

ECSTASIES OF RITUAL, DISRUPTIONS OF MODERNITY: DREAMS AS LIMINAL  
AGENTS OF RE-ORDER

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis seeks to connect dreams and rituals through their analogous psycho-cultural functions as agents of (re)order during both epochal and daily liminal phases of life. Further, it attempts to describe dreaming as psychologically vital for mediating experience through the cognitive process of schematization while making the claim that Western postmodernity's rejection of dream ideology and the resultant societal rejection of belief in their metaphysical significance has withered their psychological benefits. This connection will be made through the qualities of liminal experience and rites of passage at the macro and microcosmic scale, the process of schema formation through ritualistic belief and practice, and an ethnography of a postmodern, urban population of young adults and their process of documenting and discussing their dream ideations.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In liminal moments where the standardized cultural and/or individual sense of order is disrupted, humans have evolved several conduits of re-order: schemata, rituals, myths, and dreams. The focus of this thesis is on dreams and rituals and their analogous functions of schema formation, knowledge creation and experimentation, and the ability to think creatively about individual and social realities. For dreams, this is further evidenced by neurobiological literature which sees sleep and dreams as the brain's way to consolidate memories and move them from the hippocampus to the cerebral cortex-implying dreams' deep role in the generation of creative ideas and, ultimately, schemata.

Western modernity and postmodernity, however, have challenged the personal, cultural, and societal ability to communicate, believe in, and/or interpret the dream experience. All of these are vital components in the psychological and social importance and efficacy of dreaming. Consequently, the positive benefits of dreaming to our cultural, psychological, and biological selves have withered. An exception is the psychoanalytic school founded by Freud and elaborated on by Jung, but even these theories lack a broad communal aspect to dream sharing as well as any socio-cultural analysis outside of a clinical, personal setting.

This thesis intends to explore whether and how the dreams and dream-experiences of a postmodern, urban subset of the Houston population are reflective of a constant state of liminality in which individuals are left in a perpetual state of transition, unable to fully move onto the next state of being. This can be contextualized and ascribed as a condition of postmodernity and its ideological choices.

A qualitative measurement of the effects of this on behavior and communication is the basis of this ethnography; further, how the communication of and reflection on the dreams of my studied population contribute to theirs (and my own) perception of dreams and dreaming is of vital importance; this thesis looks at that meta-analytical layer of the ethnographic process with theories of liminality, ritual, schema mental modeling, community building, and modern critical anthropology in order to determine the specific role dreams play in the cultural and individual psychology.

## **PART ONE:**

### **A. Schema formation, knowledge creation, and the ritual process**

The concept of schemata is of fundamental importance to making an analogy between the psycho-cultural functions of rituals and dreams. Schemas as a cognitive concept were first written about by F.C. Bartlett in *Remembering* (1932). He applied them to procedural memory (knowledge of how something is done) as opposed to declarative memory (knowledge of facts). His definition centered on the idea that human action and behavior are not simply stimulus responses, but also dependent upon experience that allows for a supplying of expectations and thus a framework to act upon. Jean Piaget expounded upon schematic theory in the 1950s by applying the concept to the cognitive development process observed during childhood and into adulthood, wherein new experiences and sensory information is constantly added or assimilated into currently existing schemata. Later, Alba and Hasher (1983) expanded upon these ideas by tying them to memory and complexifying the previously understood process of memory formation and consolidation. They suggested “the operation of 4 central encoding processes: selection (a process that chooses only some of all incoming stimuli for representation), abstraction (a process that stores the meaning of a message without reference to the original syntactic and lexical content), interpretation (a process by which relevant prior knowledge is generated to aid comprehension), and integration (a process by which a single, holistic memory representation is formed from the products of the previous 3 operations)” (Alba and Hasher 1983: 203). Roy D'Andrade, in applying schemata as a driver of motivation in an ethnographic context, birthed a cognitive anthropology which sought to ground cultural theories in the reality of cognitive processes. In all of these, along with modern neurobiological knowledge, a growing theory of of

neuroplastic behavior can be formed wherein human psychology is forced to adapt, accommodate, or reject the new information. Relatedly, cognitive dissonance arises out of new information being taken in which is not easily integrated into or primarily associated with existing schemata.

Fundamentally, a schema is a psychological packet of categorized information about an observed phenomenon. It describes the process by which people may interpret situations based on prior, similar experiences. Like a database, it has a multistep process consisting of encoding, storage, and ultimately retrieval. In simpler terms, a schema can be understood as a mental shortcut, an ideal form comprised of the stored memories associated with a psycho-culturally defined category. To draw on an early example from Immanuel Kant (1781), a person has a linguistically defined category known as ‘dog.’ All that person’s observations, interactions, and learnings associated with dogs contributes to the ‘dog’ schemata from which they may make assumptions about and draw from as necessary. When thought of in a similar manner as a database in a computer, it can be extrapolated that schemata are useful tools for the human brain to more efficiently and effectively organize the huge amounts of sensory data and potential thought processes about any number of defined categories.

The role of developmental psychology is crucial in understanding the way foundational schemata are formed; by “the middle years of childhood, nonverbal, unconscious memories of social experiences may become...hardwired. They may thus become stable prototypes for the way the waking and dreaming brain organizes later experience. Psychoanalytic theories of child development suggest that the most important prototypical experiences...involve early object relations” (Ingham 1996:52). Illustrating this



process further in the process of cognitive development are three distinctive types of memory: procedural, episodic, and semantic. Procedural memory is “assumed to be the phylogenetically more primitive,” episodic memory “permits the storage and recall of details of specific events in time and space... [making available] concrete details of actual experience,” and semantic memory “involves the capacity to invent signs, the intentional manipulation of symbols, and the attribution of shared meaning to arbitrary or conventional signifiers such as combinations of sound or writing or gesture” (Shore 1996:258-259). Each of these are used in schematization and are combined in different ways during both the ritual process and dream ideation to effectively alter the cognitive process.

An understanding of the process of schematization allows for its application to the ritual process at both a cultural and idiosyncratic memory consolidation level. Schemata are not static, but rather constantly updating, changing, or reaffirming depending on the information. For example, during a rite of passage pertaining to puberty (as described in the next paragraph), an initiate will have schemata pertaining to what it means to become a young adult. As they move through the associated ritual process, those schemata are fundamentally altered and re-written to incorporate new ideas and understandings of what that means at the societal and cultural level. They emerge from the ritual process better equipped, both psychologically (schematically) and socially, to be re-integrated into society with their new roles.

The Murngin are an aboriginal Australian tribe who have a complex and extensively documented sets of mythologically based age-grading rituals which take young boys from their mothers and remakes them into men. There is a progression of public, cultural models-

taken from a mythological narrative which ends right up to the point where the boys are taken into the ritual process—being “internalized by members of a community and born again as mental models” (Shore 1996:236). The narrative quality of the myth is not enacted scene for scene, but rather alluded to and presented in a ‘flash-bulb effect.’ From the initiate’s perspective, the rituals produce the narrative, wherein the “the gradual disclosure of mysteries to the novices by their elders is done in such a way as to lead them to a sort of layered understanding of the world, by which truths are partial and emergent... the narrative is a story of epistemogenesis” (Shore 1996:248), The Levi-Straussian explanation of the cognitive function of myth, symbols, ritual, and, resultingly, schema formation lies in the idea that a “myth narrative permits the [initiate] to cope with the psychophysiological trauma by providing a kind of ‘objective correlative’” (Shore 1996:254). In the case of the Murngin, the trauma associated with an epochal life change (i.e. puberty) is eased with an associated coming-of-age mythos and accompanying rites. For the purpose of this thesis, said trauma is a cognitive dissonance which arises from any given liminal experience, be it epochal and commonplace.

As the rites of the Murngin occur over time, the episodic nature of the myth narrative is, through ‘repetition and ritualization,’ abstracted and made into archetypal forms. The story becomes “schematized and as a general and foundational set of patterns... becom[ing] ‘grounded’ as an aspect of procedural memory” (Shore 1996:259) before being deconstructed into symbolic units associated with a kind of semantic memory process. All types of memory and mental models are schematized on an individual level, but “the process by which they are schematized are socially constrained and reinforced by both positive and negative social feedback” (Shore 1996:48). Rituals provide the most salient and physically tangible form of

this societal feedback, but dreams—especially when placed in the context of them being communicated at a cultural level while having ideological importance—also provide the psychology with the opportunity to schematize and re-schematize experience in an extremely personal and visceral way. The Murngin also utilize dreamtime learning, tied not only to the “symbolic content of the narrative and the rites, but also to the ways in which the myth-ritual complex exploits the various types or ‘layers’ of memory” (Shore 1996:259). This interrelation of dreams and rites of passage is common in the ethnographic record, especially in puberty rituals but also in many other ritual and shamanic activities.

In summation, the human cognitive process of schematization is hugely influenced by liminality, which drives (re)schematization as a means of resolving dissonances arising with said liminality. Though epochal life events, here highlighted as rites of passage, are extreme catalysts for such liminal experiences and accompanying ritual forms, there also exists day-to-day liminalities that complex mammalian social interactions produce. Though rituals as well as dreams are used as cultural forms by the psychology to resolve liminality during rites of passage, they also exist to schematize daily lived experience, resolve more common liminal experiences, and consolidate the different types of memory at a neurobiological level.

## **B. Rituals**

The concept of the ritual is arguably at the forefront of anthropological thought. A ritual can be defined as “an act or series of regularly repeated acts that embody the beliefs of a group of people and create a sense of continuity and belonging [Davis-Floyd 1992:8]. They also feature a sequence of activities, involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a

specific place or time, and according to a set order” (Zunner-Keating, Avetyan, Shepard 2023:155-156). More explicitly, ritual is culturally patterned, symbolic activity which reflects and reinforces cultural values and norms-often within a framework of ideological belief: “religious beliefs and practices are something more than ‘grotesque’ reflections or expressions of economic, political, and social relationships; rather are they... decisive keys to the understanding of how people think and feel about those relationships, and about the natural and social environments in which they operate” (Turner 1969:6).

Rituals are of extreme importance in mental modeling and memory formation. Individuals are adept at “constructing idiosyncratic models of experience on the fly, as a basic meaning-making strategy” (Shore 1996:46), but there also exist culturally defined models by which a worldview may be constructed and enacted by the cultural inhabitants. Cultural models are “constructed the same way as any mental models with the important exception that the internalization of cultural models is based more on socially constrained experiences than is the case for idiosyncratic models. Cultural practices that constrain attention and guide what is perceived as salient are not left open to much personal choice but are closely guided by social norms” (Shore 1996:47). Rituals, then, are extraordinary behavioral reinforcers of cultural models born out of ideological, geographical, and societal realities.

