

Quilting Resistance to the Sleep Industrial Complex

A Narrative Account of Sleeplessness

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Article abstract

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QUILTING RESISTANCE TO THE SLEEP INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX: A NARRATIVE ACCOUNT OF SLEEPLESSNESS

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Abstract: In this narrative account of sleeplessness, I draw on Ball's (2002, 2012) poststructural conceptualization of quilts as social texts to explore the practice of quilting as a method of arts-based storytelling. Through the process of quilting, I story my experience of resisting the Sleep Industrial Complex. I explore the biocultural arena of sleep and critique the biomedical construction of sleeplessness as insomnia. I argue that the medicalization of sleeplessness works to support multi-billion-dollar industries that purport to *cure* insomnia through consumerism (Barbee et al., 2018; Williams, 2008). I describe how radically accepting sleeplessness as a facet of my existence, and not a medicalized disorder, is an expression of self-acceptance and an act of self-care. In this arts-based narrative account of sleeplessness, I mark the transition from viewing sleeplessness as a medical disorder to radically accepting sleeplessness as a natural facet of our complex being-in-the-world.

Keywords: sleep disorders; sociology of sleep; arts-based research; narrative methods; quilting

A Radical Embrace of Sleeplessness

It is three o'clock in the morning and I sit at my desk alert, focused. My MacBook has been discarded and replaced with a whirring Singer. My sore wrists maneuver the cumbersome quilt that keeps dragging on the floor; rolling, twisting the fabric up against my body and through the steady path of the needle. Listen to the needle methodically pierce through the three layers of fabric: front, batting, backing, front, batting, backing. The curvy orange peel stitch pattern, intended to be smooth sweeping lines, comes out uneven and dodgy. I get frustrated and lift my foot. Breathe and think, remember to be gentle with yourself; this is your first time. I assure myself that each uneven stitch will blend into the pattern once it's finished. I continue: lift, twist, roll, front, batting, backing.¹

Before starting on this quilting journey, I wrote the story of my relationship with sleeplessness in words. Documenting 29 years of its presence, through infancy to adulthood; operating with a circadian rhythm that defied the beat of the cultural score. As an infant, I would not fall asleep before midnight. As a child, my nights were spent reading fiction, playing memory games, writing little sonnets. I was always concerned with the meaning and functioning of time; I had trouble understanding why my body and mind wouldn't fall asleep when they were supposed to. My parents, frustrated, would say, "just go to sleep," but staying awake was not a choice. Despite my best efforts, I could not will myself to sleep. I'd lie awake feeling frustrated, deficient. Each morning, I would arrive at school early and exhausted. Over the years, I have purchased all manner of things to cure this insomnia. Nothing worked. Since birth, I have continued to feel alive at night and exhausted in the morning.

My body went on like this until the pandemic hit. Suddenly, working on my doctorate from home, I could make my own schedule. I would stay awake until three, sleep until 11. Mornings free from obligations and evenings full of quiet, I found focus and motivation to keep writing. With nowhere to be and no one to see, I fell into a rhythm that suited my physiology. For the first time, I did not feel that there was something *wrong* with me. Accepting that my circadian rhythm runs healthily to its own beat, I began to critique the hegemony of the cultural score. I stopped seeing my nightly habits as a pathology, as insomnia, but simply as a divergent but equally legitimate way of being.

When I used words to narrate my experience of sleeplessness, something was missing. They failed to adequately articulate how I have come to accept sleeplessness as part of my being-in-the-world. I had trouble using words to narrate an experience that felt so visceral, embodied. The words in my narrative felt disembodied, sanitized. I sought something tactile, soft. A tangible representation of what it feels like when I embrace the darkness rather than fight against it, to be wrapped in the night, warm, comforted. Learning to embrace my body's natural rhythm required me to deconstruct

everything I had been taught about the habits needed for health, productivity, and success.

