural artifacts.<sup>39</sup> Bernard Lahire’s *The Sociological Interpretation of Dreams* (2020) contextualizes dreams in individuals’ social environments. And while early histories of dreams overwhelmingly focused on scientific or religious perspectives, as noted, historians have recently been more careful to present dreams as highly contextualized in time and place (see note 2). However, contextualism is so paradigmatically “academic” that we seem to forget the context of our contextualism as product—and producer—of postmodernism, meaning its antifoundationalist, antiessentialist, and destructuralist tendencies have tacitly structured our approach to the material and framed contextualism as a prime indicator of legitimate knowledge.

We see a similar move from essentialism to contextualism in the sciences. Freud essentialized the nature of dreams as illusory, the function as wish fulfilment, and the content as symbolic. Though Carl Jung, as well as Freud in some regards, emphasized individual circumstances, he also argued for the universality of archetypes based in the collective unconscious, which is another essentializing notion, an innate and uniting factor across all humanity.<sup>40</sup> This was taken up by many in an

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<sup>38</sup> Andreas Nordin and Pär Bjälkebring, “The Counterintuitiveness of Supernatural Dreams and Religiosity,” *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 21, no. 3–4 (2021): 309–30, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685373-12340114>.

<sup>39</sup> Plane and Tuttle, “Introduction,” 20. For a discussion of the history of the anthropology of dreaming, see Robin E. Sheriff, “The Anthropology of Dreaming in Historical Perspective,” in *New Directions in the Anthropology of Dreaming*, eds. Jeannette Mageo and Robin E. Sheriff (Oxford: Routledge, 2021), 23–49.

<sup>40</sup> Carl Jung, *Dreams* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 77, describes the universality of archetypes and situates the psyche as both personal and collective, though elsewhere he notes some contextual considerations for archetypes as well. E.g., Jung, *Dreams*, 106–9.

essentialist fashion, particularly in dictionaries of dream symbolism. Universality is epitomized in such “keys to dreams,” which make up a lot of popular publications on dreams to this day, often invoking Jung’s name despite his opposition to this approach.<sup>41</sup> Though essentialized dreams remain the dominant trope in popular publications, essentialism in science eventually gave way to the idea of a contextualized nature of dreams, and increasingly, specific variables have been targeted for analysis, especially in the hard sciences. Sometimes, contextualism is so narrowly applied that dreams are entirely individualized, ultimately situated in each person’s given circumstances. This approach already appeared by the late nineteenth century, such as in the case of psychologist Sante De Sanctis, for example, who argued that the “whole person,” including the dreamer’s life experiences, character, habits, passions, and health conditions, plays into dream content, which cannot be interpreted based on specific symbology.<sup>42</sup>

Essentialism helped breed authority. Religious studies was “constructed, initially legitimized, and finally authorized” as a field of study through essentialist “exclusionary claims.”<sup>43</sup> Similarly, in the sciences, framing dreams as essentially and reducibly natural (the paradigm of legitimate knowledge, as we’ve seen) places authority in the hands of scientists. The postmodern shift to contextualism, though, fed an alternative current in discourses of authority over dreams. Alongside discourses on authority within the scientific episteme, value was placed on self-analysis.<sup>44</sup> From the perspective of an individual nature of dream symbolism, one must become familiar with their own patterns and associations in their dreams in order to understand them, situating expertise in the self. Contextualized interpretation nourished the democra-

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<sup>41</sup> On “keys to dreams,” see Jacqueline Carroy, “A History of Dreams and the Science of Dreams,” in *Histories of Dreams and Dreaming*, eds. Giorgia Morgese, Giovanni Pietro Lombardo, and Hendrika Vande Kemp (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 21. Regarding Jung’s views, see Jung, *Dreams*, 72–73. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for directing me to this passage.

<sup>42</sup> Morgese and Lombardo, “History,” 264, which provides several references to De Sanctis’s work.

<sup>43</sup> McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 28.

<sup>44</sup> E.g., Carroy, “A History,” 26, notes that the importance placed on self-analysis by contemporaries was even picked up by Freud in a small way.

tization of dream interpretation in this way (even though universalist notions persist). In current discourse, we see this trend with emphasis on build-your-own dream dictionaries and learning your personal dream language, such as in Richard Nongard's *Panoramic Dream Analysis* (2023), Joanne Hedger's *Dream Interpretation for Better Sleep* (2022), and Robert J. Hoss's *Dream Language* (2015).