Rituals are also distinctive for their demarcation of sacred time and space, juxtaposed by profane time and space. This separation is a classical anthropological theory laid out by Durkheim which paints human understanding of reality as separated into that which is mundane, everyday lived experience (profane) and that which holy and inspires awe and reverence (sacred). Ritualistic behavior at the socio-cultural level are the practices and

actions that bridge the gap between the sacred and the profane by which individuals may encounter the sacred realm and experience a sense of connection to that which inspires said awe and reverence. Furthermore, according to Durkheim, rituals contribute to the development of a collective conscience, a shared set of moral and ethical beliefs that guide individuals' behavior within a society. The sacred elements within rituals reinforce these collective beliefs and values, especially morality and societal values as expressed through associated symbolism. To give a comparative ethnographic example of Hindu and Buddhist religious symbolism and ritual, “matted hair and shaven head are not interchangeable symbols: on one level they both mean ‘penance’... but the unconscious meaning of the symbols has relevance to the institutions of world renunciation...the matted hair symbol is oriented to a Hindu view of celibacy, the shaven head (castration symbolism) to a Buddhist concept of celibacy” (Obeyesekere 1981:38). In both cases, the symbolism of their religious ritual practices is both a reflection and reinforcer of the socio-cultural moral and behavioral attitudes.

More succinctly, describing the cognitive function of rituals as ‘ritual learning’ allows for an understanding of the schematization process as an organization or reorganization of experience under stressful conditions (as often experienced by ritual initiates) which results in cognitive and emotional change (Wallace 1966:239-242). It is important to understand this behavioral restructuring as a fundamental process not just during large-scale rituals, but also on an idiosyncratic, everyday level as new experiences are encountered. That said, rituals offer a cultural framework and definition of these experiences and allow the psychology to more fully incorporate and process (schematize) said experience into their worldview.

An important thing to note about ritual is its public nature: “rituals reveal values at their deepest level... [people] express in ritual what moves them most, and since the form of expression is conventionalized and obligatory, it is the values of the group that are revealed... in the study of rituals [is] the key to an understanding of the essential constitution of human societies” (Wilson 1954:241). Though individual ritualistic behavior is common, it still exists within culturally defined frameworks and often does not carry the same psychological change that a more institutionalized symbolic or ritualistic process does: “if assum[ed] that emotional messages may be socially communicated, [one] may also legitimately infer that the public symbol used as a vehicle for communicating that message may become invested with an affective load. Not only can group emotions be generated and sustained in this manner, but shared cultural symbols may have personal meaning to the individual” (Obeyesekere 1981:18). Most commonly and importantly for an understanding of ritual cognitive schematization, ritual forms are enacted to mark changes in nature (seasons changing, animal migration patterns, etc.) and important life events known as rites of passages.

### **C. Rites of Passage and liminality**

Liminality was first coined and expanded upon in the 1909 book *The Rites of Passage* by the Dutch-German-French ethnographer and folklorist Arnold van Gennep. Fundamentally, his conception of liminality centers around rites of passage, or “the ceremonial patterns which accompany a passage from one situation to another or from one cosmic or social world to another” (Van Gennep 1909:10). Birth, puberty, marriage, and death are the most easily identifiable moments where these rituals of transition take place. The rituals, no matter the

cultural form, are used to move the mindset and cultural status of the initiate from their previous state to the next and are given a tripartite structure of a pre-liminal (separation) phase, liminal (transition) phase, and post-liminal (re-incorporation) phase. “The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a ‘state’), or from both. During the intervening ‘liminal’ period, the characteristics of the ritual subject... are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. In the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation), the passage is consummated” (Turner 1969:94-95). In other words, during these rites of passage there exists time where the initiate is neither what they were nor what they will become, and this is liminality.

“Whoever passes from one [status] to the other finds themselves physically and magico-religiously in a special situation for a certain length of time: they waver between two worlds. It is this situation which I have designated a transition... to demonstrate that this symbolic and spatial area of transition may be found in more or less pronounced form in all the ceremonies which accompany the passage from one social and magico-religious position to the other” (Van Gennep 1909:18).

The implications for change at the socio-cultural level are perhaps self-evident in rituals about the changing status of the initiate, but the psychological effect of the ritually induced liminality to resolve the natural liminality of becoming something new is profound. Rites of passage are extreme, life-altering cases of the liminal ritual experience, but there are

four identified types of liminality that may be combined in any number of ways, situations, or extremity: 1) status, 2) situational, 3) spatial, and 4) temporal. Rites of passage are usually focused on a liminality of status change, but all forms and extremities of liminality are extremely significant to this thesis as one of the most important drivers of schematization and knowledge creation.

Puberty rituals are often the most viscerally available ethnographic examples of liminality across cultures. “Liminal entities, such as neophytes in initiation or puberty rites, may be represented as possessing nothing. They may be disguised as monsters, wear only a strip of clothing, or even go naked, to demonstrate that as liminal beings they have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing indicating rank or role, position in a kinship system—in short, nothing that may distinguish them from their fellow neophytes or initiates. Their behavior is normally passive or humble; they must obey their instructors implicitly, and accept arbitrary punishment without complaint. It is as though they are being *reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life*” [emphasis mine] (Turner 1969:95). This “fashioning anew” that Victor Turner mentions is, cognitively speaking, the process of (re)creating a knowledge through the schematization of reality.

In looking at a rite of passage of the Ndembu of Zambia associated with acquiring the highest tribal status of Kanongesha (senior chief), Turner described the way in which ritual symbolism during the rite of passage schematizes the social reality in a way that both reorganizes and reaffirms the cultural order. The position of senior chief is a paradoxical one as the chief “represents both the apex of the structured politico-legal hierarchy and the total community as an unstructured unit. He is, symbolically, also the tribal territory itself and all



its resources. Its fertility and freedom... are bound up with...both his physical and moral condition” Turner 1969:97-98). This is a liminality associated with status change which is resolved through symbolic and ritual behavior; the transition from lower status to this higher level of religious, social, and political power is modeled by the individual liminality experienced by the initiates psychology: the “liminal component of [the installation rites of the Kanongesha] begins with the construction of a small shelter of leaves about a mile away from the capital village. This hut is known as *kafu* or *kafwiI*, a term Ndembu derive from *ku-fwa*, ‘to die,’ for it is here that the chief-elect dies from his commoner state. Imagery of death abounds in Ndembu liminality” (Turner 1969:100). Further rites of humiliation, humility, and being exposed to the tribe itself follow, with the chief being “just like a slave on the night before he succeeds.” After this, the re-aggregation of the Kanongesha back into the society occurs. The potent symbolism of death, humility, fertility are subverted in the rites as a means by which the initiate may reflect on his previous status of lesser authority as well as creating a “blank slate on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group... [through] the ordeals and humiliations, often of a grossly physiological character... [which] represent partly a destruction of the previous status and partly a tempering of their essence in order to prepare them to cope with their new responsibilities” (Turner 1969: 103). This stripping the initiate of their identity during the ritual process and imbuing them with the traits and responsibilities of their new status is extremely common across cultures in rites of passage and rituals in general, serving both a social and psychological function. At the cultural level, it is an identification of the change in status of an individual or group, providing potent symbolism by which that change is acceptable and ‘officially’ recognized.

For the individual, it has the power to rewrite fundamental schemata through the power of the physical, symbolic, and/or religious experience.

If, at a schematic level, human psychological and cultural structures exist to classify and order experienced reality, then the ritual process and liminality itself become vital components of both psychological and cultural stability. When “life changes are marked by highly conventional ritual forms, as they are in so many societies, people’s personal models of their life changes will tend to share a great many features, with overlapping salience structures...[these] will not produce total cognitive homogeneity among individuals within a community but rather a tendency for personal models to overlap far more than they would if left to purely individual experience” (Shore 1996:48). In other words, there is a paradoxical relationship between a disordered state and the creation and/or reinforcement of order at a psychological and societal level. By applying and defining the concept of liminality as such to rituals and the biological, psychological, and cultural functions of dreaming, where it is a “liminal state in which the dreamer realizes the relationship between two worlds, neither of which is fully real or unreal” (Tedlock 1992:3), a connection can be made between the analogous functions of the ritual process and the dream experience as drivers of psycho-cultural stability, knowledge creation, and formation of schemata.

In looking at the Xavante of Brazil, Laura Graham explores the way their age grading ceremonies reflect a cultural philosophy of renewal that reflects personal and societal re-schematization as a group of individuals change statuses while fostering a “sense of internal stability and continuity within a society that is ever in a process of dynamic evolution... Xavante classify individuals at different life cycle phases according to age grades [which] intersect the age-set system. An individual belongs to an age-set for life, but passes through

age grades according to processes of social and biological maturation ” (Graham 1995:95). The rites and ceremonies which accompany the changing of age grades are great examples of using physical rituals to transform the initiates cognitive understanding of themselves and their cultural role. As the young male initiates become a member of the next age group (occurring when a group of boys is between the ages of 8 and 10), he is “inducted into the bachelor’s hut during the *wapte* ceremony.” Here, the “members of an age set live together in a state of semi-isolation for about five years... during this time of collective residence, under the guidance of their senior sponsors, they engage in various solidarity-building activities... practic[ing] various skills that require group coordination such as hunting, fishing, and gardening, which will be important in their adult male lives” (Graham 1995:93). Not only are the initiates physically removed from the rest of their society, which is a hallmark of many puberty rituals, they also partake in activities which foster skills required to be a functioning adult male of the society and thus a tactile understanding of what such responsibilities look like. The liminality of growing up and taking on new roles is literally experienced by being removed from ‘normal’ society and put through an extended physical and cognitive transformation: “as a male moves through the age grades, he moves between two poles of solidarity. Solidarity is at its peak during the *wapte* (pre-initiate) and *?ritai?wa* (novitiate) age grades... the period of semi-isolation in the bachelor’s hut, age-set solidarity, and uxorilocal residence operate to weaken the bonds of patrilineal dominance and factional ties at the point in the male’s life when he begins to formalize affinal ties” (Graham 1995:97-98). In other words, Xavante culture schematizes the social order, norms, and morality during the liminal experience of becoming a young man who will be imbued with new privileges and responsibilities.

In a paper titled “Liminality as Cultural Process for Cultural Change,” the authors look at the way organizations contain liminal experiences and how they those may act as catalysts for change without dramatic shifts or ‘jolts:’ “[a]ttention to ritual casts the liminal as obligatory, rather than voluntarily entered, and paced by external events” (Howard-Grenville 2011: 524-525). Instead, liminality should be extended and thought of as including daily interactions and processes when individuals interface with complex and multifaceted aspects of modern economics, interpersonal relations, and political margins. The notion that liminality may occur in everyday situations and not just in epochal, ‘rite of passage’ moments, is important for applying it to fundamental cognitive processes that occurs regularly in the dream experience and are crucial to psychological *and* cultural innovation and, ultimately, cohesion.

