NOTES FOR OLFACTORY WHITE (WHALE)

"It is not down on any map; true places never are." Herman Melville, Moby-Dick or, The Whale

A ball of smelly matter coughed up by a sperm whale bobs around on the surface of the ocean and is eventually scooped up by passing sailors. Cured by brine and sun, once it has reached the shore, it smells extraordinary. This is a world away from the foul-smelling black fluid drained out of a freshly torn whale carcass, a brutal extraction that people once undertook in order to get hold of the ambergris, easier than searching for it bobbing around, a speck in the open sea.

This pattern of events is an affair between many things - the sun and the ocean, squid bones and the bobbing whale vomit. It is also a story of humans, ships, violence, alchemy, chance and the imagination. A myriad of transportations and transformations are in play from the moment the whale swallows a squid. A secretion is produced by the sperm whale that is thought to be a protective response against the irritation from ingesting the squid's beak. The whale then vomits or shits this fatty substance into the ocean, a battle between the whale and what it ingests.

Ambergris was once considered the second most precious treasure of the sea (after pearls) and was accordingly nicknamed "the gold of the ocean."

The rays of the distant sun are interacting with molecules and many other unaccountable things past and present. This tale, being told in a zig-zag way, is not only about the discovery of something rare, precious and strange from the 'wilds of the 'world beyond,' it is about people pitted against the sea, and people managing to overcome the largest creature in the animal kingdom. It is about matter and the imagination working away together, despite the enormous conflicts that occur along the way. We come to know of the whale's insertion into other worlds, far beyond the sea - reaching through all kinds of processes, substances and immaterial imaginings. In the multiple collectives that make ambergris into what it is, the grey sticky matter has been the subject of continual transformation, travelling far beyond the whale's skin and bones and beyond its soul.

The material from the whale is passing through so many vectors and inhabiting universes that are far beyond the whale's existence in the watery confines of the ocean. Nevertheless, something of the whale has been powerfully unleashed on domains far from the sea, and as tenuous as it might be at times, the figure of the whale in all of this, despite these ruptures, somehow manages to endure. Each moment and existence of the whale is what it is. Sometimes these are potent moments (like when the whale breaches and then falls with a booming crash back into the ocean) and sometimes, there is just a shimmer of the faintest signal of the whale coming through, found here in the character of the inky aroma, sprayed onto this surface from a bottle of yellow liquid. Once ambergris is taken from the sea, it becomes embroiled with signs, possibly from the first moment that it touched a sailor's hand. Modification of ambergris through language is as powerful as the curing of ambergris by the sun. Once ambergris is thought to possess powerful aphrodisiac qualities, the material then becomes popular as food and has all the powerful semiotic connotations attached to the act of eating and the potency of erotic powers. By the same token, language itself is modified by way of the new articulations that have come from the connections that have been forged across the many dimensions that the aroma has passed through on its journey through time. Language, it seems is made up of these turbulent ragged and noisy feedback loops, tied to material inventions, as much as the ocean is driven by currents.

Language operates as one of the pathways of transformation and movement within the ambergris network, sometimes as a poetic syntax, as incantation and at other times as law, in the sense that certain groups of people have made certain 'truth claims' about the property of the material. This 'legend making' is swept up not only in romantic projections, which always seem to be travelling on the backs of other occulted forces: the wind and the sea and the murmur of branches, voices, the shimmer of cloth, 'desire as an assemblage.' Moreover, these complex syntaxes are often simultaneously, by contrast, the tools of a mercantile and technocratic logic that takes great stock in the ephemeral, producing treasures and exchange value through commodification and marketing, or by the harnessing of speed and energy. However, these are not separate realms, as if the mercantile and technocratic is somehow disentangled from the incantatory; they intermingle like the chemicals within perfume.

The capacity of properties once thought to belong to magic exclusively and other occult agencies, are now synthesised with capitalist logic. These transformed forces serve a purpose in the production of the commodity fetish and yet they still work away as they always have; only now, transformed from their former life into other forms, they tend to operate behind a veil of rational discourse that would like to think of these realms as being pure and separate:

"If magic is the body of practice which gives certain words the potency to act upon 'things', then the world of logic, deduction, and theory must be called 'magical': but it is our magic. Just as the Greeks called the fine languages of the Parthians, the Abyssinians, or the Samaritans 'barbaric,' so we call the perfect arguments (2.1.8) of those who believe in other powers of deduction "illogical." (Latour in Irreductions)

We name these creatures whales, and we think we know what they are and what they are capable of, and yet one assumes that whales themselves in their watery cosmos are nameless and, just like us, are always striving for something. The anthropologist and philosopher Bruno Latour reminds us that:

"We should not hurry to divide 'nature' from 'culture'. Scallops also find that nature is a harsh taskmaster, hostile, nourishing, profligate - because fish, fishermen, and the rocks to which they attach themselves have ends that differ from those of scallops."

