

Sleepy Asians

THE SLEEPY ASIAN EMERGED AS a strange and humorous figure of ubiquitous computing about a decade after the advent of Web 2.0. Microblogs, Facebook pages, subreddits, and Snapchats documented Asians dozing off in public (and semi-public) spaces like libraries, buses, airports, and even at Ikea. This photo fad was most popular on Tumblr, where pages like “Asians Sleeping on Public Transit,” “Asians Sleeping @ NYU,” and “Asians Sleeping in the Library” crowdsourced photos taken on cellphone cameras, often without the sleepers’ knowledge, and spectacularized the apparent memetic qualities of Asian sleep. The “Asians Sleeping on Public Transit” Tumblr page, which is still online but now inactive, features anonymous contributors’ photos of Asians sleeping on buses and trains in California and suggests in its tagline that perhaps Asians have a “Genetic Predisposition to Narcolepsy.” Accompanying these photos are captions that are mocking or comical in tone, starting with the blog’s very first post in November 2012, which includes a photo of an Asian person dozing off on a BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) train with their head leaned back and hands folded in their lap, paired with the text: “BART: Bay Asians Rapidly Tired.” While pages like “Asians Sleeping @ NYU” reveal how anti-Asian sentiments coalesce in particular geographies of migration and settlement, the meme’s fascination with Asian slumber was also transnational in reach, involving a Facebook group called “Asians Sleeping Everywhere” and German photographer Bernd Hagemann’s now-defunct website, *Sleeping Chinese*, which is also the title of Hagemann’s 2010 photography book.

Proliferating around the same time that sleep-tracking apps and wearable sleep AI first became available for broad commercial use, the Sleepy Asian meme can be read as providing a visual grammar for the attention economy’s measurement and production of circadian rhythms at a time when rest had become more evidently scarce and commodified. Its racial expression of that scarcity and commodification, however, also requires a theorization of sleep itself as a *racializing capacity*—as a property of the modern subject conditioned by legacies of empire, war, and settler colonialism.¹ The outsourcing of service industry labor to the Global South,

particularly to workers in Asia, in the 1990s not only solidified American diurnal work rhythms and nighttime sleeping norms domestically but also “globalized” US work-sleep patterns through what Matthew Wolf-Meyer describes as “spatiotemporal imperialism.” Such “efforts toward modernity,” Wolf-Meyer points out, synchronize specific societies to Western hegemony and “are inescapably tied up in this spatiotemporal order, which is often posited as a morally superior, natural use of time and space.”² Close reading the Sleepy Asian meme, therefore, not only involves examining the memetic quality of sleep itself under information capitalism but also requires an excavation of the relationship between memetic capture and Asian racialization as an iteration of shifts in labor relations under *racial* information capitalism.³ Thus, it is necessary to ask: How and why does Asian sleep index these shifts’ temporalities? What is particularly and spectacularly “Asian” about neoliberalism’s conjunction with information capitalism as it plays out in the everyday scene of rest and slumber? Because the Sleepy Asian is not an image macro but an earlier iteration of what Naomi Smith and Simon Copland might call a “memetic moment,” my close reading of this constellation of photos is guided not by what a specific image tells us but by what its correspondence to other images and events suggests about the racial logics of informational circulation and capture.

Circadian regime(n)s—the biopolitical management and production of the waking and sleeping body—are part of a digital economy that constructs sleep as market participation. In what scholars have theorized as the attention economy, information is a “core commodity” that is bought and sold,



FIGURES 1a and 1b. Left: A photo posted on 20 June 2014, to the “Asians Sleeping on Public Transit” Tumblr. Right: A photo posted on 13 December 2011, to the “Asians Sleeping @ NYU” Tumblr.

and digital platforms must garner and keep the attention of consumers in order to collect and sell the data they generate from user participation.⁴ Today's digital platforms and smartphone apps are not free but paid for by our attention, as Jodi Dean observes: "They cost time. It takes time to post and write and time to read and respond. We pay with attention and the cost is focus."⁵ The once "slowed down" interval of slumber, rather than offering a respite from market participation, is also a mode of information labor that occurs in the background, imbricated in ambient environments. The always-on phone that takes the form of the FitBit or the Sleep Cycle app mediates and quantifies sleep, rendering slumber an online activity and form of participation in digital economies, as circadian rhythms become sellable, tradeable, and mineable information. Similar to adjacent industries like the beauty and fitness market, digital sleep tracking has become an everyday tool for self-optimizing and cultivating more capacity for market participation, rendering sleep an asset that can be measured. Writing about the world of 24/7 capitalism, Jonathan Crary states, "Sleep has always been porous, suffused with the flows of waking activity, though today it is more unshielded than ever from assaults that corrode and diminish it."⁶ Information capitalism's erosion of rest is central to its remaking of slumber, as sleep is re-mediated *by* and *as* new media, at the same time as it is made scarce.