To understand the way schemata, liminality and human psychology as a whole are affected by dreaming, we must look more deeply into the latest understandings of neurobiology, sleep, and the dream process before more deeply connecting their cognitive role to that of rituals.

## **PART TWO**

### **A. Why do we sleep and dream?**

Schemata, and thus memories, are a crucial component of the dreaming process: “Kahn and Hobson (1993) proposed that dreams are a product of self-organization of brain during sleep. As a complex system far from equilibrium state, the dreaming brain may form a new pattern by the interaction between components within this system. At REM sleep stage, signals from neuronal clusters self-organize and form image fragments, then the image fragments interact and produce images, and finally these materials are associated into a relatively continuous narrative (i.e., dreams).” (Zhang 2016). In other words, the imagistic narrative formed by the self-organization of neuronal clusters during dreaming can result in categorical re-schematization upon waking, especially upon self and/or social reflection of the dream experience.

Sleep is a vital biological function which is necessary for the health and survival of both body and mind. To fully understand the nature of sleep and its functions in the biology and psychology of humans, the environment of our progenitors must be contextualized along with natural relationships such as those between biological and heavenly bodies. Such notions call attention to the inherent contradictions of cycling between “light and darkness, day and night, heat and cold, activity and rest... [the] primordial rhythm of terrestrial life” (Bulkeley 2016:16). This planetary reality has endowed virtually every mammal with a circadian rhythm in their genomes, and it continues to operate even in the deprivation of external light. Sleep is therefore conceived as a cycle in the circadian rhythm, and all biological creatures are in some way indebted to the necessity of sleep. The conventional definition of sleep for animals includes “physical quiescence in a typical place and posture,

reduced muscle tone, less sensitivity to outside stimulus, lower overall expenditure of metabolic energy, and an ability to reverse states and wake up rapidly if necessary” (Bulkeley 2016:18). Furthermore, the amount of sleep or what kind of sleep a creature has evolved to need depends not only on complexity and different needs, but especially their place within the larger food web of the ecosystem. Creatures lower on the food chain of an ecosystem must sleep less in order to remain vigilant against predators, omnivores are somewhere in the middle, and the apex predators of the food chain can sleep the most because they have the leisure of choosing when to be active and hunting.

In modern human’s evolutionary past, there have been two major bursts of brain growth: 2 million years ago with the appearance of *H. habilis* and *H. erectus*, as well as sometime between 500,000 and 200,000 years ago with *H. heidelbergensis*, *H. neanderthalis*, and archaic *H. sapiens*. With each increase in cranial capacity came greater neural processing power, and with that more complex technological, social, and possibly cultural (though it is hard to know with the gaps in the archaeological record) activity. Although there are many evolutionary disadvantages to having such a large, undeveloped brain at birth, including massive energy expenditure, increased difficulty in childbirth, and extensive time and energy investment by adults in underdeveloped newborn infants, it is arguable that the positives justified the negatives.

For both ancient and modern humans, there are “three dimensions of neural activity” that interact and feed off of each other complexly and dynamically; these three basic ways to measure the brain, especially while asleep, are “electrically, chemically, and anatomically” (Bulkeley 2016:34). The brain, asleep or awake, works as a unit, where each part necessary for a given process is involved in a variety of complex and dynamic interactions with the

other. In “warm blooded creatures with sufficiently complex central nervous systems” (Bulkeley 2016:21), the phases of sleep can be documented through the changes and variations in the electrical activity of the brain. There are two basic types of distinctions between the waves, slow wave sleep (SWS, also known as NREM) and paradoxical sleep (PS or REM). Using an EEG, researchers have developed a map of electrical activity during a 90-minute cycle of NREM and REM that repeats throughout the time asleep. When a person is focused (such as on a specific task, visual perception, or bodily movement), their brains generate beta waves of 12-30 cycles per second (cps). When they are in a state of relaxed wakefulness, alpha waves of 8-12 cps are produced. At the onset of sleep, stage 1 NREM occurs, with alpha and theta waves of 5-8 cps. This lasts for several minutes before spindles (sudden spikes of electrical activity in various parts of the brain) at a frequency of 14-15 cps occur. These, along with K-complexes that have a negative drop in amplitude, signal the beginning of stage 2 NREM sleep. This is followed by stage 3 NREM, where electrical activity diminishes dramatically and delta waves at a frequency of 0.5-2 cps appear; this stage is also known as ‘deep-sleep.’ Next, “excitatory bursts of electrical energy” known as PGO spikes appear, which signals the onset of REM sleep. A few seconds later the “overall electrical discharges in the brain surge and intensify to a level that is equal to, and [sometimes] greater than... in the waking state.” The theta and beta waves of this REM sleep have a frequency of 12-30 cps, with some spontaneous gamma waves with frequencies of 30-80 cps. PGO spikes continue, and the “overall pattern of brain activity becomes desynchronized (as it does in the waking state)” (Bulkeley 2016:21). This contrasts with the highly synchronized nature of the brain during NREM sleep. This cycle takes about 90 minutes, with the first REM phase at the beginning of the night being the shortest (10-15

minutes in length), and after the first two or three cycles of the night deep sleep mostly disappears and “the brain oscillates between longer phases of REM and stage 2 NREM sleep.

Chemically, there is much unknown about the full range and complexity of neurotransmitters and their reactions with each other and in the context of the larger brain. More than 80 neurotransmitters have been identified, but serotonin, adenosine, acetylcholine, GABA, glycine, and dopamine are known for their role in the functions of sleep. At the outset of sleep, serotonin and adenosine increase, and both detach our attention from external perceptions, suppress arousal, and cause drowsiness at elevated levels. GABA is released in its highest quantities during deep sleep, and it “generally has inhibitory effects on other neurons, slowing down their overall activities.” The shift from NREM to REM sleep sees considerable chemical changes, including the diminishing of production of GABA, which means there is no longer a “general dampening of neural activity” (Bulkeley 2016:37) that marks the increased neural activity of REM sleep. Serotonin also decreases to its lowest levels, so the mind is no longer neurochemically ‘pacified.’ Acetylcholine, responsible in waking consciousness for stimulating arousal and attention, increases during REM to levels comparable to the waking mind. Dopamine, another neurotransmitter associated in waking states with desire and curiosity, is necessary for REM sleep to occur; animals that have been completely deprived of dopamine experience a suppression of REM sleep. Finally, glycine is a neurotransmitter that increases during REM sleep and inhibits the brain systems involved in motor activity, specifically in relation to the movement of our arms and legs. This ensures the body does not physically act out the contents of its dreamtime—a kind of muscle paralysis named atonia that is a characteristic of REM sleep. It is also important to note that “many other transmitters besides the ones mentioned are active in various ways throughout the



wake/sleep cycle, maintaining basic levels of brain functioning across all states of consciousness” (Bulkeley 2016:38).

The three basic structures of the brain are the brainstem, the limbic system, and the cerebral cortex. It is also important to note that almost all “high order cognitive processing is bilateral” (Bulkeley 2016:39) and therefore almost all psychological processes should be understood in the context of multiple brain systems working together. When the brain shifts from NREM to REM sleep, several neural regions increase energy consumption to a level comparable to the waking state, especially in the brainstem, the thalamus, and the basal forebrain. Interestingly, while awake the pontine tegmentum becomes very active when a person is faced with an unknown environment, and the limbic system is central to emotions, memories, and instinctual responses to survival-related situations. According to the author, one of the most important anatomical shifts in REM sleep involves “the reactivation of the medial temporal lobe and the fusiform gyrus, both of which are directly involved in visual imagination, internal imagery, and social cognition” (Bulkeley 2016:41). This is because at the same time this occurs, activity in the primary visual cortex decreases considerably. This means that the primary processes of the brain activated by the external environment do not matter much in sleep time, while the secondary visual processing parts of the brain remain extremely active.

While sleeping and dreaming is a primarily individual neurological experience, the cultural conception of the way to sleep, who or whom one sleeps near, dream content meaning, and the waking reflection and/or sharing of dreams are culturally enforced; these social facts dispel the notion that sleeping and dreaming are solely individualistic actions. One of the most important claims of this thesis’ ethnography is the reflection/communicative

aspect of dreaming as crucial for the efficacy of the schematization process. The neurobiological, chemical, and structural evidence of sleep and dreams as memory consolidation and an active part of thought of the same importance and complexity as waking consciousness further bolsters this hypothesis. There are multiple layers of schematization occurring during both waking and dream experiences, with schemata created through consciously experienced reality being unconsciously analyzed and thus further re-schematized by the hippocampus during the memory consolidation during sleep. The separation of memory into procedural, episodic, and semantic types also shows an evolution of memory from a sensory to a contextualized imagistic to a symbolic phenomenon—just as the dream process and reflection/communication of it reinforces and/or establishes experience as an abstract but effective schematic representation of cultural and idiosyncratic frameworks:

“newly acquired memories will be reactivated in NREM sleep, especially in SWS (Born and Wilhelm, 2012; Wamsley, 2014). In this period, there will be a mechanism that selects and determines which memories should be strengthened or weakened. If these memories are useful for the individual, they will be enhanced. If not (i.e., these memories are non-adaptive), they will be eliminated or fade away (Stickgold and Walker, 2013). Thus, this stage which mainly occurs in the hippocampus will refer to a procedure of abstraction and extraction, and it leads to fragments of memory. (b) The temporary stored memories in the hippocampus will be transferred into long-term memory which stores in neocortex about 6–7 days later. This stage needs to integrate

these temporary memories into existing schema. Thus, it is associated with a course of redistributing memories and usually results in new connections” (Zhang 2016).

Sleep and dreaming, therefore, is not only vital for memory but specifically for the formation of more complex schemata, the testing and experimentation of and with social constructs, and the affirmation of experience into a cultural and idiosyncratic framework. All of these processes, however, have throughout human history been reaffirmed in the waking state by either communication of the dreams or conscious reflection on them within a metaphysically or ideologically significant framework. This fact will become more important in the ethnographic analysis of dreams in the postmodern context and the potential negative affect a lack of ideological and social frameworks have on their psychological functions.

### **B. Analogous functions of rituals and dreaming**

Put succinctly, it is liminal experience and accompanying psycho-social processes which give rituals and dreams analogous functions as agents of re-order.

Ritual, at both a social and cognitive level, consolidates cultural structures, morality, and ideology through explicit and implicit metaphor—most potently and dramaturgically during times of liminality. Dreams provide the same function for memory, deeply embedded symbolic structures, highly available and apparent symbols, and liminal experience—both daily and epochally. Both use the biological and chemical structures of the brain as the means by which the human psychology may schematize or re-schematize experience within an

idiosyncratic or cultural framework. Thus, dreams and rituals provide analogous functions as both mediators and (re)constituters of order. This is especially apparent and psycho-socially important during times of liminality where the brain takes dissonances and, through the consolidation of experience and memory, (re)schematizes reality to create a state of equilibrium. In this sense, both cognitively and socially, dreams are rituals.

