
Sleeping into Wakefulness: Traversing the Three Stages of Sleep Towards Liberation

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Abstract

This piece is composed of a blend of poetry, social commentary, and collage artwork. It aims to draw connections between sleep and liberation, exploring how deeper levels of rest can draw us toward freedom, not only in our material conditions, but of thought, imagination and spiritual exploration. Using the three stages of the sleep cycle – light sleep, REM sleep and slow wave sleep – as a metaphorical and literal device, this piece explores productivity culture’s limiting effect on our mental and spiritual health; the piece creates poetic connections between the physical phenomena and the mental and spiritual possibilities that lie within each sleep stage. As working people, especially racialized working people, we are subject to generations of sleep deprivation through historical processes of enslavement and forced labour extraction, which translates to many lost years of the higher functions of rest: self-knowledge, memory, creativity and resilience. In today’s highly corporatized economy of neoliberal social relations, all working people are subject to a similar theft of the physical, mental, and spiritual power of deep rest. As racialized women of immigrant families, we draw upon our experience of witnessing firsthand the neoliberal ideology of sleep deprivation and extreme productivity portrayed as a necessary rite of passage for our families to have established belonging, stability and safety in Canada.

Keywords

Sleep, rest, capitalism, resistance, dreams, liberation



Light Sleep

The body begins to still into the midnight shift and we drift to the edge of sleep. Our heart slows, temperatures decrease, breath shallows, muscles relax and a light twitch plays upon our eyelids. We are in *light sleep*, a transitory phase between this world and the world of dreams. Our brain waves begin to lengthen as their daytime patterns slow into a relaxed state. We ride low frequency alpha and theta waves and move toward the threshold of memory, intuition, knowledge and dreams. We begin to distance ourselves from the external world, yet remain awake. Still awake.

A light tap upon the body is all that is required to pull us back into the waking world. In this stage, the brain is in purgatory. We can only go so deep into meaningful rest as our daily realities have a grip on us. The state of light sleep can never completely channel a deep, meditative focus on the signals originating from within.

We remain in light sleep because of our troubled histories, fears and future anxieties, all of which are fueled by the need to survive in a world that devalues social bonding, communal relations and meaningful rest. We are faced with perpetual sleep deprivation and a crisis of derealization. The body

and mind cannot integrate and access knowledge or power because our daily lives have detached us from ourselves and our environments. Racialized, migrant and labouring bodies have not only faced the capitalist theft of daily life and time, but also the sanctity of deep sleep, a level of rest that acts as a source of vital information and pathways into our pasts.

This light, cyclical and shallow stage of sleep speaks to a larger crisis. It is a crisis of the everyday long hours, stress and increased economic, emotional and affective labor that hinder our ability to achieve deep, active sleep. Locked into this non-restorative stage, we will not heal from the traumas of our waking world or dream revolutionary futures¹. Ultimately, this lack of rest, the absence of a deep insightful sleep, is symptomatic of a wider social pathology of corporate-driven labour extraction.

Still, we shall rise

In stillness we begin to know

The vast and shallow pools surrounding the city

Detaching and detaining us to machine functions

Until we dip our calloused feet into murky waters

Ground ourselves into the earth once again

And escape the fatality of the booming city

REM Sleep

We enter the second part of the sleep cycle: *rapid eye movement*, or **REM sleep**. Our muscles tense, become rigid. Our eyelids flutter to life, darting frantically around emerging dreamscapes in our minds. The dreams begin, hurling us into worlds both familiar and fantastical. In this stage, brain activity closely mimics that of waking life, but can quickly surpass these levels. Synapses fire in new and untested ways.

When we access REM sleep, we access our dreams. When we access our dreams, we begin to push the conditioned boundaries of what is possible. When we dream, we begin to colour outside the lines; we tread outside the familiar neural ruts burned through daily work, daily acquisition of resources, daily survival, daily distraction.