The Sleep Industrial Complex

My radical embrace of sleeplessness is an affront to the Sleep Industrial Complex that profits off of the medicalization of sleep and sleeplessness. Ehlers and Krupar (2019) use the concept of biocultures as a methodology to investigate arenas within our social world where biomedicine and culture intersect. Biocultures are defined as, “health issue terrains wherein biomedical logics extend beyond the confines of medicine to govern populations and discipline individuals” (Krupar & Ehlers, 2021, p.4). Using Foucault’s epistemology, Ehlers and Krupar (2019) explore how biocultures, such as cancer care and aging, are constructed through particular truth claims that govern spheres of knowledge, experience, and practice. These truth claims often originate within biomedical logics and are powerful drivers of cultural understandings of health and illness. Biocultures structure the societal discourses that influence medical and pharmaceutical practices, economic policies, public health initiatives, and business directives. These biocultural understandings and discourses work to govern our relationships with our bodies and structure how we understand our health and wellbeing (Ehlers & Krupar, 2019; Krupar & Ehlers, 2021).

One aspect of the biocultural arena of sleep is the Sleep Industrial Complex that works to construct sleeplessness as a medical disorder (Barbee et al., 2018). Barbee and colleagues (2018) describe how the Sleep Industrial Complex is fueled by neoliberal market logics and the medicalization of sleep. Medicalization refers to the process by which an ever-widening range of human experiences become, “defined, experienced, and treated as medical conditions” (Barker, 2008, p. 21). Instead of conceptualizing a broad range of circadian rhythms as the result of human diversity, those who stray from the socially acceptable standard associated with the 9–5 work day are constructed as a medical disorder in need of treatment. We are taught to be good neoliberal subjects, to take personal responsibility for our sleep cycles and ensure that we rise early to improve our health and wellbeing. The imperative to rise early for our physical and mental health effectively obscures the political and economic incentives associated with having a well-rested and productive labour force. As health becomes commodified, new markets emerge to meet the growing demand for products to assist in the aspiration to have a socially acceptable sleep routine. The commodification of sleep, and the cultural construction of insomnia as a pathology, supports multi-billion-dollar industries (Barbee et al., 2018; Williams, 2008). In these markets, sleep – at least the promise of it, is bought and sold: Have trouble falling asleep at a socially acceptable time? No problem, get yourself a clinical diagnosis. Take medications, prescriptions, over-the-counter, or herbal. Go to therapy, hire a sleep consultant, participate in a sleep study. Exercise, wear a self-tracking device. Buy a new mattress, an oil diffuser, a white

noise machine, specialty organic teas, a meditation app, a glowing disk that tells you when to breathe. Don't forget, the early bird gets the worm, so take responsibility for your disorder and increase your productivity potential through consumption.

Our contemporary notions of where, when, how long, and with whom we should sleep are culturally, socially, and historically constructed (Barbee et al., 2016; Ekirch, 2016; Williams, 2008). Thus, they can be deconstructed and restructured differently. There is no money to be made from publics radically accepting their natural circadian rhythms. In fact, this type of resistance challenges the social norms engendered by neoliberal ideology about how we ought to optimize our bodies and what it means to be productive. The notion that consumption will optimize health is a cultural imperative.

Stitching a Self-care Narrative

Radically accepting my sleeplessness as a facet of my existence, and not a medicalized disorder, is an expression of self-acceptance and an act of self-care. It is an affront to the Sleep Industrial Complex that had me believe there was something *wrong* with me for being unable to conform my body to follow a socially expected and accepted sleep schedule. Recently, I have learned that quilting, too, is an act of care. In Melanie Pauls's (2014) thesis on feminist aesthetics and the crafting of quilts, she argues that "looking through a framework of feminist ethics of care, it is clear that quilting can be part of a liberatory feminist project, of nurturing human creativity for the enrichment of people's quality of life, community, and mutual care" (p. 121). Quilting can have therapeutic benefits by providing a space to help one quietly work through difficult emotions. It is also a project in caring for others, as many quilts are made to be given as gifts to loved ones. Through quilting, one can simultaneously care for the self and show care for others.

Quilts are more than utilitarian objects created to keep us warm. They are social texts that have been used throughout history to mark important transitions such as births, weddings, and deaths (Ball, 2002, 2012; Pauls, 2014). The patterns that are chosen, the sewing techniques used, and the fabrics that comprise them, be they expensive, richly textured velvets or scraps from old clothes, contain and transmit messages (Ball, 2002, 2012; Pauls, 2014). Ball (2012) writes,

Quilts contain symbolic messages and stories that are told and that exist beyond the life of the quilter. In some cases quilts are used as subversive acts – as a medium for the expression of resistance, rage, grief, and celebration. The irony is that, while these stories were created, not a word needed to be said. (p. 4)

My quilt (see Figures 1–4), with its dark colours and imperfect seams, is a social text that marks my resistance to the Sleep Industrial Complex and my radical acceptance of sleeplessness.