The ritual process most often utilizes liminality derived from epochal moments universally recognized across cultures for their significance, specifically that of nature and the natural elements (winter into spring, summer into fall, weather patterns, etc.) and, more individually significant, rites of passages between states of being (birth, puberty, marriage, death). The liminality of these changes between states of being is readily apparent, culturally defined, and universal across geographic and temporal realities.

Dreams also act on the liminality of these moments, which is apparent in examples such as the rites of the Plains Indians, where “dreams are considered as extrapsychic events, occurring simultaneously on various planes of reality in both sacred and linear time as well as in sacred and physical geography” (Tedlock 1992:7). In psychotherapy sessions with a Plains Indian, “Devereux (1951a) described reality testing and problem solving...and he noted that Plains Indians generally view dreams as aids to solving personal problems. Waude Kracke (1992) argued that dreaming among the Kagwahiv of the Amazon effects a productive ‘mythopoetic’ style of working through personal issues. Among the Sambia of New Guinea, dreams are the subject of private, secret, and public discourse. People share dreams about ritual matters and social conflicts that are already in discussion...[and] keep private dreams about conflicts over illicit desires” (Ingham 1996:48). Further, in cultures such as the Plains Indians, there are “formal vision quests known as ‘crying for a dream,’ in

which individuals at certain life-stages actively seek communication with supernaturals through a combination of waking and sleeping dreams... in societies in which dreams are considered to integrate with, or participate in ‘objective reality,’ dreams are more egosyntonic, or ego strengthening, for the individual” (Tedlock 1992:7). These peoples place importance on dreams as a means of communication with nature, ancestors, and the self as a means of problem solving. Thinking of such experiences in terms of the previously defined ritual learning, a connection should be made between the egosyntonic functions of rituals and dreaming. Importantly, however, dreams also use primal neurobiological realities and processes, specifically in the consolidation of memory and the formation of complex and oftentimes abstract schemata, to take the liminality of daily existence as a conscious and highly social creature and navigate complex social relationships, resolve paradoxical cosmic thought and, especially upon the waking reflection and/or communication of the dream experience, schematize idiosyncratic and culturally defined lessons which may be wrought from said reflection and communication. To relate it back to the dream ideology of Plains Indians, Kuper (1979) “ordered the dream texts... as modes of argument in which a problem is resolved through a series of rule-governed transformations of the initial dream situation” (Tedlock 1992:27). Thus, a context exists in which dreams are used to schematize experience in a post-dream waking state and create a state of equilibrium in a time of psychological and/or social liminality.

Jeanette Mageo, who has devoted nearly all of her career to looking at dreams anthropologically, discusses the way in which ambiguity drives the cognitive processes of dreaming; from her perspective, the consistent reports from dreamers of the ambiguous nature of the dream experience is “not merely a property of dream imagery, but ignites a

process that *is* dream thinking... when images are ambiguous, one's mind cannot fix on a single meaning... this inability catalyzes a play of memories and meanings that implicitly raises questions." In this view, the waking reflection of the ambiguous (liminal) dream experience is the crucial component for schematization to occur since the ambiguity forces the dreamer to decide on any potential number of meanings and question "personal life-history memories that initially evoke dreamer's ambivalence [and] also... the shared cultural models that are a source of their ambivalence" (Mageo 2019:326). In this paper, she looked at the dream journals and analyses of 114 American students as a way to draw out "critical parts of their personal histories, but also [reveal] feelings about these histories and about major features of middle-class American life." She used Empson's "useful stratagem of identifying ambiguity types" (Mageo 2019:329). Her focus was on supermasculinity and ambivalence in American dreams, providing a useful tool for documenting and analyzing dreams in a post-industrial, high-tech, western context. In this way, she identifies much symbolism from specific dream narratives that tend towards aggression, strength, and power dynamics. It is both ambiguity and cultural models which drive the dreaming process and the specific symbolism of the dreams of a population: "[c]ultural models are deeply linked to social values and tend to be morally valorized by people in groups that hold them... ambivalence... registers new or magnified difficulties people experience during and lingering after times when they used a cultural model" (Mageo 2019:341-342). This echoes the importance of liminality (here, ambiguity) in establishing and maintaining cultural values and morality, both in public and idiosyncratic forms.

As with the ritual experience, the ambiguity of the dream experience (especially upon waking reflection) forces the dreamer to decide on what it means and ultimately reinforce or

rewrite schemata at all potential levels of complexity. This liminal ambiguity positions the psycho-cultural functions of ritual and dreams as a resolution of cosmic, social, or individual change/disorder that, through the behaviors of the participants, may be re-ordered (i.e. the process of schematization).

### **C. Cultural frameworks for the dream experience**

Of central significance to this thesis is the stark contrast between the ethnographic record of dreams and accompanying cultural frameworks of postmodern, urban Western society and pre-industrial peoples. There are main features of the dream ethnographies of pre-industrial cultures, specifically a) the dream experience existing as a reality at least co-equal with that of waking experience, and b) the dream experience as holding vital information about the self, the past, and/or the future. These are not mutually exclusive, but rather constituent parts of the societal framework surrounding the interpretation and communication of dreams; in fieldwork done with the Guajiro in Venezuela, “dreaming is described as reality in all senses, not only depicting or foretelling actual events that will occur in the future, but commenting on the dreamer’s present physical and spiritual status (Watson and Watson-Franke 1977; Watson 1981). The Ojibwa of Manitoba... are like the Guajiro in describing the dream experience as an *actual* experience of the self. Further, they... have a unified spatio-temporal frame of reference for all self-related experience” (Tedlock 1992:5). A majority of the world’s population not subscribed to Western philosophical thought, in other words, have not isolated the dream experience as a completely unreal phenomenon or relegated it to a strictly psychoanalytical treatment of the individual, in private, with a therapist.

Dreams, in ethnographic record, are often effectively applied to the actions of ritual initiates as a way to restructure their lives in the liminal and post-liminal phases. Previously mentioned was the Plains Indians ‘crying for a dream,’ where an individual seeks revelation in an isolated place without food or water. Though adults also take part in such rituals to receive revelations, it is undertaken by all young men as part of the rite of passage to manhood. The dreams that they have are ways to gain spiritual knowledge of themselves, but most especially their “oneness with all things, to know that all things are [their] relatives” (Black Elk 1953:46). In this sense, the ritual seeking of a dream, be it for the transition to manhood, the healing of a sick relative, or the revelation of some kind of information through divination/mediumship, becomes the way by which liminality is transformed through and into knowledge. Thus, dreams become an avenue by which individuals restructure their lives and psychology through a cultural medium to make sense of their transition from one state to another. Knowledge of the self, cultural practices, and the cosmos becomes a source of power by which the individual and social/moral values become more cohesive.

The Zuni are a group from New Mexico whose dream ideology Professor Tedlock documented and compared to the Quiche Maya of Momostenango, Guatemala. For the Zuni, while dreaming a “segment of the dreamer’s self travels outside the body and has experiences in past, distant, or future times and places.” This places dreams explicitly as a metaphysical event existing outside of just the dreamer’s sleeping consciousness, where either “one’s mind or emotions... [or] one’s breath wanders... out into the world” (Tedlock 1992:113). This creates a kind of danger to dreaming through its apparent closeness with the experience of dying. For the Quiches, who also “recognize a close connection between dreaming and dying... [there is] so little fear of the dark that they may visit one another and even initiate



long journeys in the middle of the night, and they express noticeably less anxiety about dreaming.” There are two main theories the Quiche have about what is happening to the body during dreaming. One is that “the dreamer’s luck or destiny... leaves the body and goes about in the world, meeting other people’s and animal’s free souls. The other is that the gods or ancestors approach the sleeping dreamer’s body and awaken the lightning-soul... which then struggles with the visitors until they give the dreamer a message” (Tedlock 1992:115).

Significant is not just the extra-materialistic explanation of the dream experience for these peoples, but specifically their acts of dream sharing:

“Dreams are shared both informally among family members and friends and formally in social groups... the precise social situation, the number and type of dreams shared, the discourse frames in which they are shared, and the outcomes of the sharing process are remarkably different... these variations in behavior between the two societies are rooted in differences in both cultural theories about dreaming and attitudes toward the dreaming process itself” (Tedlock 1992:116-117).

The sharing of dreams within a cultural framework, in other words, has a huge impact on the way the dreams are categorized and processed at both a social and cognitive level.

Schematization and memory consolidation occur because of the formation of schemas and memories in our waking consciousness, and thus the cultural necessity of remembering, communicating, and interpreting dreams with the help of a larger social network becomes vital to the social and cognitive efficacy of dreaming.

Looking at the historical development of hyper-rationalism in the postmodern West is thus necessary to provide context for the claim and ethnographic evidence that introducing and/or reinforcing a social obligation to document, reflect on, and communicate dreams positively benefits the psycho-social experience of the participants of this study.

## **PART THREE**

### **A. Western postmodernity, dream ideology, and liminality**

To define any period of history with any exactitude could be considered a fruitless, endless endeavor. This is even more apparent when that period not only exists in living memory but as the current and ever-evolving socio-economic reality subject to discussion, debate, and even controversy. Thus, western postmodernity and its ultimate effect on dream ideology is a complex historical and intellectual phenomenon emergent from pivotal historical and technological developments. Defined as a “movement characterized by broad skepticism, subjectivism, or relativism [with] a general suspicion of reason; and an acute sensitivity to the role of ideology in asserting and maintaining political and economic power” (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2022), to fully understand the paradigm shifts culturally there must be an exploration of its roots in ancient western thought on the very notion of reality. Here, “a sharp dichotomy between dreaming or internal subjective reality and waking or external objective reality, together with the devaluation of dreaming, can be traced back to the scholastic inheritance from the ancient Greeks, most especially Aristotle. He dismissed dreams as nothing but mental pictures which, like reflections in water, are not like the real object.” This, however, was less practically applicable to the highly religious and symbolically inclined ancient populations and more so an experiment of philosophical thought. It is not until the Enlightenment and Scientific Revolution, with a focus away from pervasive religiosity towards the superiority of rational, ‘objective’ reality that the blossoming of what we define as postmodernity occurs. The ultimate authority and desire of science towards objectivity and “the development of Cartesian mechanistic dualism” finally placed dreams “totally within the realm of fantasy or irrational experience” (Tedlock

1992:2). How much such philosophy was of immediate effect to the cultural framework of the average person can be debated; however, there can be no doubt that the broader cultural and institutional trend of western society was towards more rationality and less emphasis on the legitimacy of inner subjective experiences.

