
Sleep Must Be Protected

In March of 2019, a “blessing of the beds” took place at the Ashara Ekundayo Gallery in downtown Oakland, California. This event marked the opening ceremony for *Black Womxn Dreaming/Divine the Darkness*, a collectively authored, site-specific, and interactive work consisting of a public installation at the gallery and a private “durational ritual” (in the words of the artists) taking place elsewhere in the city. *Black Womxn Dreaming/Divine the Darkness* can be considered alongside projects like *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* and *SLEEP1237* as a work that integrates the experience of actual sleep in a participatory fashion and within a specified framework. But in contrast to these other examples, it also removed the activity of slumber from the public space of exhibition, situating it instead in a separate location disclosed only by means of informal networks within the local community. For seven consecutive days, this location was transformed into a space dedicated entirely to the dreams, sleep, and rest of Black women, with participants joining this ongoing “private ritual of resting” on a rotating basis throughout the week. The invitation to participate in the ritual was addressed to all those of African descent “who experience life through the lens of womxn/girl in body, spirit, identity past, present, future and fluid.”¹ The 2019 event was one of several episodes constituting *House/Full of Black Women*, a five-year-long performance project conceived by the choreographer and artist Amara Tabor-Smith, co-directed with Ellen Sebastian Chang, and driven by the core question: “How can we, as black women and girls find space to breathe, and be well within a stable home?”²

Those involved in the realization of *Black Womxn Dreaming/Divine the Darkness*—Tabor-Smith, Sebastian Chang, Alexa Burrell, Amber McZeal, Gina Breedlove, to name a few whose words I cite below—spoke about the activity at the core of the ritual during the blessing ceremony and afterwards. Their comments reflected the positive formulations of sleep that circulate in contemporary discourse, granting it a generative role at many levels. At the biological level, sleep is a vital time in which essential restorative processes transpire—or “sleep is when

HOUSE/FULL OF BLACK WOMEN

BLACK WOMXN DREAMING "DIVINE THE DARKNESS"
A public interactive installation and a private ritual of resting sleep
MARCH 24 – APRIL 14, 2019

EVENTS SCHEDULE

MARCH 24 – APRIL 14, 2019
DIVINE THE DARKNESS INSTALLATION
Created by Alexa Burell/ Shelley Davis Roberts / Stephanie Johnson

MARCH 24 – MARCH 31, 2019
PRIVATE - BLACK WOMXN DREAMING
Black Women Dreaming durational ritual of black women sleeping, resting and dreaming over seven consecutive days and nights in a secret location in Oakland.
Contact us: Housefulofblackwomen.com

APRIL 4 6-8pm
DREAM WRITING WORKSHOP
With A-lan Holt

MARCH 24 5-7pm
OPENING CEREMONY
BLESSING OF THE BEDS
Opening invocation Tobe Melora Correal/Yvette Aldama - Sound Healing Gina Breedlove - Decolonizing our Dreams Amber McZeal

MARCH 27 6:30-8:30pm
ARTIST CONVERSATION
Divine The Darkness And The Neuromelanin Wall

APRIL 14 6-8pm
CLOSING CEREMONY
Twilight Procession

Deep Waters
CHANGE THEATER

ASHARA EKUNDAYO GALLERY

480 23rd Street Oakland California
Hours: Wed. Through Fri. 1-7pm | 1st & 3rd Sat. 12-4pm | Also by appointment - 510.604.2748

FIGURE 5. *Black Womxn Dreaming/Divine the Darkness* (House/Full of Black Women, 2019). Poster by Ernesto Soprani. Courtesy of the artist.

the brilliance of the body begins,” as McZeal stated at one point. She summoned these restorative capacities in the name of a program of communal revitalization and empowerment, invoking sleep as a means of “rebuilding the strength of our bodies and communities.” Sebastian Chang spoke to the importance of sleep and rest as part of ongoing revolutionary struggle. Capitalism teaches us that doing work is the source of all value and meaning, she declared, but we say no and assert the right to sleep. Just as notably, this refusal is staked upon the right to sleep *here*, in a neighborhood and city that has seen the displacement of large numbers of residents by rampant gentrification—as exemplified in the location of the Ashara Ekundayo Gallery itself, an independent art space in a modest one-story wooden building surrounded by newly constructed office buildings and condominiums. For these artists, then, to sleep is an act not only of taking power, but also reclaiming place. Finally, nothing in this society encourages Black women to sleep better and so, in Sebastian Chang’s words, “we are going to have to teach ourselves.” Invoking the limits of the body and the right to rest, they simultaneously initiate a rechanneling of energies toward the forging of a world formed by different values.

In carving out a time and place for sleep as part of a Black feminist political project, *Black Womxn Dreaming/Divine the Darkness* can be seen as another instance of the revaluation of sleep in the twenty-first century, recognizing its

positive capacity while rejecting a negative conception of sleep as deficiency. As I have suggested, this revised understanding stems from a broadly growing sense of dysfunctionality; who but the deprived can best appreciate the reparative effects of sleep? At the same time, *Black Womxn Dreaming/Divine the Darkness* challenges the promise of easy solutions to a ubiquitous shortage of energy and attention. It insists on specific histories and economies of exhaustion that cannot be subsumed to a generalized crisis of sleep, as this chapter will argue.³

Indeed, the phenomenon I have mapped as a shift from paranoid to reparative demands further qualification, insofar as it reflects another set of dynamics that converge around sleep as a moving target of knowledge, not a static locus to whose underlying truth we are just now catching up. For the reparative impulse sets its sights not only upon the “inchoate self” who stands to be put in order, but also upon sleep as an object in need of rehabilitation. Within this dynamic field of knowledge, sleep shuttles between the position of problem and solution, disease and antidote, alarm and answer. It embodies a promise that is constituted in dialectical tension with its problematic status, such that the plenitude it bodes cannot be unknotted from the lack it simultaneously figures. Sleep is a remedy whose powers to cure seem to grow in proportion to the degree of affliction it presents, in a peculiar kind of reverse homeopathic logic, looked to as a panacea for an ever-widening range of problems. This peculiar logic informs the coinage in 2017 of a new diagnostic term in clinical sleep medicine: orthosomnia, or insomnia caused by anxiety about getting enough sleep.⁴