I assembled the quilt using 17 unique fabrics encompassing a range of dark colours and patterns, from black to burnt orange, tiny stars to florals. Each fabric was chosen to represent my life-long fascination with the night, and my new-found appreciation for our dialectical relationship. On the front, I pieced together a four-square design using a combination of four-inch and eight-inch squares. The finished quilt measures 108 by 145 cm. The backing features a large symmetrical cross, an ironic nod to the international symbol that has been used for over 150 years to protect medical buildings and modes of transportation from being attacked during armed conflicts (Shetty et al., 2014). This protective symbol is pieced from a white dotted black fabric, chosen for its resemblance to the stars in the night sky.

Figure 1

The Front View of the Quilt

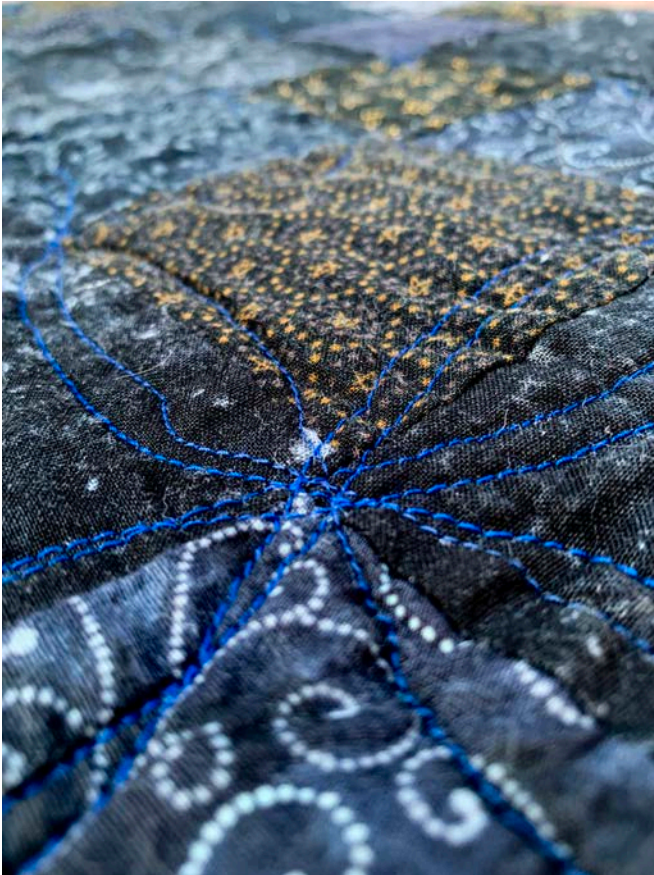


Figure 2*The Back View of the Quilt*

Since finishing the quilt, I have spent many nights reading into the wee hours, wrapped in my soft, warm, social text. Under the cover of my cotton night sky, I feel protected from those biting remarks I've received throughout my life to, "just go to sleep." If only it were that easy. Understanding how such comments are bound up in our social, political, and economic ideologies allows me to forgive those who have made me feel ashamed of my inability to sleep. Radically accepting my circadian rhythm as part of my unique being-in-the-world allows me to feel comfortable in my natural nighttime state. I no longer feel anxiety about my inability to sleep; a weight has been lifted. I'm tired of consuming the hegemonic construction of sleeplessness as a disorder and trying to cure it through disordered consumption. This quilt shares a story of self-acceptance and resistance.

Figure 3

A View of the Stitching Detail

**Figure 4**

A More Detailed View of the Fabrics



Coda

I recognize that being able to adjust my work schedule to fit my natural circadian rhythm is a privilege, and that being a graduate student is a privilege too. I am grateful to have the financial resources required to purchase the necessary tools and materials to engage in this project, and grateful for my aunt, Kelly DuMaresq, whose expert quilting advice I sought numerous times throughout this process.

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ENDNOTES

1. Writing the narrative aspects of this piece in a staccato cadence was an aesthetic choice intended to emulate the sharp, methodical sound of the sewing machine quilting through three layers of fabric: front, batting, and backing. I aim to narrate this story through quilting, an act that cannot be seen by the reader, but echoes of which can be heard through the rhythm of the words.