Dreaming is a right, not a privilege. How else would we access our depth? Our boundaries? Our capacity to change, to grow? How else would we confront our fears, access our subconscious? To dream is to exist – if only in our minds – in a world without the limits of our flesh. Our dream worlds are without the need to produce daily in order to live, in order to be seen, in order to have a place in broader society.

*We shall sleep for sleep's sake,
we shall dream not to escape,
but to discover hidden truths,
uncovering a grander reality
than in the world in which we wake.*

Lucid dreaming occurs when the dreamer becomes aware of the dream. A common and trainable phenomenon, lucid dreamers can quite literally take flight, able to experience anything their imaginations can conjure. The lucid dreamer can bring to life the characters from their lives and interact with them in new and unforeseen ways. Lucid dreaming is a creative and empowering practice potentially available to us all; it offers the ability to transpose our fears – both subconscious and omnipresent – into living symbols, characters and sometimes defeatable adversaries. Sometimes, in this period of high activity and volatility, we can also confront the demons manifested through sleep paralysis.

*In sleep I break the master's spell
I dream his body damned to hell.*

Accessing the powers of sleep, lucid or unconscious, is a deeply creative and empowering practice acting as an avenue for new social imaginings untapped in our present state. Our rationalist Western culture considers the subjective space of sleep and dreams as merely “imaginary,” but unknown worlds and dream-visions offer truths that are inaccessible through the body’s senses and often obscured by Western epistemologies and hegemonic understandings of truth and knowledge.

*There's work I must do alone tonight
Led only by light of moon
Leave me to my work, I say
I am strong, I will surface soon.*

*I am lowered down by starry light
Into pools of mirrored tears
They stalk me through the glittered swamp
The smiling, snarling fears*

*The hand that stabs, the Jabberwock,
I'm weighted down with lead
I scream but only breeze comes out
I shift, I change, I tread.
Leave me to my slumber now*

*There's something I must do,
If I slay them all tonight,
I'll come back home to you..*

Sufi poets would evoke such powers of dreams and disrupt the linear temporalities of the present by practicing ritualistic sleep, following dream-stories as spiritual insights into our material existence¹¹. The spiritual signals in this twilight state hold an evocative power but remain faint and often fleeting if we do not sleep, rest and push the rigid and often violent boundaries of productivity.

Slow Wave Sleep

We have traversed past our dreams and entered our own uncharted depths. We are now in the longest and most critical sleep stage: *slow wave*, or **deep sleep**. Here, we don't dream: we become.

Our breath grows long and even, our muscles

settle into a deep stillness. Finally, there is quiet, there is space, there is room to grow. Deep within our bodies, our cells regenerate. Wounds heal, skin repairs itself, growth hormones are released. In deep sleep, the natural functions of the body may come to life at last, free of the busy chatter of the mind. Delta waves resound from our brains throughout our sleeping forms. The day's buildup of toxins are cleared away, and the body integrates what it has learned that day.

In deep sleep we are physically, literally becoming ourselves. This is Rest in its truest sense, where the many fragments of life's unending stimuli can float gently into place, allowed to integrate into tomorrow's waking self. In this state of rest, there is no struggle, nor is there joy. There is simply Being.

*As the sun falls into the West
And I have outgrown my nest
I think of the night as moments
blessed and of progress
Not from the sweetness of wine
But from the diligence of rest*

Historically, we have been deprived of sleep. Deep, unhindered sleep, past the reach of our fears, is not a luxury of the working person. It has not been the luxury of enslaved and racialized peoples whose rest-deprived docility is necessary to populate the lower rungs of the economic ladder. Permitted to sleep only enough to sustain productivity, we are denied growth, self-realization, and healing. We are kept complicit, afraid, vulnerable, reactive.

Sleep, unlike race and gender, is not often a visible marker of social and economic hierarchies, but it is nevertheless a significant obstacle to equity in any true sense. While we are robbed of sleep, those who benefit from neoliberalism's power structures also enjoy some of its greatest spoils: the freedom to rest and explore their dreams and longings within the haven of sleep.