Orthosomnia is the symptomatic endgame of our current fixation on sleep, behind which is a growing consciousness of, and sensitivity to, the untenably disordered state of modern slumber. A mounting alarm finds expression through the rhetoric of risk, mass affliction, and crisis. The constant refrain sounded in this discourse is the inadequate quantity and quality of the rest we receive—whether signaled in the rise of the sleep disorder as a prevalent medical complaint, the exponential increase in specialized sleep clinics at the turn of this century, or the deluge of therapeutic advice and tools available to those seeking to improve their slumber.⁵ The notion of “sleep debt” has entered the popular lexicon as an index of the disparity between the required and actual amount of nightly sleep. As this disparity accumulates across bodies and chronic tiredness comes to define the experience of wakefulness for increasing numbers and demographics of people, sleep debt scales up along the lines of a national fiscal crisis—or a “great sleep recession,” as recently declared by a group of pediatric researchers.⁶ The widespread impacts of lost sleep are also formulated as a public health emergency, linking it with depression, dementia, cardiovascular disease, and numerous other leading medical causes of death, along with traffic fatalities and industrial accidents.⁷ Noting the contribution of sleep deprivation to the human error responsible for ecological catastrophes like the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* oil spill (which released an estimated 10.8 million gallons of crude oil into Prince William Sound), some

have reached beyond the framework of national emergency to compare the crisis of sleep to a planetary disaster.⁸

At the time of this writing, in the midst of the shutdowns instituted in many parts of the world in response to the COVID-19 outbreak, there has been a marked upward spike in references to exhaustion, burnout, and sleep disturbance in the public conversation. The problem of sleep assumes pandemic proportions, a result of the upending of the routines of workplace and home, as well as an effect of the amplification of already existing imbalances in the rhythms of everyday life and the care of bodies (imbalances that have everything to do with race, class, and gender). The observation that the shutdowns have not so much disrupted the functioning of our social systems as they have exposed and exacerbated the dysfunctions all along structurally embedded in these systems also applies to sleep in this context.⁹ For if the disturbed sleep currently experienced by so many stems directly from the disturbances wrought by the pandemic situation—with its scrambling of schedules, rezoning of spaces, and dive into the inescapability of screen-mediated relationality—this represents not an entirely new condition but rather one more stage in an ongoing process of disordering, or an acceleration of a preexisting condition. The elusiveness of a good night's sleep reflects the priorities of a society intent upon conquering the difference between day and night, abolishing the distinction between work and nonwork, and collapsing the divide between on and off. As Benjamin Reiss points out, the nineteenth-century labor movement slogan “eight hours for work, eight hours for sleep, and eight hours for what we please” imposed a “standard model” on sleep by cementing an expectation that one single, continuous eight-hour interval would suffice for the daily requirement of workers.¹⁰ A firm limit established in defense of time for rest simultaneously disciplines this activity in accordance with the demands of an industrial economy, bringing sleep into alignment with what the labor historian E. P. Thompson has termed modern time-discipline.¹¹ Yet even this ambiguous limit further loses its meaning in a postindustrial era characterized by the ceaseless circulation of goods, money, and information in a globally networked world; the erosion of labor protections and, concomitantly, the increase of flexible schedules, shift work, and contract hiring; and the technological extensions of an attention economy that absorbs all instants of life.

The link between the attenuations of sleep and the assaults of a nonstop, 24/7 world features throughout discussions of the spreading epidemic of exhaustion.¹² A particularly bracing account of the fate of sleep under such conditions—and stirring call to protect sleep from the forces that would erode it—comes from Jonathan Crary's 2017 book *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. Crary describes 24/7 as “a global infrastructure for continuous work and consumption,” one that strives for no less than the “generalized inscription of human life into duration without breaks defined by a principle of continuous functioning.” The excesses of this regime find their ultimate expression in the vision of an existence with-

out sleep, beyond natural limits, in which rest “has no necessity or inevitability.”¹³ Such a vision is what propels the US Department of Defense’s research into amphetamines and drugs like Provigil, with the objective of enabling combatants to stay awake for days at a time during sustained military operations. Citing this example at the beginning of his book, Cray suggests that the soldier “whose physical capabilities will more closely approximate the functionalities of non-human apparatuses and networks” can be seen as the forerunner of the contemporary worker and consumer.¹⁴ The trajectory of Provigil from the military to the civilian sphere bears out his claim: approved by the Federal Drug Administration for the treatment of sleep disorders like narcolepsy in 2004 (under the name modafinil), the drug has seen the vast majority of its profits driven by off-label uses.¹⁵ As a “wakefulness promoting agent,” it is sought out for its improvement of attentional performance by corporate road warriors, journalists, and others in the figural trenches of the postindustrial economy.¹⁶

The imagination of a post-sleep existence, once the province of science fiction, spreads throughout the everyday world, where there is no shortage of reminders that “within the globalist neoliberal paradigm, sleep is for losers.”¹⁷ (And even within literary representations of the fictional future, the ascendance of 24/7 can be detected; while earlier sci-fi books tend to locate their post-sleep subjects in zones of recreation and leisure, more recent ones assign them to the setting of the board room and research center.¹⁸) For example, a common sight in San Francisco’s underground Muni stations in the late aughts were advertisements for the start-up freelance temp agency Fiverr. In one ad, a portrait of a twenty-something sporting a tailored jacket (professionally passing) and septum ring (yet creative, or outside the box) is overlaid with a phrase in capital letters: “Dreamers, kindly step aside.” Under the company logo appears the catchphrase “in doers we trust.” In another of their ads, the text reads, “You eat a coffee for lunch. You follow through on your follow through. Sleep deprivation is your drug of choice. You might be a doer.” The ads evoke a popular mythology that conflates a somnophobic attitude with an ethic of work and industriousness. The self-denying sleep habits of highly successful people, from Thomas Edison to Martha Stewart to any number of Silicon Valley CEOs, are brought to the portrayal of the ideal gig worker as the entrepreneur of their self.¹⁹ Moreover, in their vaunting of an image of productive busyness (encapsulated in a generic notion of doing) to the detriment of not only rest, but also dreams, food, and recreational drugs, these ads reprise a familiar accounting of time lost versus time well spent. The calculation that every hour diverted from value-producing activity amounts to an hour wasted has roots in a modern cult of productivity and utility. As these values come to determine the worth of time, so the voluntary restriction of one’s hours of sleep likewise comes to signify reasoned self-interest and even moral virtue. When the “Bullion of the Day is minted out into Hours,” as Benjamin Franklin famously wrote, sleep can only be seen as a felon.²⁰