Lurking within this network of beings and things, in the very uprising of all this energy that is pitted against any number of entities pushing back, are seemingly opaque black box systems churning away, until they are eventually overcome by the tides of scrutiny and energy loss that everything goes up against eventually. If entropy is as certain as the tides, another fundamental resistance that many things face, is the humble occupation of space. One might also include primal forces such as gravity and friction, the strong and the weak nuclear forces, and the electromagnetic, that holds things together and shape our cosmos. There is an uncountable number of resistances that things go up against before we even get to our role in this multiplicity and undoubtedly many aspects of these alliances and resistances shall never even be named. As well as physical struggles, there are all kinds of rhetorical struggles, negotiations and impersonal, abstract forces that are like weapons in the mix that make up an assemblage. Alliances (sympathetic affairs, confluences, differences and resonances) of great variety are forming every which way that could be thought of as loving and empathetic, sensual, erotic, symbiotic, parasitic, painful, productive, and destructive. For every composing element that can aggregate there will be others that are decomposing.

Let us settle for now, with this affair of the sun and the ocean and the regurgitated mass of Ambergris. Every connection that makes up these attributes will go deeper than can be put into language, and every network will contain more characters than we will ever be able to perceive, and yet can be moulded in such a way to serve an observer's capability or interest as a composition. These three, an ensemble of the sun and the ocean and the whale vomit are thought to create the conditions for curing Ambergris into something that smells wonderful.

The glob of grey waxy material when brought to shore, leaps into a tincture of alcohol and be-

Taking ambergris as an assemblage of synthesis par excellence, we begin to see how capitalism, despite appearances, is tied to a compelling form of expressionism. Esther Leslie, a philosopher of political aesthetics, describes a material relationship to exchange value through Karl Marx and Joseph Engels: "Value moves from one thing to another, in the process of an objects modification. This is a physical process and is traceable. Dyestuffs become the colour of cloth, raw materials take on another form, and coal dissipates into the air having produced energy. However, in the course of capitalist production something chemically untraceable is also generated: exchange value. This is capital's most magical transformation – the invention of exchange value. A much-quoted line from The Communist Manifesto describes the impact of capitalism as vaporisation in which all that is solid melts into air".

However, it can be argued given any number of materialist understandings of system theory that these processes of exchange value and its resulting commodity fetishisation are in no way exclusive to capitalism alone, they are ridden in the workings of reality itself. If we follow the lines of our example of ambergris, we see how this exchange is now spectacularly realised through the production of a vast number of synthetic odours that rewrite the 'nature' of whatever object it is fixated upon, in this case, ambergris. All kinds of 'amber-variants' come into existence that are not only based on the actual smell impressions of the original material but are also the confabulation of leaps of the chemists imagination. The aromas that we receive in the name of ambergris are now the product of aesthetic transformation and many other sets of transforms, including more than likely the influence of experts on fragrance who are not themselves chemists.

Like most materials found in perfumery, amber (as it is now known) has proven to be a versatile candidate for the workings of the mind of the composer and the marketer of fragrance. From the air of oriental deserts to the shoreline of Indian Ocean beaches, this material has been charged with the erotic signals of mystery, luxury, opulence and animalic sensuality within a fragrance. No one needs to trade in the actual authentic material anymore since the marketing people are now traders in images of ambergris. From the moment it was dragged out of the sea it became a kind of information factory. The supplements that have attached themselves to what was once grey globules, are as wide and diffusive as its odour. This beautiful and romantic hallucinatory material, worthy of Coleridge, is potentially boundless. Michel Serres remarks, "As soon as an object becomes a stake, a fetish, merchandise, it leaves the domain of objective knowledge."