The rise of industrialization and subsequent rapid technological innovation further paved a road to postmodernity. There was a shrinking of tight-knit communities following associated urbanization, with ideological and philosophical movements emerging out the disillusionment from increasing social isolation, rapid technological advancement, a loss of religiosity, and, ultimately, the World Wars. The hyper-rationality and rapid loss of explicit social ritualistic behavior from the 1950s and 1960s onward was exacerbated by extreme and unprecedented technological complexity, further urbanization and the spread of suburbs, ideological trends following the societal catastrophes of the World Wars, and the disillusionment (especially in the United States) with powers structures leading to large scale societal upheaval and change. Ultimately, the rise of a globalized, homogenized, and Technocratic world with a glaring disregard or even disdain for the notion of a common socio-cultural reality emerges: “as members of Western society, we are living at a time when our own concepts about reality have undergone tremendous changes, resulting in a polarization between... institution and impulse (Turner 1976). Within the institutional paradigm true reality is revealed only when we are in total control of our faculties, while within the impulsive paradigm reality is revealed during dreaming and other alternative forms of consciousness” (Tedlock 1992:4).

Important for understanding the nature of postmodernity as compared to modernity, however, is what David Harvey deems the “most startling fact about postmodernism: its total

acceptance of the ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity, and the chaotic” (Harvey 1990:44). There exists broad cultural movement towards a constant changing of symbolism, values, and morality which is highly unique in human history, especially as it pertains to the extreme technological advancement that has facilitated such continuous change into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Though the postmodern is distinguished from the modern as a turning away from the latter’s hyper-rationality, there remains a societal belief in a linear progress of ideals, social change, and morality that is constantly shifting and thus both absolute and non-absolute. This apathy, acceptance, and/or striving for non-stability also seems to indicate a psycho-cultural reaction to acute stressors: both animals and humans “react to acute stress with a fight or flight response...unpacking the relationship between society and the (impending) ‘death of nature’ in the epoch referred to as the ‘Anthropocene’ that includes specific engagement with the psychological...[allows one to] ponder on *societal death anxiety* as a coping mechanism for what is widely perceived to be an era in which ecological catastrophe is imminent...the loss of a loci of control...[creates a] significant barrier in an individual’s decision to act” (Walton & Shaw 2015:1-3).

The postmodern condition as a philosophical, cultural, and individual phenomenon is crucial for understanding the decline of the cognitive role of rituals and dreams in the liminal state. Victor Turner wrote extensively about the concept of liminality in the anthropological context and how it has evolved in a postmodern western world. In works such as *The Ritual Process* (1966), *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (1974) and ultimately *Liminal to Liminoid* (1974), Turner grounds the tripartite structure of rites of passage in ethnographic observation, and in doing so sees a necessity in demarcating the experience of liminality in a pre- and post-industrial context:

“The ‘work’ of the collectivity in performing symbolic actions and manipulating symbolic objects... is an ethical feature of ‘cyclical, repetitive societies,’ not as yet unbalanced by innovative ideas and technical changes... the liminal phases of tribal society invert but do not usually subvert the status quo, the structural form, of society... liminality is a temporal interface whose properties partially invert those of the already consolidated order which constitutes any specific cultural ‘cosmos’... but one thing must be kept in mind: all these acts and symbols are of obligation. Even the breaking of rules has to be done during initiation. This is one of the distinctive ways in which the liminal is marked off from the liminoid” (Turner 1974:64, 72-73).

In other words, the liminal aspects of individual and social life in pre-industrial societies were regulated on both a microcosmic and macrocosmic level by cyclical, cultural structures which aided in the reordering of reality and in which the collective community participated in. In post-industrial, complex mass society, there is not a sense of cyclicity to time or behavior but rather a constant ‘progression’ or attempt at innovation. The fundamental mechanisms of cultural activity (such as rituals) as previously experienced throughout all human history existed as obligation to the culture and community; in the postmodern western context, such cultural baselines exist (structurally and ideologically) as an option in which one has the free will to participate rather than being a fundamental duty to the *communitas*, the gods, and reality itself. For Turner, this is the crucial distinction between the liminal and the liminoid. Whereas liminality inverts certain aspects of society as a means of reordering or reaffirming, liminoidality subverts via individual choice, which in post-industrial society is

seen as a conduit for innovation, creation, and progress. Rather than being a temporary foray into novel situations or social norms, then, liminality becomes a semi-permanent state as an adaptation to persistent and rapid innovation, which creates a continual shifting of ideological, cultural, and material boundaries and therefore a constant state of liminality—the liminoid.

This individualism has reached extremes in the previously defined postmodern context, especially in the realm of the dream experience. The American culture lacks a coherent kinship nexus by which individuals may model their behavior and create a cultural and self-generative social network. This is reflective in looking at the ethnographic record of non-western, pre-industrial societies where dreams are more freely shared not just among the family but throughout many social relationships; these aid in the transitional stages of emotional and physical life of humans. Liminality and, for this ethnography liminoidality, are hugely significant for any study of dreaming in that the dream experience as an individual psychological occurrence wherein the four types of liminal passage (status, situational, spatial, temporal) may be both experienced and resolved within the same dream-narrative experience. In spite of the extremely personal quality of the imagistic nature of dreaming, the reflection on a dream and its behavioral and reality-perception effects in the post-dream state allows for the dream to become a material, social phenomenon. This contributes greatly to processes of developmental individuation along with social structuration and stability. In such a structural functionalist view, dreams are phenomena which illustrate both the tension and harmoniousness of the symbiotic relationship between individual and group/society/culture.

This is only plausible, however, if the socio-cultural context of the dreamer not only views dreams as significant but also creates a social arena in which a dialogue of and about dream events is exercisable. In the instance of the institutions of postmodern Western ideology, this is not the cultural reality. Be it an extremist product of enlightenment rationality, the decline of spirituality among the populace in general, techno-cultural homogeneity, or all of the above, the result is the same: dreams to the postmodern, Western citizen are not institutionalized culturally or personally, and therefore their evolved purposes of ordering reality cannot be fulfilled in the community or the individual psychology.

Regarding dreams, Western culture “recognize[s] dreaming as self-related but [does] not accord this experience the same status as waking reality and thus we do not fully integrate dream experiences with our other memories” (Tedlock 1992:1). The negative implications for this view of dreaming as a ‘nonreal’ experience lies especially in memory integration and, ultimately, consolidation in the post-dream waking state. This is of special importance to the claim of this thesis the lack of institutionalized, cultural frameworks for dream interpretation and communication severely undermines the vital cognitive functions that dreams facilitate. Put simply, the lack of a unified, ideological, socio-cultural context for dreaming could be one of the most significant causes for the liminoidal state of citizens of modernity-creating feelings of isolation, depression, anxieties, and other psychological conditions driven by the mind’s inability to properly schematize and consolidate experiences, liminal and otherwise.



## **B. Ethnographic methods**

This ethnography explores whether and how the dreams and dream-experiences of a postmodern, early adult, urban subset of the Houston population are reflective of a constant state of liminoidality in which individuals are left in perpetual states of transition, unable to fully move on to a next state of being. A qualitative measurement of the effects of this on behavior and communication is the basis of this ethnography; further, how the communication of and reflection on the dreams of the studied population contribute to theirs (and my own) perception, communication, and possibly evolving ideology of dreams and dreaming will be focused on.

Importantly, this thesis claims that having a cultural, ideological, and or/metaphysical framework with which to both interpret and communicate dreams is vital for their psychological and cultural benefits, especially in relation to schematization. As the ethnographic process goes on, the cognitive and social efficacy of the dream process as the participants go from various states of communication and belief regarding the dream experience is tracked.

As previously stated, this ethnography is focused on five individuals aged 20-25 based in the Houston area. This age group was chosen specifically because of the transitory nature of the age group (university attendees, living away from their parents, figuring out their education and career paths, in a transitory state between youth and full adulthood). This transitional state of the ethnographic subjects is a great way to explore the potential power of dreams as a way to schematize experienced reality and move out of the liminal/liminoidal stage of their current lives into a re-ordered state of being. This is especially important when trying to comprehend and interpret a fragmentary, non-unified American culture which is

simultaneously homogenized and idiosyncratic; in this sense, liminality and liminoidality itself becomes a unifying feature of postmodern American culture by which dream experiences may be understood.

Further, all subjects are members of a postmodern, post-industrial, high-tech, urban subset of the population. This is crucial for looking at their cultural and ideological dream interpretation and communication frameworks. All subjects, even with different religious and ideological backgrounds, have a basis in the hyper-rationality of explanations of the phenomenon of dreams. This exists in stark contrast to the previous ethnographic examples wherein the dream state is viewed as, at the minimum, of co-equal reality with the waking state and useful for a wide variety of religious, cultural, and communicative purposes.

Using Roman Jakobson's formulation of the speech act, dream interpretation in the ethnographic process can be formulated as "a communicative event... [with] a 'sender' (dream teller) and a 'receiver' (dream listener), as well as a 'referent' or narrative event (dream experience) the actual message of which is the 'message' (dream story). What is said in the interpretive system is the 'code' (dream explanation) structuring the relationship between the narrative event and the message. Finally, the physical 'channel' and psychological connection (psychodynamics) between the sender and receiver enable them to enter and stay in communication" (Tedlock 1992:30). In other words, the ethnographic process between a dreamer and the interviewer becomes a multi-dimensional relationship where cultural understandings, memory, linguistics, power dynamics, and interpretive frameworks all intersect to play a role in deciphering, at a micro and macrocosmic scale, the dream experience. It was important to keep in mind that the dream experience and specifically dream sharing is "'performative' in the sense that...it is part of a process of

adjusting to the changing circumstances of life. And since human beings use language to deceive themselves and others, ‘dream images’ must be interpreted as ‘metaphorical symbols’” (Ingham 1996:48).

The following is an overview of the dream questionnaire given to the ethnographic participants; though providing a strong framework, there was significant variation of the interview conversation depending upon the individuals dream experience.

### **I. Background Interview Questions:**

1. How often do you dream?
2. How often do you reflect on your dreams, and to what degree?
3. Do you believe that your waking life affects if/when you dream?
  - 3a. Does it affect the content of your dream? The frequency?
4. Do you view dreams as having any significance?
  - 4a. Do you think the dream experience is a product of psychology/neurochemistry, or as a separate reality our consciousness accesses when we sleep? If you believe in one or the other more strongly, or both equally, or neither. Elaborate.
5. Do you view dreams as positive or negative experiences?
  - 5a. *Dreams as expressions of anxiety, isolation, or the like.*
6. Do you use your dream experiences in any way during your waking life?
7. How would you describe the phenomena of time in your dreams?
8. How would you describe the phenomena of space in your dreams?
9. How do you define community?
10. Do you feel connected to a community? If so, to what extent?