As this example suggests, the 24/7 society's aspiration to override the limits of wakefulness belongs to a longer history of sleep denial. Alertness-promoting medications like modafinil find an antecedent in what Sidney Mintz calls the "drug foods" of tea, coffee, and sugar. Starting in the seventeenth century, the demand for these drug foods soared, and their production and trade generated enormous wealth for Europe's expanding colonial empires.²¹ This age of empire saw the rise of the coffeehouse as a modern institution linking a developing commercial sphere with an emergent public sphere. Roger Schmidt identifies the coffeehouse as the beating heart of a radical transformation in the "architecture of human sleep," one in which sleeplessness materializes as "a symptom of modernity, as well as one of its primary causes."²² Caffeine powered the discursive output of the very writers who entrenched the insomniac orientation of the modern age in their proclaimed values. Samuel Johnson, known to consume as many as twenty-four cups of tea in a single sitting, disparaged sleep as an adversary throughout his writings, as in the ode, "Short, O short then be thy reign, And give us to the world again!"²³ The phrase *Nox insomnis*, along with references to fatigue, recur throughout his diaries, Schmidt observes, while the word *insomnia* appeared in English for the first time in 1758.²⁴ Eluned Summers-Bremner similarly describes the early modern period as an age of insomnia, when "sleep was rendered difficult due to new mobilizations of desire" and the "material contradictions" generated thereby.²⁵ Crary alludes to this longer history of sleep denial in referencing Marx's analysis of the "constant continuity" of capitalist circulation and exchange in the *Grundrisse*. "In effect," he writes, "Marx is positing 24/7 temporalities as fundamental to the workings of capital."²⁶ In his *Capital*, Marx makes the point even more bluntly: "The prolongation of the working day beyond the limits of the natural day, into the night, acts only as a palliative To appropriate labour during all the 24 hours of the day is, therefore, the inherent tendency of capitalist production." Sleeplessness is at once the predisposition and the telos of capitalist modernity, a condition sustaining and perpetuating the world that engendered it.

Building on these long-term developments but also breaking through to a new threshold, Crary argues, 24/7 ushers in an endless temporality foreclosing interruption and difference, along with rupture and the possibility of change. Disconnected from natural cycles of time, the self-same, self-perpetuating present is subject only to the natural law of entropy as it brings about "the exhaustion of life and the depletion of resources." Late capitalism will settle for nothing less than the end of sleep. Yet it is precisely at a point when this goal seems more achievable than ever that sleep asserts its potency. In a moment of danger, sleep discloses its status as "the only remaining barrier, the only enduring 'natural condition' that capitalism cannot eliminate."²⁷ For even as "most of the seemingly irreducible necessities of human life—hunger, thirst, sexual desire, and recently the need for friendship—have been remade into commodified or financialized forms," Crary writes, sleep stands apart as a "colossal exception," an "interval of time that cannot

be colonized and harnessed to a massive engine of profitability.”²⁸ Sleep may be attacked from all sides, but it cannot be subsumed. He sets forth this case with dazzling polemics:

In its profound uselessness and intrinsic passivity, with the incalculable losses it causes in productive time, circulation, and consumption, sleep will always collide with the demands of a 24/7 universe. The huge portion of our lives that we spend asleep, freed from a morass of simulated needs, subsists as one of the great human affronts to the voraciousness of contemporary capitalism. Sleep is an uncompromising interruption of the theft of time from us by capitalism In spite of all the scientific research in this area, it frustrates and confounds any strategies to exploit or reshape it. The stunning, inconceivable reality is that nothing of value can be extracted from it.²⁹

The basis on which sleep has been denigrated in the modern era—its uselessness, wastefulness, and intransigent negativity—provides the exact terms by which it is recovered as a resource for an oppositional politics. As the only remnant of an uninvaded natural existence, sleep stands as a last line of resistance against 24/7 capitalism and a starting point for the repair of the social bonds devastated by the latter. Thus, the book concludes with a call to arms: to preserve any hope of awakening to a future after capitalism, sleep must be protected.

Here we find another instance of the self-referential reparative logic that holds up sleep as the cure for the malady it simultaneously embodies, a solution mirroring the contours of the problem. The promise of sleep as a political remedy retraces with precision the degree to which exhaustion stands out as a primary political symptom of contemporary life. Crary’s account has become a touchstone for recent discussions of sleeplessness and burnout. But can the political significance of sleep be staked entirely upon the claim to a default exceptionality, regardless of other factors? Among those who evince doubt is William Davies, who, in a review of *24/7*, observes that “Crary has a curiously Taylorist view of value extraction, and scarcely any view of value creation.”³⁰ The assertion of a fundamental incommensurability between the passivity of sleep and the activity of the economy becomes less convincing when weighed against the backdrop of the postindustrial turn and the management approaches ushered therein. Starting with the medicalization of employee oversight in the 1970s and continuing with the wellness programs of today’s workplace, health has become an important factor in the complex calculus of profitability.³¹ Along with exercise and nutrition, sleep and rest are key prescriptions in the neo-Taylorist fashioning of high-functioning workers impervious to burnout. The distinction between human and economic health blurs. “From this perspective,” Davies writes, “sleep is not opposed to regimes of production and rationalization, but a necessary ingredient in a life lived productively and rationally. There may be no value to be extracted from sleep, but there is much value to be created from sleep.”³²

This critique is a prescient one, as demonstrated by the appearance two years later of another notable book addressing the state of crisis wherein “sleep deprivation has become an epidemic.”³³ Perhaps the surest indication of the difficulty of ascribing to sleep a position of anomalous otherness, an impenetrable bulwark against the prevailing logics of late capitalism, is the publication of *The Sleep Revolution: Transforming Your Life One Night at a Time*, a best-selling self-help book by the power broker, erstwhile media mogul, and now self-proclaimed “sleep evangelist” Arianna Huffington. A brief comparison with *24/7*, notwithstanding the disparities in their targeted readership, is instructive. Similar to Crary, Huffington sounds an alarm on the erosion of sleep in a society of around-the-clock work and hyperconnectivity. “Today a full night’s rest has never been more difficult to come by,” the introduction declares; the 24/7 world “has imperiled our sleep as never before.”³⁴ She also takes aim at a global capitalist and neoliberalist regime that dismisses the need for rest—not in order to tear down the regime, but rather to show how this dismissal undermines the latter’s objectives and self-realization. And like Crary, she draws in the reader with disturbing vignettes of extreme sleep deprivation. But Huffington also includes some horror stories of a different kind. In the United States, insufficient sleep accounts for more than eleven days of lost productivity per year per worker, adding up to a total annual loss to the economy of more than \$63 billion. According to one specialist in health care policy, “In an information-based economy, it’s difficult to find a condition that has a greater effect on productivity.”³⁵ The book also compiles metrics on the costs to public health and safety entailed by sleep loss, such as a report calculating that sleep disorders cost Australia more than \$5 billion per year in health care and other indirect costs. Another startling set of numbers concerns the global market for drugs, technologies, and products powered by the contemporary sleep crisis. The amount of money spent worldwide on sleep aids in 2014 was \$58 billion, projected to rise to \$76.7 billion by 2019.³⁶