As corporeal surfaces often depicted without a face and blending into their surroundings, the memetic Asian napper gives (quasi-)human shape to the digital age's transformation of rest into an arena for ambient capitalism, where the market continues to "run" in the background like and through ubiquitous computing. Slumped across hard chairs, on a kitchen counter, across or under desks, or with legs crossed and propped up against the wall, these postures of sleep in the meme are excessive—both in the sense that the student or commuter is sleeping outside of public health-approved arenas of sleep and in the sense that sleepers are *not feeling* the pleasures of rest and therefore not really resting. By breaching the boundaries that define Western temporalities of work and leisure, these sleeping bodies evoke anxiety and intrigue because they take on seemingly inhuman postures. The images on Reddit, Tumblr, and Facebook almost always capture Asians sleeping nearby or on laptops, computers, and mobile phones. The implication here is not only that these nappers operate like these technologies but that the Sleepy Asian *is* the technology. When Asians sleep on the internet, the sleep is not legible as the comfort or relaxation of human rest but more akin to the way a laptop or mobile phone can enter "sleep mode" regardless of the social setting.

Western ogling at strange Asian postures of sleep is therefore also a response to the Asian body's apparent disregard for the social norms and environmental conditions of public space. In an article attempting to

provide an explanation for why Asians “deftly sleep in public by day,” one *Forbes* writer cites Taiwanese studies of childhood sleeping habits to suggest that Asian children tend to have “shifty” nighttime sleep and daytime naps in schools. He attributes their sleepiness to the constant noise of densely populated Asian cities with little zoning enforcement “that might, say, require separation between family apartments and commercial discos.”⁷ In other words, the article suggests that the *unhealthy proximity* between familial and commercial spaces in Asian cities leads to Asians’ inability to rest during proper resting times and to work during workdays. The popular sleep-tracking app Sleep Cycle has daily rankings of “Best Sleep Quality” and “Worst Sleep Quality” by country, often putting Asian countries—particularly Vietnam, Korea, and Japan—at the top of the list for worst quality of sleep, while listing European countries like Finland, the Netherlands, and Sweden as the most well-rested. Not surprisingly, then, the sight of Asians sleeping in public spaces reinforces model minority stereotypes that figure Asians in North America as excessively industrious to the point of social ineptness; they are imagined to sleep at school, in the library, or on the bus because they work *too much* and outside of “regular” school and workplace hours. After all, as the Binghamton University student who created the now-defunct “Asians Sleeping in the Library” Tumblr photo blog states, Asians are “better at life and they get better grades than you for a reason.”

Underlying such discourses are long-held settler colonial anxieties about the efficiency of Asian labor. Impervious to both the pain of labor and to the pleasures of rest, the Asian sleeping in public visualizes the threat of capitalist abstraction and abstract labor. As Iyko Day points out, settler colonial romantic anticapitalism, which is a “fundamental misperception of



FIGURE 2. A post on the “Asians Sleeping in the Library” Tumblr page.

capitalism as an opposition between a concrete natural world and a destructively abstract, value-driven one that is personified as Asian,” personifies the threat of abstract, less concrete work as Asian.⁸ The homogenizing (mass-produced) effects of abstract labor time has historically been personified by the dehumanized Asian laborer or “coolie,” in contrast to the white liberal subject, who has traditionally symbolized qualitative, *humanized* work. The idea that the concrete, “pure” sphere of the natural world is in opposition to the “ills” of abstract capital racializes Asian North Americans as discursively less organic and less material than white subjects.⁹ The critical difference between concrete labor and the abstract labor racialized as Asian is *temporal*: concrete labor is associated with quality, or how well a commodity is made, while abstract labor—historically descriptive, according to Day, of the mechanical efficiency of early Chinese migrant labor—is the quantitative expression of value as “an unfixed social average of human labor time.”¹⁰

Critical to this antinomy is the role of sleep, which is socially understood as a temporal pause from the human labor time necessary for the concretization of labor expressed in the quality of a commodity. Yet Asian sleep/lessness, characterized by its poor quality, is too efficient and disembodied, and is thus not only spatially too close to work but also racialized as exceptionally abstract in its *temporal proximity* to labor. Such a deviancy or perversity is an “economic functionality” expressed in gendered and racial terms.¹¹ As the incredulity over Asians’ “impossible” and uncomfortable postures of sleep on the internet indicates, the dozing Asian indexes how the category of the human is yoked to the historically racialized and gendered boundaries around labor and leisure that take form in public-private demarcations. Joseph Keppler’s infamous, meme-like political cartoon “A picture for employers,” published in an 1878 issue of the US political humor magazine *Puck*, depicts Asiatic labor via its excesses—as a temporality outside of properly demarcated work—in direct contrast to the civility and self-possession of the white settler (fig. 3). Its commentary relies on the depiction of starkly different living and sleeping quarters as an explanation for the cheapness of Asiatic labor. Keppler’s caption, “Why They can live on 40 cents a day and They can’t,” insinuates that the Chinese men crammed together in dirty and close sleeping arrangements are inherently cheaper labor because of their distance from the bourgeois household and domestic propriety.¹² The illustration features the racial characterization of sexual and gender deviancy in the nineteenth-century “bachelor society,” as a cluster of lethargic Chinese men recline against or on top of one another in an opium stupor. The social reproductivity of the heteronormative white family is juxtaposed to the opium den of Chinese “bachelors”: a white man returns home to a wife holding a baby and two children on the floor with their pet cat (in contrast to the rats on the left panel), eagerly greeting him. The



FIGURE 3. Joseph Keppler, “A Picture for Employers” (1878). LC-USZC2-1242. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress. Washington, DC.