## **II. Weekly Dream Interview Questions**

1. Describe generally your dreams this week- did you feel they shared similar qualities/images/experiences/emotions?
2. Was your dream imagistic or narrative?
3. Did you have a dream that stands out in your memory/consciousness?
4. Did you feel like you encountered and/or processed any emotions, experiences, anxieties from your waking life?

*4a. Did you interact with your community over the course of the week?*

5. Do you feel like the process of documenting and sharing your dreams has helped, hurt, or not affected your ability to remember your dreams?
6. Do you feel like the process of documenting and sharing your dreams has helped, hurt, or not affected the amount you have been dreaming?

## **III. Personal Dream Questionnaire**

*[Questions which, after the participant writes their dream in a stream-of-consciousness, narrative form upon waking, provide an opportunity for a streamlining of dream classification and, more importantly, to provide a discourse framework in which the participants may think more deeply and reflexively about previous, current, and future dreams.]*

1. Based on what you just described, do you believe that your dream was more narrative focused, or image/material focused, or both?

2. Did you feel a familiarity with the setting, people, and/or objects of your dream experience, or did those elements instead lack familiarity? Elaborate

After being interviewed with the background interview questions (I), the subjects were introduced to some terminology as a way to standardize and help better describe, at a fundamental level, their dreams:

Dream experience- a way to more accurately and precisely describe the dream as an amalgamation of the way the dreamer experiences space, time, their senses, the narrative structure, people, and objects [people and objects may be considered as one experiential cognitive phenomenon].

Manifest- content in the dream which is directly, materially present.

Latent- the self-realized meaning of the dreaming; the underlying symbolic purpose of the manifest content in the dream experience.

Narrative focused- a dream which, when recalled, has a focus on the progression of the dream, wherein the 'story' of the dream is more easily remembered/described by the dreamer upon waking, and is recognized as being the more impactful component of the dream (as opposed to image focused).

Image focused- a dream which, when recalled, has a focus on striking or powerful imagistic experiences, the power of which can be due to familiarity, emotional/aesthetic reactions (such as beauty, awe, or fear), or strangeness (see: dream refraction); these striking images may include but are not limited to the setting, objects, and/or people in the dream experience.

The subjects were asked to record their dreams upon waking, if remembered, in a stream-of-consciousness narrative style. This was necessary both as a means to free them from the constraints of attempting to explain an often confusing, often non-linear experience in a traditional form. Furthermore, the evolution of the way all the subjects described their dreams was more easily compared and identified by adhering to a uniform style which is more reflective of an actual dream experience. Along with this stream-of-conscious recording of their dreams, they were asked to answer the questions in the personal dream questionnaire (III). Finally, I met with the subjects once every seven or so days to go over the previous week's dream experiences, specifically looking at the macrocosmic trends of the dreams and the way they were potentially influencing their waking life choices as well as recording any changes in their ideological or metaphysical frameworks for looking at the dreams (II).

### **C. Ethnographic data and analysis**

Subject A is a 23-year-old female, Subject B is a 24-year-old male, Subject C is a 23 year old female, Subject D is a 23 year old female, and Subject E is a 23 year old male. Subjects A, B, and D come from highly religious Christian backgrounds, with B being self-described as having become highly atheistic while both A and D now express some doubts about aspects of Christianity/the Bible while still maintaining a certain level of belief in a higher power. Subject E comes from a highly religious Islamic background; while he no longer considers himself a practicing Muslim, he still observes familial ritual duties and customs and maintains certain metaphysical beliefs. Subject C comes from a slightly Christian background, with a loss of belief early on in her adolescence that has evolved slightly but

still not fully returned; she expresses doubt especially in the fundamentals of Christianity and the religious community in general.

The first and most fundamental question of the participants was their pre-conceived notions of the importance of dreaming, both generally and from an ideological/metaphysical level. All subjects agreed that dreams provide a function-be it psychological, metaphysical, or a combination of the two. None expressed a concept of cultural or social drivers as the purpose of dreaming, and none but E actively kept any form of dream journal or documentation before this study.

### **Subject A:**

In her first dream interview, A described dreams as being “where your emotions are more blatant... and your self-awareness reveals itself.” For her, dreams may not always be rational, but “every dream has a kind of importance, every dream has something to say.” Her vocabulary seemed to view dreams as a rational product of the mind but still had lessons about things that were weighing on an individual’s mind, even subconsciously. Further, dreams for her had relevance to her waking experience.

*“Recently, they [dreams] have been feeling very nostalgic and I’ve been dreaming about people from back home a lot, like, from high school, which I haven’t really thought about people from the past in a while. So right now I’m kind of getting more nostalgic and I feel like it affects the way I’m thinking about people and I start to miss people I haven’t talked to or maybe want to text my mom right now. I’m not usually*

*like that but my dream, something is pulling me to think about those people to be in that place.”*

The nostalgic feelings associated with the dream experience is something described by most of the participants and might be due to both the neurological use of dreams as consolidators of memory and the material, cultural, and symbolic ephemerality of postmodernity as previously described.

In her description of recent dream phenomena, they are a means by which her psychology and/or subconscious makes its wishes or thoughts available to the waking mind. Interestingly, she uses the phrase “something is pulling [her]” to think about that, implying perhaps a level of autonomy of the subconsciousness or a potential metaphysical driver of the dream experience. With this said, she did not find herself actively documenting, communicating, or most effectively utilizing her dream experience in a significant social way.

She mentioned that she doesn't necessarily pay attention to the surroundings in a dream until (if) she thinks about it after the fact; I therefore asked how her dreams played out in a narrative or imagistic sense, and out of that how she felt she progressed in her dreams. characteristics (as opposed to imagistic), to which she replied:

*“there's no space. Like, I could be driving a car or something but even if I'm driving a car, it cuts to the next place. This is weird but I never remember dreaming and driving and parking somewhere and getting out like going from point A to point B, I don't know, I've been in the car but I've never been from like point A to point B.”*



The imagery of her dreams can be strong, such as when she had dreams (especially growing up) about horrific images that she “had before really seeing or experiencing violent things, like I wouldn’t have had it in my head” while dreaming her “whole family got murdered at her grandma’s house.” But she, especially more recently, has had dreams where anxieties are driving a more coherent narrative, such as when she dreamt she “checked [her] bank account and it was depleted... and asked ‘What can I do?’ while remembering all my big real life recent purchases.” This is a great example of both day-to-day liminalities and the more epochal liminal experience of being a young adult paying for one’s own things being schematized and learned through the consolidating effect of a dream. Further, it is an example of the inextricable linkage of public and personal ideals, “generated primarily out of the unconscious [and] once generated... exists on the public level as a cultural symbol” (Obeyesekere 1981:37).

Overall, the first interview saw Subject A as cognizant of the dream experience and with a good vocabulary for describing what she viewed as interesting phenomena in her dreams. She also viewed dreams as having at the least a psycho-social purpose and potentially a more metaphysical cause/significance. Her potential for more rigorous documentation and significant application of her dreams into her waking consciousness was apparent even from this first interview. She would soon prove in several instances that, for her, more waking thought and action to social and self ‘importance’ of the dream experience would yield positive real-life results.

The first instance of this waking application of a dream experience came a couple of dream discussions in. She consistently reported having dreams about work, and described their type as narrative, with normal but stressful interactions with both the environment and

people. In this specific dream, she had a dream where she interacted with a former boss of hers. They had a good relationship when working together, with her boss even getting her the promotion that led her to the new job location, but she felt like “things ended somewhat unfulfilled without any closure.” In the dream, her boss visited her new job and Subject A felt anxious/stressed trying to please them. When discussing the dream in our interview, she says she woke up feeling like she wanted to reach out to her, echoing previous statements made about dreams instigating nostalgic feelings about people she had come out of contact with. She ultimately concluded that she should reach out to her, and ended up meeting her for dinner and having a great experience where she could express her gratitude, receive validation, and have some closure. In this case, even the act of communicating the dream experience with me caused action in her waking life and the ultimate re-schematization of her relationship with not just her old boss, but her work and position within it. Interestingly, after their dinner, Subject A had the same dream about her boss, but it was filled with positive emotions and an easy-going attitude; in contrast to the previous anxiety, this dream “felt like ‘good to see you.’” This subject’s struggle with a change in her status stemmed primarily from a lack of institutionalized kinship nexus’ in American culture. Through her dream experiences and specifically through the opportunity to discuss them, she was able to resolve the liminoidality of a personal relationship and come out of it with more personal and social peace.

### **Subject B:**

Subject B is a skeptic of all kinds of metaphysical belief; growing up very strictly Christian, he became disillusioned with his faith and the notion of faith as he got older, ultimately

becoming a self-described atheist in college. In our preliminary interview, he said that dreams weren't very important to him, and sees them as mostly "meaningless" in the sense of containing higher-level messages. For him, their purpose is mostly to "allow the brain to relax." Throughout the interview he seemed to take a hardcore rationalistic stance, incorporating things he had learned about the nature of sleep and dreaming neurobiologically. His chosen major is Psychology, so he has a natural inclination to think in such terms. Because he does "not believe we are fully in control of our brain" during sleeping and the dream experience, there exists a fundamental belief that dreams have a sort of absurdist nature. Thus, because he ideologically toes a line between a hyper-rational construction of existence and the human inability to objectively perceive that existence, dreams do not (or cannot) deliver messages from any kind of metaphysical source. That said, like subject A he views dreams as often being nostalgic, leading him to think about things that he hasn't thought about for a long time.

During one of our last interviews, we discussed the difference between imagistic and narrative dreams and were led into a discussion about the visual nature of the dream. In response to discussing a dream he had set in his old high school, I asked why, in many visual experiences of both imagistic and narrative dreams, do the places you're in feel both familiar and unfamiliar. His response was highly interesting:

*"The visual consciousness whenever you're asleep is not able to articulate the range of emotions that your sleeping consciousness is feeling. Whenever you think of home, your body feels home but since you're asleep you can't articulate some of those*

*specific memories, so your brain conjures up a kind of pseudo-home. If someone asked you to draw a picture of your house right now, it wouldn't be perfect.*

*When I think of my high school, I think of the one I went to—but I've had dreams where I'm there but not there because there might be a room or set up that's not how it actually is. My sleeping brain is trying to formulate it, but either way I just know that's what it's meant to be. I feel like drawing skills equivocates to your brain being able to visualize it if you're a very visual person. Maybe people who are more visual-oriented probably have very detailed dreams where more details are right in line, whereas people who are less visually oriented need to be able to fill in the pieces.”*

As an artist in many different mediums, Subject B seems highly interested in the visual components of the dream experience and how dreams seem to be spatially organized depending on the way one's brain works. Though there is not a specific mention of any metaphysical driver of the dream experience, language he uses such as him “knowing that's what it's meant to be” perhaps implies a growing view of dreams as containing sorts of messages—even if coming from the self rather than an external supernatural force.