The statistics cited by Huffington—which reappear throughout the many other books and articles on this topic—delineate a quantitatively precise picture of the sleep we are missing. Here, too, a logic of transvaluation turns this lack into a plenitude of rewards to be gained by the reader who responds to her exhortation to look after their slumber. The worth of sleep exceeds “the sum of our successes and failures,” Huffington insists. “Sleep is a fundamental human need that must be respected. It’s one of humanity’s great unifiers.”³⁷ And even though it is much more than merely “a tool to help us be better at work, give a better presentation, come up with more ideas in a meeting, score more goals, or put more points on the board,” it certainly does not at all hurt that better sleep “will undoubtedly help us do all these things.”³⁸ There is much value to be created from sleep: “properly appraised, our sleeping time is as valuable a commodity as the time we are awake.”³⁹ Sleep must be protected, and even more crucially, sleep is worth investing in. Where

Crary conceives the utter inutility of sleep as a source of resistance, Huffington equates this value proposition with no less than a “sleep revolution.”⁴⁰

Taking these two books as signal exhibits in the ongoing reappraisal of sleep, we find the latter stranded in an oddly ambiguous place—somewhere between waste and value, between a revolt against the dominant order and a top-down revolution. On the one hand, the linking of sleep to a politics of resistance resonates widely in the contemporary landscape, as borne out by the encampments of the Arab Spring, Occupy Movement, and Umbrella Movement; by the worldwide Sleep Out events drawing attention to the crisis of homelessness; and even by the intrepid Patricia Okoumou, who on July 2, 2018, climbed to the base of the Statue of Liberty to protest the federal detention of migrants and, for part of the four hours that transpired before her arrest, took a nap. In parks, squares, streets, and monument sites, sleep has entered the corporeal lexicon of protest—as a reclamation of public space, a disruption of business as usual, and, in the words of Anna Della Subin, “a stance against injustice that is not only nonviolent but as vulnerable, and as noncooperative, as possible.”⁴¹ On the other hand, the remaking of sleep as a monetizable resource, located not outside of late capitalism but well within its bounds as a central concern for its self-improving, self-caring, and always-optimizing subjects cannot be dismissed (and not just because it comes with an endorsement from the chief operating officer of the sixth most highly valued company in the world).⁴² To contend with this ambiguity, then, what is required is a more detailed consideration of how power acts upon the body and mediates the relationship between sleep and the orders of waking life. More than and never fully reducible to a preexisting “natural condition” that mounts an impermeable wall against external forces, sleep marks the highly unstable juncture of the body and technologies of power.

Or to make an analogy, our sleep is no more natural than our sex. Such concerns have been taken up by the philosopher Cressida Heyes, who, in a recent interview, raises an intriguing question: has sleep replaced sex in the popular imagination?⁴³ While sex was once considered a risqué and exciting topic of discussion, today it elicits yawns from her students, who would much prefer to talk about their sleeping problems.⁴⁴ There is abundant anecdotal evidence to support Heyes’s hypothesis—from the ways that popular discourse formulates its obsession with certain bedroom activities (how much sleep we are getting, how we can get more, whether it could be better, how to reach deep sleep more quickly), to the return of the waterbed (first sold in 1967 as a model dubbed the Pleasure Pit, today it is hyped for its cradling sensations).⁴⁵ Pressing further with this exercise in transposition while also shifting course, we can restate the question thus: does sleep in fact occupy the status previously ascribed to sex by Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*? As sex is already, sleep is now becoming “an object of analysis [and] a target of intervention,” crucially poised “at the boundary line of the biological and the economic domains.” Sleep has assumed a place alongside sex as

“an issue, and a public issue no less; a whole web of discourses, special knowledge, analyses, and injunctions settled upon it.”⁴⁶ While Foucault saw a “great sexual sermon” sweeping through society, we now glimpse a wave of sleep evangelism, such as that proclaimed by Huffington, which denounces an old regime of inhibition and, with near-religious fervor, heralds a new order: “Tomorrow sex”—and sleep—“will be good again.”⁴⁷

The rustlings “of revolt, of promised freedom, of the coming age of a different law” stir this discourse, Foucault writes. His observation applies at a superficial level to *The Sleep Revolution* (to the extent that freedom can be reduced to a individualist notion of self-actualization and thriving within a narrow field of action) and more profoundly to 24/7. For to look to sleep as a source of true revolt, or a repository of oppositional energies by which the body resists the powers that would capture it, is to advance something along the lines of a repressive hypothesis of sleep. The repressive hypothesis, as Foucault writes about sex, constructs its object “as a natural given which power tries to hold in check.” Sex, like its counterpart sleep, is conceived “as a stubborn drive, by nature alien and of necessity disobedient to a power which exhausts itself trying to subdue it and often fails to control it entirely.”⁴⁸ In opposition to this stubborn drive, power is conceived as a repressive force, operating through mechanisms of negation and exclusion. This form of power is “the power to say no,” or “a pure limit set on freedom”; historically rooted in the threat of termination of life, its goal is to produce an obedient body.⁴⁹ Foucault goes on to refute the repressive hypothesis, which is blind to the operations of an entire other set of techniques of power. What the history of sexuality shows is that the long-standing mechanisms of prohibition have been joined with and penetrated by newer techniques aimed toward the “incitement and intensification” of the body, with the goal of cultivating its vigor and maximizing its capacities.⁵⁰ He writes, “Since the classical age the West has undergone a very profound transformation of these mechanisms of power. ‘Deduction’ has tended to be no longer the major form of power but merely one element among others, working to incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize, and organize the forces under it: a power bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them.”⁵¹ Such power endeavors to care for the body rather than to dominate it, by means of exerting a positive influence on its performance. Foucault calls this biopower, whose object is life itself and whose “highest function” is “to invest life through and through.”⁵²

The consideration of sex leads Foucault to an articulation of biopower, an idea on which he would elaborate late in his career. Likewise, through the lens of biopower, another understanding of sexuality comes into focus: “Sexuality is not the most intractable element in power relations, but rather one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality.” It stands out as “an especially dense transfer point for relations of power.”⁵³ Turning back to sleep with this insight in mind, we can

identify a similar set of dynamics. In addition to a proliferation of discourses and new knowledges, sleep comes to be defined also by a thickening tangle of therapeutic interventions and regulatory strategies. Some of these operate in a mode of exclusion—by setting limits on this activity, assigning to it a proper time and place, and distributing it within an ordered system. The time-discipline of the industrial era and the institutionalized workplace continues to shape the way that a large portion of the population sleeps, while to partake of sleep apart from its designated time and place—as in a public space—is a prosecutable offense in many places in the world. Such procedures, however, coexist and overlap with a host of biopolitical techniques whose objective is not to limit sleep but to improve it. In the words of Huffington, “increasingly, getting enough sleep is all about performance—job performance, physical performance, mental performance, athletic performance.”⁵⁴ The burgeoning array of biotechnological tools that hold out the ability to track and influence our slumber (from tracking apps to drugs, from transcranial induction devices to polysomnography labs), converge toward the end of maximally optimized sleep.