Much further down the track, after the modern industrial complex had begun to master chemical synthesis, ambergris, once thought of as natural, complex, precious and rare, is eventually taken over by a fantastical array of industrially synthesized molecules. These present to the nose as novel smells based loosely around a difficult to describe warm, woody, animalic and earthy theme. Perhaps it is the relatively low impact, minimalist and yet highly diffusive character of these molecules that makes them so compositionally versatile, the illusiveness of the aromatic that is part of its powers of persuasion.

comes an ingredient in many types of aromatic creations. Once it was afloat in the sea, now, by secret channels that belong to the black art of the perfumer, it brings radiance to perfume. Richard Stamelman, an author and professor of romantic literature, gives us an inkling of the diverse and long history (at least since the Middle Ages,) of the use of ambergris in perfumery and the culinary:

"To chocolate, according to the testimony of Casanova, Madame Du Barry, and Madame de Pompadour, it gave an indispensable aroma which inspired the early nineteenth-century gastronome Brillat-Savarin to create a recipe for ambergris laced chocolate in 1826. In the sixteenth century, Nostradamus, the astrologer and physician to Charles IX, believed Ambergris could increase the production of seminal fluid. A century later, the nonagenarian Cardinal de Richelieu, having perhaps learned of Nostradamus's hypothesis, was rumoured to chew on small amounts of the substance. Among the Chinese, ambergris was at one time considered as a potent aphrodisiac as well".

All of this knowledge was hard won by sensitive noses, methodically trying things out at the perfume organ, melding ambergris with other aroma materials and through various levels of potency, asking "what does it blend well with? What materials weaken its aroma, or even make its smell disappear altogether? What happens over time, after seconds, hours, days, weeks, and months on a smelling strip?" In its culinary uses, knowledge comes through taste, by gingerly testing the waters, and from taking a punt, adding it to the pot. Perfumery and the culinary and the proto versions of what we think of as chemistry, go back to the artisanal culture of the alchemists. As Isabelle Stengers and Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent reveals in "A history of Chemistry":

"The best known of the sixteenth-century chemists is undoubtedly Paracelsus, Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim (1493-1541)... For Paracelsus, all those who improved upon nature – the baker who turned grain into the perfection of bread, the metallurgist who transformed metallic ores into swords, the farmer who created wine out of grapes – could be called alchemists... Man as the centre of creation possessed in himself a knowledge of things, but this knowledge could only become a reality through experience, through the sympathy, attraction, and affinity between these things and their analogue in man".

Ambergris is said to cause perfume to bloom and meld. The anecdotal evidence, of which so much of perfumery contains, tells us that it is somewhat of a chemical amplifier. This amplifier does not do the usual pump up the volume but perhaps instead, helps to create transparency and a different kind of perceptual volume, one of a subtle sense of space or sillage. The famous perfumer, Jean-Paul Guerlain, describes it as performing like cream in haute cuisine: as an exquisite binding agent.

"For me, ambergris is a magical material", said Givaudan's perfumer Ralf Schwinger...He explained that it reminds him of the biblical tale of Jonah and the whale where the prophet was swallowed alive. "Ambergris has so many facets — amber, woody, dark, a salty-sweet concoction with [notes of] ink and tobacco." OLFACTORY WHITE (WHALE) fragrance composed by the artist, 2018.

SELECTED MOLECULES:1-(2,2,6-trimethylcyclohexyl)hexan-3-ol (Norlimbal), 6-ethyl-1,5,5-trimethylbicyclo[2.2.1]heptan-6-ol, (3aR,5aS,9aS,9bR)-3a,6,6,9a-tetramethyl-2,4,5,5a,7,8,9,9b-octahydro-1H-benzo[e][1]benzofuran (Ambroxan), 1-(2,3,8,8-tetramethyl-1,3,4,5,6,7-hexahydronaphthalen-2-yl)ethanone (ISO E SUPER) Natural Ambergris (ethanol extracted), 4-[(3E)-4,8-dimethylnona-3,7-dienyl]pyridine (Maritima), Valley Des Fleurs 1939 -trace, 3-(1,3-benzodioxol-5-yl)-2-methylpropanal (Ocean Propanol) Rather than acting as anything like a simulacrum of ambergris, the wide spectrum of the ambergris aroma, now becomes splintered into the new 'amber–like' smells that arise from the chemist's structural rearrangement of a molecule, in a manner similar to drug design. This dextrous 'sculpting' of atomic material spawns a great number of distant relatives of the warm material ambergris that is now thoroughly transformed and dislocated from its origins. Such is the wonder and power of these networks that passages are enabled through numerous domains: the maritime, the terrestrial and the imaginary - all from the result of alliances forged and trials and tribulations overcome.