This conversation, however, led to a wondering on my part about the role language and hyper-literate societies play in shaping the dream experience. Though it seems that most of our postmodern minds work to verbally articulate as much as or rather than visually articulate our perceptions, for most of human history that is an abnormal state of being. Our psychology is perhaps evolved to process something visually, but in our hyper-literate, hyper-rational society our cognition is less visually oriented and competent, and thus our dreams have become more amorphous and harder to form a cogent picture. Conversely and

perhaps resultingly, as cultural models and vocabularies for communicating dreams have withered, it becomes more and more difficult to verbally construct a coherent narrative of the experience—though the growth and wide-spread use of the internet may be changing our psychology again towards visual processing. For Subject B, having a mind trained or perhaps naturally inclined to make visual constructions of objects and/or events allows for greater imagistic clarity and higher levels of detail when dreaming.

Though by the end of this ethnography Subject B did not view attach any specific ideology to dreams or view them as containing any metaphysical significance, both his vocabulary for discussing dreams and the many discussions we had regarding the nature of dreaming in general led him to create a sort of idiosyncratic model for understanding the dream experience and their purpose. Whereas before they were just “ways for the brain to relax” and did not hold any kind of special messages, by the end of the ethnography he was voluntarily messaging me to tell me a particularly impactful dream he had and discuss the potential purpose the dream cognitively held for him to uncover and reflect on.

### **Subject C:**

Of all the participants, Subject C consistently and with ease was able to recall and write a vivid description of her dream experiences. Her written narratives were significant in not only length but especially in seemingly minute details which were still striking and relevant to her dreams. This subject has dealt with acute anxiety issues for most of her life, especially as it relates to health and worrying about the people in her life that she cares about. Her mother is very religious and has had very vivid dreams she feels are predictive of the future, such as when babies will be born and whether they will be boys or girls. Growing up,

however, Subject C was not very religious and says she took for granted the idea that dreams had a metaphysical power; she “didn’t really think too much about them”—a commonality amongst the participants. That said, she had some very specific dream experiences that impacted her when she was younger: she mentioned a dream she had of a red dog drowning only to wake up the next morning and be told that her aunt’s dog had drowned, ascribing such phenomenon as having “intuition.” This intuition is something she has recognized in herself since she was young, expressing itself as a predictive ability when it comes to people giving her bad news and things that happen to herself or people close to her. This led to us both sharing experiences where we dreamt of a situation or place and had extreme deja-vu days, weeks or even months later when that exact same place/situation occurred in our waking experiences: for her, the dream of her aunt’s dog drowning stood out as the most obvious example of this. In general, however, she would wake up from most dreams “thinking ‘that was a weird dream’, but not wondering ‘what’s the meaning of it.’”

The subject also discussed a recurring dream that she experienced many times growing up, one which she still remembered in great detail and she describes as “scary” and anxiety-ridden:

*“My dad was always at work and my mom, my sister, and my brother was there. My brother was eating a pop tart on the couch. I was walking down the stairs and I was going outside, opened the back door, and I was heading to the garage where we had a fridge. My mom was standing at the top of the stairs holding my sister [even though her sister is 6 years older than her]. In this dream I was 3 or 4. My mom screamed at my brother to get me to pull me back into the house because there are bad people*

*living in the garage. They knew we were there, and we weren't allowed to go out there. We knew they were there but also didn't know, I'm not sure why... We were more vulnerable because my dad wasn't there."*

From my viewpoint, this is a clear expression of the acute anxiety she has dealt with from a very young age. During our preliminary interview, she said she views dreams as usually negative experiences filled with anxiety, usually centering around the deaths of other people. As the ethnography went on, she has done various things to better manage her anxiety and her dreams have also become less explicitly worrisome; during our last meetings, she described her dreams as always being "weird" and not having much logic upon waking:

*"Dreams can help you work things out, but with me a lot of my dreams are snippets and I'm combining a lot of things and I go from scene to scene to scene. In my head during the dream it all makes sense until I think back on it and realize it doesn't make any logical sense. That's the weirdest thing I've always noticed with my dreams, I never question much and even on the rare occasion I do I immediately have a justification for it in the dream... I'm always over stimulated during the day, so I think my brain is always in that mode and even during sleep it's jumping from thing to thing to thing."*

She and I also discussed numerous times the importance of dreams to her mother all throughout her life, and specifically a recurring motif where Subject C's deceased grandma would appear in her mother's dreams and stand there silently, even when being talked to.

Subject C used the language of her deceased grandma coming to “visit” her mom, implying a kind of thinking of the activity as metaphysically significant or existing outside the realm of the explicable. When asked about this, she says that she has grown to view the concept of the soul as being important and more of a part of her ideology in general, especially as it pertains to loved ones who have passed away. She can’t explain some of the dreams of hers/her mothers which have predicted the future, but said:

*“If you believe in souls and heaven it could have been them stopping by on their way. But also, as I’ve gotten older and reflected on a lot of my anxieties and why I have them... I have experienced death and trauma at a young age and have very early memories.”*

We came to the conclusion that her experiences with those deaths and trauma were triggers for memories she has formed which act almost as dreams in the way they consist of both “what really happened and what people tell you happened over and over.”

She felt very strongly that having to record and discuss her dreams caused her to remember them better and in their aforementioned high level of detail. Growing up she says she had a hard time recalling her dreams, but now she both remembers them more easily and also thinks about what they could mean in a way she didn’t before. Her liminoidal emotional state stemming from years of unresolved anxieties and traumas was not given the opportunity to resolve without the use of institutionalized ritual and dream ideologies; this is something our ethnographic relationship allowed her to develop and, ultimately, use to resolve some negative emotions. During our last interview, she expressed her view of dreams as not just



potentially holding experiences which can't be explained rationally, but also ways in which she may delve into past trauma and anxiety and be forced to think on their root causes.

**Subject D:**

Subject D experienced some initial challenges remembering and documenting her dream experiences in great detail, something that she says has been mostly the case throughout most of her life. At the beginning of the ethnography when asked about the importance of dreams to her, she said:

*“They aren’t super deep to me, they’re like entertainment that I’m not necessarily creating intentionally but I don’t really think I’m manifesting that energy into the world... I don’t really think that it’s coming true or that I want it to come true, it’s just entertainment.”*

This view of dreams as entertaining without holding any kind of waking significance is a unique perspective among the subjects of this ethnography, and perhaps is reflective of some of the values held by the cultural postmodern west. That said, in this same preliminary conversation, when asked if she believes any dreams could have any significance, she says:

*“Part of me still believes some parts of the Bible in the sense that messages are sent by a higher power to kind of show you something about the future. I just don’t believe I would be the subject of that and that’s why I don’t pay attention to them like that... When I was super spiritual in high school I do feel like I had dreams that were trying*

*to guide me. But also those might have been crafted by me to make something happen.”*

The seemingly contradictory nature of these answers might be from my questions pushing her to reflect more on the nature of dreaming, but also seems to point to her changing attitudes as she has lost certain elements of her faith. Simultaneously saying that she doesn't believe a higher power would be sending her dreams and that she had dreams during a highly spiritual time in her life is a very interesting duality that could act as a microcosm of the cultural loss of religiosity and subsequent relegating of dreams to a non-real, non-important phenomenon.

In her descriptions of her dreams, they are quite fragmentary experiences which act more as a collection of images rather than containing any strong narrative. This solely imagistic nature is also unique among the participants and presented a challenge to Subject D in documenting and interpreting her dream experiences. Asked if this contributed to her views on dreams, she confirmed that it could be the cause.

As the ethnography progressed, she gradually began to express some level of waking integration of her dream experiences. Even though her descriptions of the dreams would be short and succinct (“dreamt about group of friends, just remember the people,” “next day dreamt about the same thing but at my Oma’s house but it was subtly off because she wasn’t sick”), she said she would remember them 4-5 hours after waking up and expressed that would cause her to subsequently think about the dream a lot. This echoes the experience of Subject A’s nostalgic dreams which stuck with her throughout the day and forced her to reflect on their potential purpose or meaning. During one of our later interviews, I asked

Subject D if her views on dreams had changed at all. She said that some of them had predicted some things happening and she was starting to view them as more significant. She had a very interesting thing she said that mixed a rational, biological approach to the dream experience while expressing their importance, saying:

*“Anything the body produces is significant, but not all dreams are necessarily significant.”*

Again, there seems to be a contradiction that is present in her thoughts on dreams, but her continuing reflections on what dreams mean to her indicate that she grew to view some dreams as having a deeper purpose while maintaining a rational approach to their psychological nature. Though she said dreams have a certain “uneasy” quality to them, she still viewed dreams as positive experiences which “develop your personal history,” which places the ‘unconscious’ on a more equal plane with the ability of waking consciousness in forming the idiosyncratic personality.

### **Subject E:**

Subject E is unique as coming from a strict Islamic background, where dreams are both highly relevant to their ideological belief and are more freely discussed amongst his family. At the start of this ethnography, he still took a more rationalistic approach to his view of dreams; this view would change not just as a product of our numerous discussions

surrounding them, but also in lieu of geopolitical events taking place which made him consider the dream experience as having potential metaphysical significance.

In preliminary discussions about his views on dreams, he viewed them as being mostly “random” and he “didn’t really pay attention to their content or think about any hidden meaning.” That said, he enthusiastically documented and discussed his dreams with me throughout the ethnographic process, with a couple of them standing out in our discussions. Specifically, he had a reoccurring dream that came at a period in his life of great anxiety and change:

*“The one I remember most is a recurring my teeth falling out of my mouth. There were a lot of things going on in my life at the time that I attributed those dreams to. I was undergoing a fair bit of dental work and at times had pain in my teeth while I slept. At times I dealt with high amounts of anxiety about uncertainties with my future - graduating college at all, getting a job, not losing my current job, earning enough money to pay my bills, to save up for my goals, achieving goals that seem too difficult while watching myself grow older and the time slip away. The recurring dream became almost a projection of my anxieties as well as a manifestation of physical pain I felt and my fear of aging with little achieved.”*

To me, this is one of the clearest and most concise examples of the way in which great change and accompanying anxieties can be catalysts not just for more frequent and vivid dreams, but the opportunity to use those dream experiences to reflect on the causes and potential solutions in the waking consciousness. For Subject E, the imagery of his teeth

falling out presented a situation where his then current dental issues could serve as a springboard for the other, less physically tangible, worries in his life. All of these were of a liminal nature related to various changes in his statuses, be them economic, academic, or existential.