To illustrate this dense transfer in relations of power, let us return to one of Cray’s exhibits. The development of stimulants like Provigil to prolong the soldier’s wakefulness during continuous operations does not capture the full extent of the military’s manipulation of sleep. The “sustained combat operations” warranting the use of such stimulants represent but one element of the “sleep management systems” utilized by the U.S. Armed Forces. As Eyal Ben-Ari demonstrates in his research, these systems arose in the 1990s as a critical component of the military technological apparatus, and their purpose was “enhancing the very bodily and mental capacities of soldiers.”⁵⁵ In the research reports and command guidelines circulated throughout the organization, the management of sleep is directly linked to maintenance of operational performance. “Sleep sustains battlefield awareness—the sum of mental abilities necessary for effective combat performance,” states one document. “Managing sleep to sustain performance is analogous to managing any item of logistic resupply By and large, commanders understand the value of sleep in sustaining performance. With a few exceptions, most military personnel recognize that total sleep deprivation and brief, fragmented sleep exacts a substantial toll on individual and unit performance.”⁵⁶ The report goes on to pinpoint the difficulty faced by commanders in accurately gauging the alertness level of their troops, introducing a wrist-worn computational monitor for the collection of individual sleep data and thus anticipating the rise of wearable self-tracking technologies a decade later—bearing out the claim that the soldier is indeed the precursor of the worker and consumer. Contrary to what the drug Provigil implies when considered on its own, many military manuals explicitly advise against interpreting the need for sleep as “a sign of weakness, laziness, or lack of motivation,” Ben-Ari notes.⁵⁷ For instance, a 2015 “Leader’s Guide to Soldier and Crew Endurance” opens with an admonition on the dangers of fatigue

and sleep deprivation. The remainder of the document reads like an extremely technical sleep-hygiene guide, including suggestions like “nap as early and often as possible.”⁵⁸ Sleep is not suppressed or deferred so much as it is integrated into a calibrated system of command and control.

Beyond the military, the adoption of daytime napping as a means of “logistical resupply” also transpires in the private sector, promoted by leaders who have likewise been persuaded that “sufficient sleep is a uniquely powerful fuel for sustainable performance.” The expectation that “sleep will always collide with the demands of a 24/7 universe” is controverted by the normalization of the daytime nap in certain spheres of the economy. In this context, napping is increasingly seen as a key to competitive advantage and a central pillar of a program of alertness maintenance, whether from the viewpoint of managers seeking to boost their operations or of workers seeking to increase their own output. “No single behavior has more power to influence overall well-being and productivity,” writes Tony Schwartz, the chief executive of the consultancy firm The Energy Project, founded on the mantra “Manage energy not time.”⁵⁹ Schwartz explains the math behind the mantra: “Too many of us continue to live by the durable myth that one less hour of sleep gives us one more hour of productivity. In reality, each hour less of sleep not only leaves us feeling more fatigued, but also takes a pernicious toll on our cognitive capacity.”⁶⁰ That is, the daytime nap realizes a replenishment of capacity rather than a pure subtraction from productive time. The fallout of this lesson can be detected across a variety of institutional spaces, from higher education—such as the University of Pennsylvania, which distributes to its incoming undergraduates an eye mask imprinted with the exhortation to “sleep well”—to the corporation, where napping is increasingly subject to official protocols. As Vern Baxter and Steve Kroll-Smith argue in a study of napping policies across a range of industries, such policies are reflective of “an intensification of work and an extension of the work day that is blurring modern boundaries between what is public and what is private space and time.”⁶¹ In the 24/7 era, the act of sleeping on the job undergoes a process of resignification—from a symptom of delinquency to a sign of the worker’s “temporal flexibility” and “continuous accessibility for work,” or from a failure to obey to a commitment to high performance.⁶² In leaving behind the familiar formula of eight hours for work and eight hours for rest, the normalization of the daytime nap illustrates the transfer of relations of power taking place around sleep, conjoining a disciplinary mode of power that partitions in space and orders in time with a biopolitical mode of “continuous regulatory and corrective mechanisms.”⁶³ From the perspective of a biopower that targets energy not time, even the time of unconsciousness can be rendered useful, and sleep put to work, by its precise insertion into a system of modulated and variable controls.⁶⁴

Consider, then, the matter of sleeping on the job. Today the phrase might evoke a hypothetical knowledge worker who, in the course of a long day at the office, dutifully refuels their energy with a strategic nap. If this worker is employed by

Google, they might opt to do so in a deluxe programmable “EnergyPod” that cradles its user in a “zero gravity position” while encasing them in a personal bubble of relaxing sounds and controlled light.⁶⁵ In this echelon of labor and for this type of worker, whose sleep must be protected to the extent that their cognitive capacities are prized, to sleep on the job is to regulate the body’s functions so as to bring them into conformity with organizational imperatives. In other labor contexts, however, the same act can signify dissent rather than conformity, marking a conflictual interplay between opposing interests. In contrast to the hypothetical example above, sleeping on the job was leveraged as a coordinated action by actual factory employees in the industrial zones of Delhi, as reported by a workers’ newspaper in 2014. Responding to the management’s punitive attitude toward those on the night shift who exhibited signs of fatigue, more than one hundred of their colleagues slept together on the shop floor. “We carried on like this for three nights,” the paper reports; “workers in other sections of the factory followed suit. It became a tradition of sorts.”⁶⁶ The Raqs Media Collective recirculated these events among English-language readers as an example of the “acceleration of linkages and exchanges between workers” taking place in the factories of Faridabad. For those bodies subjected to value calculations and disciplinary regimes particular to this setting, sleep enacts protest in a quiet register, signaling “the gentlest possible refusal of capital’s rapacious claim on time and the human body.” Thus choreographed as a strike, a stoppage of work, and seizure of space, the decision to sleep on the job becomes a display of collective power and worker unity in the face of exploitation. If these exchanges transform sleep into a political act, the meaning of this act takes shape in a concrete situation, forged in tension with the demands of capital and the state, the Raqs Media Collective insists. Their bosses command them to return to their stations, their political leaders call upon the nation to rise, and meanwhile, “for all practical purposes, the subjects are opaque, oblivious to every command The more they sleep, the louder is the call to rise.”⁶⁷ Raqs relates the slumbering masses to the mythical sleeping warrior Kumbhakarna, identifying their sleep with “the revolutionary potential of the cultivated hibernation of a reticent strength, whose awakening has consequences.”