The whale is not lost completely in these leaps from one place to another; one might say that its energy profile shifts as it slides around in the pluriverse, engaged in one negotiation after another. Thankfully, we have now been banned from hunting for ambergris by killing whales. And what about the citizens navy Sea Shepard that conducts its high tech vigilante war protecting whales on the high sea? Legislating on behalf of a mute animal seems like a bit of a miracle in a world that seems to be sliding towards self destruction. The sheer volume of immense productivity and proliferation of creativity both on the side of good and ill is mind boggling. Even if we live consciously through all kinds of separations as a way of coping, synthesis occurs on top of synthesis, laws are written on top of laws, it is strange to think that people right now are actively legislating towards our end.

Contemporaneously, new 'amber-like' molecules are the product of self-referential and imaginary compositions. As much as they might resemble the smell of ambergris found on the beach, when certain chemicals can reflect something of a reconstitution, the figure of the whale becomes a fragile signal in the background, until it is reimagined once again into the repertoire as a 'giant of nature'.

People are searching for and crafting new aroma accords every day, based on these 'variable' signals that once came from this fatty, smelly gunk, all of which are now mostly unique creations of the laboratory. Amber-like molecules of laboratory synthesis play their part in the role of new componentry in formulas that arose from the olfactory knowledge of the original ambergris, now reincarnated as crystalline white needles. Many of these new amber notes utterly surpass the original altogether, representing an ever wider conception of what amber is, and what it is capable of becoming. However, the reductions, transportations and purifications do not stop there, with the proliferation of chemical distillations and the obsessions of chemists and the gleaming steel vats and pipelines and chimneys of the industrial complex that has let loose over ten thousand aroma molecules into the palette having a huge impact on what society smells like. In a leap worthy of science fiction, the starting materials for the bulk of aroma chemistry, including these new hybrid offspring of ambergris, come from sources far removed from its animal origin. These new synthetic aroma molecules emerge from the fractionation of the sap of the pandanus tree or are extracted from the primordial coal tars that have been brought up from deep below the surface of the earth from another epoch altogether. Here time becomes reversible. It is as if the trees themselves once alive some 300 million years ago, have been raised from the dead and put too many uses, one of which is to adorn our skin and play a role in our seductions. Esther Leslie tells the remarkable tale of Frederick Kekulé Von Stardonitz (1865) discovery of the composition of benzene's carbon and hydrogen atoms that turned coal tar into such a versatile starting point for the production of new chemicals:

The synthesis of synthetic ambrox - an alcohol that has been found to be the main chemical constituent of ambergris, soon becomes a challenge for industrial chemists in terms of finding a way to achieve a reasonable and economically acceptable pathway to synthesis and entails a massive effort regarding the negotiation of a mind-boggling matrix of networks within networks, of technical and theoretical processes. Economic concerns, intellectual property rights and physical labour, playing out the procedures in the laboratory with dexterity, precision and accident. The list of negotiations for even the simplest things seems to be without end. I sense this churning edifice when crossing the Parramatta River near Silverwater, the matrix of factories and industrial units amongst towering new housing developments pumping out plumes of what we can only hope is steam.

In many of the perfumes that contain ambergris (or what are now its synthetic variants, since the natural ambergris is rarely used commercially), the smell of these new molecules barely resembles those that came from the whale. Amber molecules in perfumes are paradoxically both ghostly modifiers and prominent base notes. This ability for a molecule to both hide and signal within the mixture is a fascinating quality of perfumery. Arcadi Boix Camps in Perfumery – Techniques in Evolution 2nd Edition, describes a recreation of the natural material as requiring the following four chemicals: dihydroactinidolide, dihydro-x-ionine, alpha-ambrinol, and ambrox. He goes on to say that:

"If one of the four chemicals is missing, it is absolutely impossible to achieve the truly natural and rich, expansive and metallic seductive note of the natural product. The fantasy version of an amber accord will often contain vanilla, musk and spicy notes. Apart from the animal aspects of the musk molecules, these notes are a long way from the strange olfactory qualities of what ambergris smells like in its natural form." "Benzene, a colourless, odiferous, flammable liquid, one of the components of coal-tar and petroleum, had been first isolated by the chemist Michael Faraday in 1825, and, after two daydreams, one in 1854 on a London bus when [Kekulé] saw a dance of atoms, and one in the early 1860s when he saw a snake chewing its own tail - in a hexagonal ring. This recognition explained how carbon could make five or six times more chemical combinations than other elements."

Perfumery and industrial chemistry have retained an authentic lineage with the much-maligned alchemists from which the discipline sprung from hundreds of years before. This is a tale of a carnival of synthesis, where almost every mode has a role in the formation of the story of ambergris. This is the entanglement where everything becomes information, belonging to both the actual and the virtual.