*I am as tenacious as I am sleepy.
I am waves upon a shore.
I will do my work even as I rest, retreat.
I will create my own existence,
and do good with it.
I will exude love
as an endlessly replenishing gift.*

To sleep deeply – for us – is to *resist*. In slow-wave Rest, we elude the twisted hierarchy of late-stage capitalism. We refuse to become disposable. We grow rich in self-knowledge, resilient in our minds and courageous of heart. We access wisdom from other realms, and we are fortified by our own spirits and those of our ancestors..

As we heal and integrate in deep, active sleep, we grow more independent and creative in our thinking. We move steadily toward our highest selves.

In deep sleep, we become dangerously Awake.

*Let us dream with intention,
Let me sleep with determination,
Let us rest with purpose and power.*

Author biographies

Anjali Appadurai is a climate justice activist, communicator, and artist of South Indian descent. Her work in climate justice advocacy has ranged from engagement with the United Nations' international process down to grassroots organizing in her current home of Vancouver, BC. As an activist, Anjali has sought to draw connections between the geopolitical, social, and economic aspects of climate change, advocating for equity-based solutions to what is inherently an issue of justice. In her work as a Climate Justice Campaigner with the environmental organization Sierra Club BC, she works to bring a strong equity lens to campaigns, movements, and environmental discourse across the province. Viewing the climate crisis as a symptom of the deeper pathology of excessive growth and inequality driven by centuries of colonialism and erasure of traditional ways of knowing, the spiritual aspects of this field of this work give life to Anjali's creative pursuits as a singer, producer, and writer. In her collaborative musical project Aluma Sound, Anjali weaves mythology and imagery from her South Indian roots into the emergent landscape of the diasporic identity, exploring what it means to exist as an immigrant settler from the Global South on unceded Indigenous lands. In her solo work, she expresses through poetry, songwriting, and original compositions.

Sasha Askarian is an Iranian-Canadian PhD candidate in Political Science at York University. Her studies specialize in comparative politics, feminist epistemologies, and Science, Technology, and Society (STS). Her research explores the racial and gendered dimensions of mass incarceration in the United States and Canada, with a current focus on emerging Artificial intelligence (AI) technologies and their role in the shaping and disciplining of subjects in prisons. In examining this rapidly growing form of technological power, she seeks to illuminate how AI is dramatically shifting the ways we think and imagine the capitalist state's power. Sasha's work in the feminist movement, particularly through social projects with women's centers, has offered the radical space necessary for feminist praxis. She has helped organize demonstrations against anti-choice groups, acted in solidarity with grassroots feminist groups, and facilitated and organized workshops around feminist pedagogies and mental health awareness. Her time within the feminist community has inspired a radical understanding of power and politics in a way that continues to fuel her passion in the pursuit of knowledge. Sasha's first love, however, is the arts. Her passion for feminist praxis and political movements is best expressed through the medium of poetry.

¹Rest as resistance and particularly the importance of healing the traumatized body and soul from the violence of capitalism and productivity culture interprets and builds upon the critical work of Tricia Hersey, founder of The Nap Ministry (<https://thenapministry.wordpress.com/>). Their work shared through social media, performance art, and physical installations is critical in demonstrating the nuanced ways in which Black and other racialized peoples have been subject to various forms of bodily and spiritual deprivation through the ongoing historical structures of slavery and colonization.

²Learning about Sufism and more generally from our cultures and families has been integral to understanding the transformative power of sleep and dreams as a source of knowledge and self-representation. Various writers on Sufism and dreams have established the epistemological value of dream visions in the waking world (Amira Mittermaier, 2015) and dreaming as creative problem solving (Fariba Bogzaran & Daniel Deslauriers, 2012). Furthermore, Indigenous systems of knowledge express how dreaming and visioning act as essential ways of knowing our physical world and ourselves more deeply (Leanne Simpson, 2000; Dawn Marsden, 2004).