A final vignette of sleeping on the job comes from *Dilbar*, a single-channel video installation by Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Chai Siris. Commissioned by the Sharjah Art Foundation for the opening of its newly built Art Spaces and exhibited at the Sharjah Biennial in 2013, the work presents a portrait of a Bangladeshi worker involved in the construction of this very site, Delowar “Dilbar” Hossain. Its opening shot is a close-up of Dilbar lying on his side asleep, and the images that follow track the spaces in which he spends his days, moving between the museum and the shanty-like quarters where the workers reside. Throughout the nine-minute video, Dilbar slumbers—on construction sites littered with scaffolding, in the immaculate corridors of finished galleries, and on his bed, which marks a small spot of personal space in the makeshift quarters. Conveyed in this



FIGURE 6. *Dilbar* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Chai Siris, 2013). Courtesy of Kick the Machine.



FIGURE 7. *Dilbar* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Chai Siris, 2013). Courtesy of Kick the Machine.

“sleeping existence” is the feeling of a life untethered, lonely, and experienced from a remove. The portrait expresses Dilbar’s displacement, a condition shared with the million other Bangladeshi migrants living in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) at the time, many also employed in construction. Perhaps Dilbar sleeps because he is wiped out by the long hours and strenuous demands of his job, his exhaustion a reflection of the sheer manpower consumed by the UAE’s recent building boom in luxury properties, campuses, and art museums. Perhaps his sleep marks the time of waiting and longing for escape, as the artists suggest.⁶⁸ This longing responds to the unfree circumstances in which migrant workers like him find themselves—forced into debt bondage, deprived of mobility, and denied basic human rights.⁶⁹ If Dilbar is representative of the large invisible population of workers exploited by the Gulf states, then the video returns him to the site of his labor, confronting the museum visitor with his presence. By projecting his slumber onto the structure he had a hand in building, the installation enshrines the exhaustion of worker within the temple of art and slyly monumentalizes the act of sleeping on the job.

Taken together, these examples demonstrate that even while sleep always involves the reminder of a limit or the assertion of a boundary, these lines can themselves be inscribed on tilted planes and shifting sands. A politics of sleep must contend with the specific techniques of power that relate to the time, place, and bodies it involves, situating sleep as a wedge into a particular context, as much as a line of flight from the dominant order. It must likewise proceed from a recognition of the combinatorial possibilities of biopolitical and disciplinary mechanisms,

along with how these are unevenly distributed across the “power chronography” of the contemporary world. This power chronography—as coined by Sarah Sharma to encompass the “multitude of time-based experiences specific to different populations that live, labor, and sleep under the auspices of global capitalism”—determines whose sleep must be protected and who must stay awake in order that others may rest.⁷⁰ Sharma offers an important rejoinder that the 24/7 world describes not a universally shared condition arrived at via a singular genealogy of insomniac modernity, but a differential system of “inequitable temporal relations,” composed of plural interlocking economies of exhaustion, each with its own history.⁷¹ Sleep occupies multiple positions within this differential system, and this multiplicity dogs the question of what exactly is preserved when sleep is protected. The reparative impulse plays out according to different logics, as the foregoing examples show, from instances that corroborate the rippling effects of a growing market for sleep that fluidly traverses the boundaries between the commodity sector and the experience economy—instantiated in art installations as rarefied editions of the customized sleeping environments that companies provide for their employees or consumers are now encouraged to assemble in their homes—to others that aim for more far-reaching reconfigurations of the social. I conclude this chapter by returning to *Black Womxn Dreaming/Divine the Darkness* as an example of the latter, a work that clarifies the conditions under which sleep can entail “an awakening with consequences.”

Black Womxn Dreaming/Divine the Darkness situates sleep at the fulcrum of an art of collaboration and a politics of resistance. The artists call upon sleep as a rejection of capitalist values, a disidentification from its ethic of work, and a limit upon its usurpation of energy, in language that resonates with Cray’s vaunting of the “uncompromising interruption of the theft of time from us by capitalism.” But at the same time, they expose the shortcomings of a politics of sleep that fails to address how this theft of time and energy toll are unevenly distributed along the lines of race and gender, calling into question the assertion of 24/7 as a straightforwardly common condition. The image of a well-rested Black woman is an unfamiliar sight, Tabor-Smith points out, even in a culture that regularly consumes Black bodies as spectacle. For her, this absence calls to mind the status of African Americans as the most sleep-deprived demographic in the United States. Numerous recent studies have delineated the depth of the “racial sleep gap,” attributing it to factors such as environmental safety and noise, the stress of discrimination and economic precarity, and disparities in medical care and treatment.⁷² To these factors, Josie Roland Hodson adds “the explosion of incarceration and the criminalizing of everyday life”—with sleep deprivation routinely used in detention as a device of torture—“homelessness and dispossession born of racist housing policies, and hyperexploitative labor conditions that require that Black people work more for less.”⁷³ Thus, coming across an old photograph of a Black woman lying in repose, Hodson is seized by a realization like that of Tabor-Smith. “It occurred to

me then that I had never seen a photograph like this before: a spontaneous image of a Black woman's sleep."⁷⁴