After the violence which erupted in Gaza with the war between Hamas and Israel, Subject E talked about how both him and his family had multiple dream experiences which caused him to reflect more deeply on their potential metaphysical significance:

*“My mom said she’s been dreaming that she’s in our house and she’s going around pulling everything out of the pantry and cooking huge amounts of food and she turns around and there’s like 50 people in the house squatting together and she’s feeding them food... for me I’ve just been dreaming of stormy weather, like hearing the sound of rumbling thunder.”*

The impact of his mother’s dream was apparent in discussing it, perhaps even more impactful because it was shared with him by her. When asked if these dreams reinforced his belief that the treatment of Palestinian civilians was wrong, he responded that it had. Though living in America, his cultural, religious, and moral understanding of the situation in the Middle East were further revealed and strengthened by his and his family’s dream experience. In this sense, even though geopolitical and ethnic violence is not directly happening to him, he was empathetically validated and moved to further direct action in his waking life through attendance of protests, political action, and more. In discussing the Islamic Tuareg-Kunta relationships in rural northern Mali, Professor Rasmussen identifies “locally prevalent but not agreed upon symbols. Cultural models expressed in [the] dream reflect the dreamer’s

personal predicament and mixed feelings in the context of conflictual models of gender [and] religion...dreams' core metaphors do not necessarily always signify mastery of internalized cultural models by evoking a dreamer's past, but instead may signify attempts to balance contested cultural knowledge in confronting difficult choices and fear of the future” (Rasmussen 2015:637).

The balance of knowledge within the familial unit, the experience of events impacting the Islamic world as a whole, and personal anxieties on his future and status changes created a fruitful discourse framework which reflected his evolving views on the way dreams may act as a culturally and metaphysically significant phenomenon. Further, his liminoidal emotional and physical state arising from health problems (his dental pain) and status change (his desire to become successful and make a real impact on the world) allowed his dreams to become rich grounds for exploring the liminality of his existence and reflecting on how to resolve it. Asked at the end of this ethnographic process to give a summary on how his views on dreaming have changed, he said:

*“I try to document my dream as well as my feelings around how they are related to my life now if I feel like there may be something significant I need to think about later. I see myself giving my dreams greater weight now than before we started but there are many I still ignore or quickly forget about without reflecting on their significance. Perhaps the issues behind these dreams are too small for me to care about, or too great for me to consider dealing with. Maybe the ones I forget aren't very significant at all or maybe the ones I forget are based from roots of my deepest pain too difficult to deal with. Both situations seem likely and the volume of dreams*

*I've had in my life make me certain that both situations have been true at different times.*

*The more I kept track of them, the more frequently I began to notice a pattern of my dreams showing myself confronting suppressed emotions or situations that are challenging within my life. I see dreams now almost as a self-healing mechanism at times of my unconscious mind bringing key issues to the forefront for better or worse to give me insight on myself and the need to resolve certain conflicts. Sometimes even the path to resolving a conflict.”*

## CONCLUSION

### A. Broader implications

There seems to be a clear importance of dreams to psychological and social health and stability that, as expressed by many of the participants' initial beliefs, have been lost to the ideological, technological, and cultural shuffle of postmodernity. Liminality, as resolved through the ritual and dream experiences, is crucial in the process of change and becoming: change and becoming are crucial in the processing of knowledge, memory, and socio-cultural status and responsibility. All of the participants are in a state of change or changes in status, be it personal, educational, professional, or any combination of those. Many of the participants expressed the dream experience as eliciting extremely nostalgic feelings for people, places, and times in previous parts of their lives—potentially a reflection of the short- and long-term memory consolidation process, potentially a reflection of the liminoidal state of ideology, symbolism, and material culture in America and the postmodern west at large. Apparent in my discussions with all of the participants is change or anxiety present in their lives being a catalyst for more vivid dreams which are both more easily recalled upon waking as well as spurring thought/discussion about the relationship of the dream to that anxiety and/or change. The participants of this ethnography each faced liminality in their daily lives and their transitioning into adulthood, and their dreams almost unanimously reflected these uncertainties and anxieties.

As the ethnography progressed, the participants were able to more clearly express their dream imagery and narratives, and they also became more comfortable with sharing increasingly intimate details of their dream lives. Though not all of the participants grew to view dreams as having explicit metaphysical significance, they became more ponderous of



the notion of dream macrocosmically and what insights those dreams might offer microcosmically. Through the ethnographic process, they were given a vocabulary and purpose for documenting, reflecting on, and communicating their dreams with me. This allowed them to reincorporate certain aspects of their personalities and personal relationships into a newly formed understanding of the self and their role in the world.

Though their experiences are each personal and reflections of an idiosyncratic history and processing, a certain ‘social’ ideology was established in our first interviews from which their dream symbolism did “not exist by itself...[but as] part of a larger context” (Obeyesekere 1981:37). Said context provided the participants and I with a stable framework by which an amorphous and difficult to comprehend experience was able to be interpreted and applied to waking thought and decision making. This allowed for the positive cognitive effects of dreaming (memory consolidation, schematization, enhanced social cohesion, liminal reincorporation, etc.) to more frequently occur with the participants, such as Subject A’s inspiration through her dream experience to resolve a relationship which was causing her anxiety, Subject C’s use of dreams to reflect on both her past and present to help resolve anxiety and trauma, or Subject E’s culturally and metaphysically significant dreams which mirrored personal and societal upheaval. Through all of these and the many other examples from all participants, the main byline is one of communication and reflection to work through individual dreams and the dream experience as a process. Thus, it can be surmised that it is not dreaming alone which holds the complete scope of their cognitive benefits. Rather, a social avenue to share them and, ideally, a metaphysical, ideological, and/or cultural belief in their significance is needed as the vehicle for such discussion and interpretation.

The participants were exceptional in both their initial embracing of this ethnography and their continual willingness to conversate—not just about their individual dreams but about what dreams may mean psychologically, biologically, culturally, and metaphysically. Though all live in the throes of western postmodernity, each brought a uniqueness to their views of dreams while maintaining certain constants expected of members of this culture. Specifically, a tendency to rationality and at least partial explanation of dreams through psycho-biological processes was present throughout. Despite this, all but Subject B used vocabulary that indicated an inexplicable nature to much of the dream experience, especially as the study progressed; even Subject B sometimes described the notion of dreams as having an inherent mystery that, even if it could one day be uncovered by modern western medicine and technology, remained hidden from our current ability to fully understand them.

### **B. A self-ethnographic reflection**

*I can't remember what happened in the lead up to this part of the dream. Me, x, y, and z all prepare for the battle with the dragon by trying to memorize combos (like a video game), and before we set off, we think we have them memorized. We get to a chain link fence, go over it, and start running (it is my elementary's soccer field), and it is very dark and eerily quiet. Eventually I spot a shadow on the ground from directly above and shout to everyone that it is coming. X is no longer there, and y and z stop because their machines (which we input the combos into) start malfunctioning and they are trying to get it figured out. I keep sprinting and eventually the dragon lands in front of me. There is a large wooden structure (a plus (cross)) that extends high up into the air, and I go to take shelter behind one of its sides. I do*

*a few basic combos on the dragon that takes some of its life, but it pursues regardless, and I run around this structure, popping out when it's about to turn a corner and get a few shots on it. I am battling it alone, I don't call out for help but even if I had I don't think there would be a response. I can only do the most basic or combos because I've forgotten all the ones I learned before running into the battle. I eventually realize I will run in circles forever avoiding it while trying to defeat it, and eventually I stop and confront it.*

This dream is one I had while writing this thesis. I analyzed it as such when I awoke:

*It is highly symbolic of my youthful belief (the complex combos learned before the battle, running into my elementary school recess area). The dragon is symbolic of evil/the devil/sin/temptation/disorder, at first only a shadow but then a full-fledged monster to destroy. The structure I attempt to use to defeat it could mean a couple different things. The battle I partake in with the dragon is one I take alone because only I can save my soul, and in doing so can help lead and save the souls of the people I love. My forgetting of the 'combos' when in battle with the beast is symbolic of losing my way and faith, relying purely on natural talent, skill and instinct. My final confrontation with the beast is gaining the courage to confront my temptations and failings and defeat it to regain favor with good/God/order.*

This ethnographic process allowed the interviewees to develop a greater vocabulary for understanding, communicating, and interpreting their dream experiences while consciously (and unconsciously) using them to schematize their waking lives; it also turned me into a subject of my own. I developed a greater understanding of the process of dreaming

from an anthropological, psychological, and biological perspective while also growing to view dreams as being more than just product of the mind. I come from a background of belief, but for quite a few years have fallen out of both belief and religious practices. Through the process of writing down every dream I remembered, thinking about their meanings, discussing other's dreams with them, and exploring the ethnographies of cultures that view dreams as metaphysically important, I grew to myself see and understand the dream experience as having a greater significance than a hyperrational worldview allowed. Through the ethnographic process, a community formed between me and each of the participants. This created a kind of self-made cultural framework of documenting, analyzing, and communicating the dream experience—creating the very models which western postmodernity has stripped them of.

In looking at diasporic Algerian populations in France, Professor Rasmussen analyzes the act of dreaming and its importance in religious conversion. She remarks that “[r]eligious and cultural encounters and transformations bring change, but also contradictions... convert’s accounts of dreams are illuminating because they reveal how pre- and post-conversion memories together shape the forging of new meanings from past and current experiences” (Rasmussen 2022:2). Dreams not only consolidate memories already experienced but also provide a framework for understanding current situations of changes in statuses of many types and social significances. In the instance of a diasporic population living in a postmodern western society, dreams provide a way to maintain or (re)gain religious belief—even as the converts stand “at a crossroads” of foundational and newly experienced culture and morality. For me, the writing of this thesis and the conducting of an ethnography where a

self-contained community of dream sharing was allowed to occur and flourish was my opportunity to come to terms with my own ideological crossroads.

Nelson Mandela, writing about his dreams and specifically recurring nightmares while imprisoned, was able to interpret his dreams personally as coming to terms with a seemingly hopeless situation. It was also an outward political demonstration “dramatiz[ing] the experience of being severed from contact with human society” and, in the face of such political chaos, “dream-life becomes a particularly portent resource” (Sliwinski 2015:7-16). Through other’s dreams and ultimately my own, I was able to negotiate a self-journey wherein information, knowledge, and experience translates to personal and metaphysical powers.

The viewing of dreams as co-equal reality with our waking one is a hallmark of the ethnographies included in this thesis and the non-western, pre-industrial ideologies of cultures all around the world in general. As the postmodern west stands on the precipice of technological, ideological, political, and metaphysical liminality, dreams—both individually and communally—should be turned to as both a means of personal cognitive reflection and a way to build cultural structures which promote unity and a means by which the liminoidal stagnation of constant societal change and ‘progression’ may be ordered and resolved.

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