### Conclusion: Dream Research Today and the Post-Postmodern Episteme

What is a dream? Not so shockingly, experts disagree on how to define a "dream." We have seen how the dream as an object has been variously constructed throughout history as constituting different physical, metaphysical, epistemological, and social spaces, forms of communication, and theoretical paradigms, as a religious experience, cultural artifact, social expression, historical object, and discursive construct. What has historically been attributed to the object "dream" has varied wildly through time, reflecting dominant discourses guided by overarching epistemes. Despite all these proposed answers, the question of definition is one thing that virtually all present-day research shares. And this question is itself a product of the postmodern episteme and even more paradigmatic of the academic cultural environment than contextualism itself: a doubting, a skepticism of metanarrative that has thrown our central terms of inquiry into chaos. And what I have seemingly done here is provide a painfully postmodern skeptical view of the metanarratives applied to "dreams" variously constructed. But the story needn't end here.

Instead of focusing on a highly contextualized and contingent "dream," plurality is increasingly emphasized in scholarship. This perspective on the nature of academic objects of study is, too, historically situated, a reflection of post-postmodernism. There is no consensus nor even a generally accepted notion of "post-postmodernism." But as with any period in intellectual history, it is helpful to position it in conversation with previous eras. As such, we can think of post-postmodernism as situated in the debates between modernism and postmodernism on foundationalism/antifoundationalism, structuralism/deconstructionism,

objectivity/relativism, and essentialism/contextualism. Post-postmodernism, according to cultural theorists Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van der Akker, “negotiates between [and “beyond”] the modern and the postmodern (...) both here and there and nowhere.”<sup>45</sup> They emphasize oscillation over balance, arguing the post-postmodern appears as a “‘both-neither’ dynamic” toward the modern and postmodern. Though they are speaking of a turn in art, architecture, etc., I argue elsewhere that this reflects an increasingly prevalent discourse on reconciling dichotomies—including the modern-postmodern binaries listed above—that speak to the larger epistemological condition without a reductive identity between the “opposites.”<sup>46</sup> In fact, it is a rejection of such dichotomies as necessarily oppositional. While postmodernism emphasizes the contingency of knowledge in the sense of epistemological skepticism, post-postmodernism sees the multiplicity of narratives as epistemologically enlarging, a diversification of understanding the human condition. For example, a post-postmodernist might take the dichotomy of essentialism and contextualism not as mutually exclusive but as mutually inclusive, existing in a fundamentally relational mode of “other” referentiality and equally important parts of the story, which historiography at large—with its emphasis on eliminating essentialism—could benefit from taking into account. In terms of how the theoretical paradigms shape the object, the modern essentialist dream was one thing; the postmodern contextualist dream was nothing; the post-postmodernist plural dream is everything.

In the case of dreams, the post-postmodern turn can be seen, for example, in the recent positioning of dreams in terms of ontological multiplicity. For instance, in the natural scientific study of dreams, the object “dream” was originally restricted to REM-sleep mental activity but now includes the hypnagogic and hypnopompic stages. This has led to further pluralization of the object: the construction of the dream not as a static entity but as something that lies on a continuum from focused waking to daydreaming to dreaming (hence the “object” is not

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<sup>45</sup> Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van der Akker, “Notes on Metamodernism,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* 2 (2010): 6, <https://doi.org/10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677>, and for “beyond,” 4.

<sup>46</sup> Vollmer, *The Relational Structure*, chap. 8.



monadic), as put forth by dream researcher Ernest Hartmann in *The Nature and Functions of Dreams* (2011), for example.

We can also see a post-postmodern turn in the historiographical considerations discussed in this article. Recently, the internal-external division of dreams has been disputed. Phyllis Mack, for instance, argues this binary is a bit forced, as many premodern dreams were regarded as both internal and representing transcendent truth, and the same is true for many people today.<sup>47</sup> The internal and external are not necessarily mutually exclusive even though that discourse certainly exists, and multiple constructs are thus simultaneously upheld. Speaking to the contingency of the internal-external divide, Ann Marie Plane and Leslie Tuttle argue a historiography of dreams should take note of the teleology of externalization to internalization,<sup>48</sup> which is part of a larger teleology evident in the modern worldview of moving from a more “primitive” or religious understanding to scientific ones. In a self-reflexive way, historiographers should also note that the awareness of this teleology is itself constructing new historical objects, such as the plural dream, reflecting a new, post-postmodern discursive phase in this teleological evolution of which we “conquer teleology.”

Regarding the conversation on the imagined spaces of dreams, we can also detect traces of post-postmodernism. Vande Kemp, in her later work, revised her earlier statement on the historical phases to be more on the point of dimensions of dreams rather than eras. She does not think of the spaces of dreams as mutually exclusive, though some enjoyed popularity at different times. Instead, there is a “scope” of dreams evidenced in the given interdisciplinary research, and she notes the contingency of “truth” and “facts” on these various dimensions but does not dip into relativism.<sup>49</sup> Instead, she argues, “scholars are studying dreams in ways that reflect all four dimensions of human existence.”<sup>50</sup> In other words, the various imagined spaces of dreaming are all “true” (as reflec-

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<sup>47</sup> Phyllis Mack, “The Unbounded Self,” in *Dreams, Dreamers, and Visions*, eds. Ann Marie Plane and Leslie Tuttle (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 207–25.