Moreover, Tabor-Smith couches this disparity in relation to histories of racialized labor. She notes that fatigue was widely deployed by slaveholders as an instrument of torture and method of forcing compliance. Chronic sleep deprivation served the purpose not just of extracting the maximum amount of labor from enslaved people, but also maintaining control over them during nonwork hours. Alluding to this practice, Frederick Douglass writes in his diaries, "Sunday was my only leisure time. I spent this in a sort of beast-like stupor, between sleep and wake."⁷⁵ Prompted by Tabor-Smith's invocation of the legacies of racial and colonial violence, we can begin to discern another history of sleeplessness, one that bisects capitalism's theft of time with the theft of lands and bodies, and that looks beyond the factory and coffeehouse to the plantation and colony. Accounts of the 24/7 world like Crary's locate its origins in the industrializing West, where the temporal regimes associated with the factory and its system of wage work encroached upon previous patterns of rest, severing these from the natural cycles that shaped premodern agrarian life. For Thompson, too, the time-discipline that imposed standardized limits on sleep was a phenomenon of industrialization, thus a deviation from the rhythms of preindustrial, rural societies. But these divisions—and any nostalgic fantasies they might inspire—break down under a global framing of relations of production that centers the political and economic project of Western colonialism. Such a framing encompasses, along with the factory, the colonial plantation as a mechanism of imperial territorial expansion and ecological disruption, a dispositive of agrarian capitalism and, as Saidiya Hartman has observed, a laboratory of coercive labor practices and techniques of discipline that would circulate across the Atlantic, crisscrossing North and South.⁷⁶ Across these locales, between past and present, racial capitalism has relied upon myths of "Black nonsomnia," or what Hodson identifies as "the racialized presupposition of a condition of sleeplessness that has been mapped onto the Black body."⁷⁷

In a 1830 report on the colonies of the Americas, John Gladstone, a prominent British slave owner with sizable properties in British Guiana and Jamaica, referred to "the extensive supplies of sugar and coffee they produce for our consumption (now become almost necessities of life)."⁷⁸ As demand for these supplies grew in Europe's markets, so did the profits generated by their trade, resulting in the enrichment of colonial powers. Sugar was among the most lucrative, brutally intensive, and slave-reliant of plantation crops, and its consumption was closely tied to that of coffee and tea. As Mintz writes, "the combination of a nonalcoholic, bitter, calorie-empty stimulant, heated and in liquid form, with a calorie-rich and intensely sweet substance came to mean a whole new assemblage of beverages."⁷⁹ And the rise of this stimulating liquid assemblage attests to the location of sleep at the juncture of racially differentiated but conjoined economies of exhaustion. The

transforming architecture of sleep identified by Schmidt therefore links together the denizens of the coffeehouse, hyped up on caffeine and sucrose, and enslaved plantation laborers, pushed to depletion and death. The modern syndrome of sleep deprivation was shadowed by more acutely violent forms of privation and dispossession. These connections bring into view another aspect of the age of sleeplessness, situated at the site of production and residing in a history of enslaved labor that has been sidelined by narratives of global capitalism (by its relegation to a vague prehistory of accumulation) or elided at the point of consumption.

To the extent that sleep debt scales up across individual bodies, to reiterate a point raised at the outset of this chapter, it must be read through this history. That is, sleep debt accumulates in time and in accordance with the ledgers of racial capitalism. Its calculation must take into account what Kathryn Yussof terms a white imperial regime of energy extraction. The latter, she writes, was built upon “the traffic between the *inhuman as matter* and the *inhuman as race*,” both treated as extractable, fungible, and transferable energy sources.⁸⁰ Thus, Yussof argues, “sugar was the conversion of inhumane slave energy into fuel, then back into human energy, plus inhuman energy, to produce industrialization.” The extractive regime “of being energy for others, of putting sugar in the bowl, and in the muscles of white labor” was central to the system of capitalism and the making of the modern world.⁸¹ By bringing these processes to bear upon *Black Womxn Dreaming/Divine the Darkness*, Tabor-Smith points to another dimension of the reparative impulse that animates the project, one oriented toward a historical horizon of reparatory justice. The couching of sleep and rest in response to the call for reparations for past and continuing harms inflicted upon Black people connects *Black Womxn Dreaming* with numerous other recent projects. These include the Nap Ministry, founded in 2016 by Tricia Hersey on the basis that “we believe rest is a form of resistance and name sleep deprivation as a racial and social justice issue”; *Black Power Naps/Siestas Negras*, an installation and initiative by the artists Navild Acosta and Fannie Sosa that addresses sleep deprivation as part of the legacy of extraction and aiming for “the redistribution of rest, relaxation, and down times”; and Experiments in Supine Possibilities, an event organized in 2020 by the Church of Black Feminist Thought (founded by Ra Malika Imhotep and Miyuki Baker), which invited participants to engage in seven days of laying down and heeding “the messages or silences of your body at rest.”⁸² Experiments in Supine Possibilities asks, “What happens when Abolitionist Strategy emanates from this place as opposed to from militant postures of self-denial?”

Across these projects, the enactment of a politics of sleep unfolds on a collective plane, thus breaking away from individualist approaches to repair, as well as from a notion of sleep as a purely inward turn or a withdrawal from the sphere of intersubjective exchange. To sleep in the presence of others is to willingly abandon the fiction of self-sufficiency and autonomy, in acknowledgment of vulnerability and interdependence. Those who sleep are unable to see themselves and must be

watched over by others, consigned to the protection of those who are awake. *Black Womxn Dreaming* secures such protection through the construction of a commons of sleep by means of the participatory, performative framework of ritual. In its innermost circle, this commons comprised those who responded directly to the invitation extended by the artists. Beyond this group of sleepers, the circle of ritual was opened up further by means of the blessing ceremony described earlier, which gathered the attentions of the attendees to send “a message of ease” to the sleepers; the display of the related installation *Divine the Darkness* at Ashara Ekundayo Gallery; and a twilight procession in downtown Oakland that marked the closing of the episode. Thus, a larger group of participants was brought in to participate indirectly in the commons of sleep, contribute to the web of support sustaining it, and express their solidarity with its political message.

This commons of sleep acquired an even greater resonance in the following year when the COVID-19 pandemic and a series of publicized police murders exposed in stark relief the absence of basic social and legal protections for Black Americans. In the current political landscape, the supine body has emerged as a powerfully charged image, to reiterate a point made by the Church of Black Feminist Thought. It is an emblem of exposure to the lethal force of the police order, a body leveled in death; or one that has been laid low by “depression, fatigue, apathy, chronic pain”—not to mention burnout—“in the face of converging crises.”⁸³ Demonstrations against racist police violence have taken the form of die-ins, with protestors lying down in streets and public buildings. Meanwhile, beyond the public gaze, groups like the Movement for Black Lives tackle the challenges of “activist burnout” amid crises that continue to build and spin out. In these circumstances, restorative rest recalls Audre Lordé’s lesson that self-care amounts to “an act of political warfare.”⁸⁴ Alongside the familiar postures of rising up and standing up (which draw upon what the feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero has identified as a conception of agency fully captive to a vertical geometry of rectitude), another gestural repertoire—one oriented to the horizontal line, the place of refuge and retreat, the “position at the bottom”—enters the frame of the political struggle for racial justice.⁸⁵

The insistence on a role for sleep aligns these projects with a recent strand of feminist thought that prioritizes the recognition of vulnerability and interdependency as a basis for political collectivity. Sleep might serve as the ideal instantiation of such an appeal to vulnerability, as Judith Butler suggests when discussing the revolutionary demonstrations in Tahrir Square during the Arab Spring, where “sometimes the simple act of sleeping there, in the square, was the most eloquent political statement.”⁸⁶ Responding to these same events, the Egyptian writer Haytham El Wardany asserts that the occupation of public space “is the most extreme expression of the protest movement,” and “sleeping while occupying is the true heart of occupation.”⁸⁷ Butler reads the publicly exposed sleeping body as a reminder of “the ways in which we depend on political and social

institutions to persist,” and therefore as a holding to account for this dependency and exposure. Crossing over from private to public, sleep puts the body “on the line” and entails a call to reorganize the social world in a manner that can safeguard its basic needs.⁸⁸ Sleeping occupiers, in El Wardany’s words, “become the brokers of a new reality.”⁸⁹ But while *Black Womxn Dreaming* reflects the horizontal orientation of a politics of vulnerability, it also takes a deliberate step back from such tactics of exposure and visibility. It refrained from putting supine sleeping bodies on the line and into public view. Instead, the communal event of slumber remained hidden from view behind a curtain of privacy, while being publicized indirectly and by degrees of remediation. In its careful enfolding of disclosure with reserve, *Black Womxn Dreaming* short-circuited the dynamics of visual confrontation and witnessing set into play by sleeping in public.

In its measures of reserve and withholding from view, *Black Womxn Dreaming* raises important questions about the ways that exposure might not enable, but rather hinder, a reparative politics of sleep. Contained in this reserve is a caution: if access to rest is unevenly and inequitably distributed, then sleep must not be idealized as the gateway to a common, biologically leveled humanity. Even vulnerabilities that are shared by all will weigh upon different bodies to different degrees; vulnerability is allowed to or inflicted upon disparate groups in varying measures. A turn to a counterexample provides an entry into *Black Womxn Dreaming*’s navigation of such concerns. This comparison takes off from the work’s status as an artistic intervention as much as a political one. Integrating the activity of slumber as part of a choreographed event (of which the “ritual” represents a specific modality), the project evokes a strand of performance involving the enactment of sleep. For instance, one recent work that sits squarely within what can be called a performance art of sleep is *The Maybe*, by the artist Cornelia Parker and the actor Tilda Swinton, in which the slumbering body is presented in accordance with the art museum’s traditional methods of display and in conformity with a long-standing iconography of the aesthetically idealized female figure. At the first exhibition of this piece in 1995, Swinton slept inside a large glass vitrine at London’s Serpentine Gallery: the unconscious woman placed on exhibit as a precious object. Swinton kept up this performance for eight hours a day during seven consecutive days, matching the duration of *Black Womxn Dreaming*. Aesthetic admiration therefore shades into respect for the sheer physical and mental stamina required to withstand such a prolonged pose and scrutiny. Swinton’s feat calls to mind a host of other works that have similarly engaged sleep as part of an extreme performance that overwrites its associations with ease and rest, recoding it in terms of endurance and discipline. The tightrope of extreme inertia and superlative willpower upon which she balances calls to mind, for instance, Chris Burden’s *Bed Piece* (1972), in which the artist laid on a bed in a gallery for twenty-two continuous days.⁹⁰ Says Burden, “I wanted to force [them] to deal with me by presenting myself as an object. But I’m not an object, so there’d be this

moral dilemma.” The body on the line is simultaneously caught up in a precarious balancing act between personhood and objecthood, suspended between a withdrawn subjectivity and an object status to which that body cannot be reduced, as Burden confidently asserts.

Notwithstanding its performative dimension, *Black Womxn Dreaming* disengages from this strand of heroic sleep performance, along with the myths of individual exceptionalism into which it feeds and the institutionalized aesthetic economies upon which it relies. This distance inscribes the difference between a spectacle of sleep, centered upon the artist as performer, and a commons of sleep, unfolding through communal participation. In so doing, it also raises the crucial question of whether the wager of objecthood so boldly assumed by the performance artist merits the risk for those subject to techniques of racialization that systematically deprive them of the status of personhood. If the question of race hovers only at the margins of *The Maybe*—hinted at with its evocation of stories of sleeping beauties who are as white as snow—it is central to *Black Womxn Dreaming*. Sleep must be protected, but what about the sleep of those for whom social protections do not reliably function in the first place, such as the Black women and girls whose well-being constitutes the main impetus for *House/Full of Black Women*? The project centers the bodies of those for whom the visibility of sleeping in public—along with other ordinary activities like driving, running, walking, eating, talking, and so on—can likely elicit reactions of violent erasure. Consider the example of Lolade Siyonbola, a graduate student at Yale University who in 2018 was subject to an interrogation by four police officers as a result of taking a nap in the common room of her dormitory during an all-nighter, after being reported by another student. Despite widespread university efforts to address sleep deprivation in the student population—which extend to the creation of napping zones in libraries, dorms, and other campus spaces—Siyonbola’s nap was met with the charge of criminality. A more disturbing example that transpired in the work’s aftermath is that of Breanna Taylor, shot dead by police while at home in her bedroom, echoing a history of civil rights leaders killed by police at night in their beds. The targeting of Black Americans by systems of surveillance and state violence nullifies the sanctity of sleep along with any meaningful distinction between private and public.

It is precisely “because black female subjects are not granted social, culture, or legal privacy,” Jennifer Nash writes, that the private becomes for them a site of self-cultivation, opposition, and “potential liberation.”⁹¹ In response to such unremitting exposure to the policing gaze, Black women have historically developed practices of dissemblance, fugitivity, opacity, and invisibility, for the purposes of securing safety and “the sanctity of an inner life.”⁹² These practices demand a rethinking of default distinctions between the public as the realm of political action and the private as apolitical, between active and passive resistance. *Black Womxn Dreaming* assumes a position in this lineage of practices, carving out a

commons of sleep that is also an enclosure, or a space in which bodies are at once held and withheld. Its politics of sleep is informed by the Black feminist concept of the retreat—defined by Tina Campt as a strategy of inward escape, a place to “dream of possibility from within impossible strictures,” and a transformation that begins in the dark.⁹³ Turning to sleep as a mode of retreat, *Black Womxn Dreaming* taps its incubatory powers.