<sup>48</sup> Plane and Tuttle, “Introduction,” 8.

<sup>49</sup> Hendrika Vande Kemp, “Epilogue,” in *Histories of Dreams and Dreaming*, eds. Giorgia Morgese, Gionvanni Pietro Lombardo, and Vande Kemp (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 277.

<sup>50</sup> Vande Kemp, “Epilogue,” 280.

tions of the data) even when their individual “truths” may vary, a very post-postmodern view of inclusivity. Further, though theories abound regarding what characterizes the post-postmodern episteme, technology features as a central, defining discourse.<sup>51</sup> And we saw the impact of this as regards the inter- and intrapersonal space of dream engineering and in the construction of the “dream” in cyberspace, with the discursive dream particularly exemplary of post-postmodern pluralism.

As for the essentialism-contextualism debate, in psychoanalysis, anthropology, and the history of dreams today, paradigms of archetypes, cultural unity, and universalization exist alongside disparateness and contextualism at the levels of society and the individual. Furthermore, dreams are constructed as simultaneously individual and communal (in terms of psychology, culture, society, etc.): dreaming is a “collective phenomenon,” “shaped by social and cultural forces,” as argued by Jacques Le Goff, for instance.<sup>52</sup> In a similarly pluralistic ontologizing, Kelly Bulkeley and Maja Gutman’s 2020 Dream Project analyzes dreams as part of “collective experience” relating to real-life historical events, another example of a continuum but, this time, among one’s own dreams and others.<sup>53</sup> Similar approaches can be found in the I Dream of COVID project and collections of dreams related to the historical events of 9/11, the atomic bomb, and Nazism, which “calls for a framework that can hold a space for dreams that emerge between minds,” as Adelais Mills argues.<sup>54</sup>

This paper has but brushed the surface of possible historiographical considerations taken from changes in intellectual history related to discourses on the boundaries and legitimacy of different forms of knowledge. Other possible directions for future research include: discursive links between dreaming and psychosis (potentially a reflection of legitimization discourses of rationality/irrationality); changes to what is considered the function of dreams (divination, healing, contempla-

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<sup>51</sup> Vermeulen and van der Akker, “Notes,” 3.

<sup>52</sup> Le Goff, *Medieval Imagination*, 229.

<sup>53</sup> Kelly Bulkeley and Maja Gutman, “The 2020 Dreams Project,” accessed September 24, 2023, <https://tiger-grape-astm.squarespace.com>.

<sup>54</sup> Adelais Mills, “Pandemic Dreaming,” in *Lockdown Cultures*, eds. Stella Bruzzi and Maurice Biriotti (London: UCL Press, 2022), 244.

tion, creativity, memory consolidation) and how the “function” establishes/reinforces power structures; the types of dreams considered within the boundaries and worthy of scientific study (from lucid to everyday dreams to “big dreams”); other localizations of dreams in physical places to imagined spaces ranging from temples, Freudian couches, individual beds, virtual reality, and sleep laboratories<sup>55</sup> to waking life (e.g., as in research on how dreams impact the day’s mood); the many, many other social realms of dreams that shape the historical object, such as art and film (e.g., as a theme or as an aesthetic but also in terms of narrative instability—a possible postmodern decentering of the self); and the power of dream interpreters throughout history and its impact on social structures of gender and sexuality.

Further research should pay attention to countercurrents as well since the ways of constructing dreams discussed here are more a reflection of the discursive power of dominant epistemes than the reality of the variety of “dreams” in lived experience. The reality is even more diverse. Moreover, the dichotomies drawn upon in this reconstruction of historical discourse, such as internal/external, subjective/objective, supernatural/natural, and others, have never been completely accepted, and challenges to them constitute a substantial discourse throughout history.

Returning to the question of how to define the “dream,” to conclude in a post-postmodern way, instead of taking the contingencies of the “dream” as indicative of the relativism of knowledge, we might say that these different constructs are suggestive of ontological multiplicity or, meta-analytically, that the ontologically multiple construct is self-reflexively suggestive of post-postmodernism. The plural dream is a prism, relationally existing and evolving in creative tension with various “others” from philosophical locales and imagined spaces to theoretical paradigms or even to the epistemes themselves.

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<sup>55</sup> Hacking, *Historical Ontology*, 227–254, explores some of these.

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