Asiatic sleeper’s inability to own his sleep—a failure denoted especially by the wayward time of the opium pipe—is indicative of an inability to make a home either spatially or temporally, thereby illuminating an incapacity for self-possession and self-propriety.¹³

On the internet, Asian sleep visualizes a fraught temporality of *informational* labor; the inert body that blends into the laptop, smartphone, desktop, or campus library brings into view the “productive force” of knowledge in the information age.¹⁴ Defined by Christian Fuchs as the labor that directly or indirectly “produces and distributes information, communication, social relationships, affects, and information and communication technologies,” knowledge or information work is a “social, common process”; nonetheless, everyday knowledge is appropriated and made part of the accumulation of capital under information capitalism.¹⁵ The exploitation of the varied array of information workers, both paid and unpaid, is now arguably understood by North American internet publics, but the Sleepy Asian meme, regardless of whether the actual Asian person in the photo is a waged or unwaged tech worker, educator, student, blogger, or factory

worker, presents the *spectacle* of the information worker whose particularly abstract nature as background (ambient technology) and as perverse temporality equates the worker with information circulation rather than with a human body. As a visual grammar of a computable world, the Asian sleeper makes representable the speed of knowledge-turned-commodity in real-time economies. Captured by the smartphone in moments of transit and movement, the virtual Asian napper is a racial personification of abstraction via the parameters of sleep—one that is particularly emergent in the production of circadian rhythms with and as social media.

While there are formal and compositional characteristics that Sleepy Asian posts tend to share, including the low-res and candid qualities of the photo, the depicted environments, and the obfuscation of sleepers' faces, the Sleepy Asian is not a template-based meme. Rather, Sleepy Asians foreshadowed the intensifying role of meme aesthetics in surveillant technoculture. As a photo fad, it also illuminates how photography, especially smartphone photography, is part of larger AI and ambient intelligence environments.¹⁶ Comprising networks across multiple digital platforms, the proliferation of similarly obtained and composed photos renders the Sleepy Asian a memetic moment—what Smith and Copland describe as “less persistent and recursive than image macro memes” but pointing “to a broader understanding of memes as social artifacts in participatory digital culture.”¹⁷ As ways of “hacking” today’s attention economy, they argue, memetic moments rely on participants’ knowledge of online communication and humor in internet culture. While the virality of Sleepy Asian threads and submission-based microblogs has expired, as many of them are no longer updated, they remain part of an ongoing assemblage of images, affects, interactions, and events that configure, via Asian bodies, anxieties about the ends of labor and rest in the digital age. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, social media producers began livestreaming and monetizing their restless sleep—sleep-streaming—on Twitch and YouTube. This figuration of disrupted rest as a racial condition and memeable moment speaks to larger shifts in the blurred demarcations of work and play, and of public and private, in the social media era, when as Wendy Chun argues, subjects “act publicly in private, or are ‘caught’ in public acting privately.”¹⁸

But unlike other bygone internet photo fads involving the disruption of public space, such as planking, or flashmobs, or the overt monetization of slumber by today’s sleep-streamers, the subjects of these images and videos are not the producers, nor do they pose for the camera. It is emphatically the smartphone camera and the circulation of the images that produce, as a mode of economic and political capture, the conditions of racial spectacle. The Sleepy Asian who is often facially obscured or at times reminiscent of

a corpse, is less a representational subject and more a *potential event* that can be channeled for and into spreadable media. In other words, the “Asian-ness” of this memetic moment inheres in the formal and figurative components, and not necessarily the racialization, of the prosumer-subject. If memes are social and cultural capital in the attention economy of information capitalism, out-of-place Asian slumber is *the potential for media’s circulation*.

And yet the sleepy Asian body that makes neoliberal capitalism all too apparent also effects something like disruption. These postures may even visually conjure a global history of lie-ins or sleep-ins, in which performances of inertness protest imperial, settler colonial, and capitalist violence, as seen during anti-Vietnam War demonstrations in the 1960s, in AIDS organizing in the 1980s, and in protests across the US in 2020 after George Floyd was killed by Minneapolis police. Performing sleep or the disruption of slumber has also been a mode of critique for Asian artists, including Tehching Hsieh, Sakiko Yamaoka, and Christine Sun Kim.¹⁹ Indeed, as Jean Ma suggests in *At the Edges of Sleep: Moving Images and Somnolent Spectators*, which examines sleep in film as both moving image and as audience experience, a collective politics of sleep can help us “abandon the fiction of self-sufficiency and autonomy, in acknowledgment of vulnerability and interdependence.”²⁰ So how do we move from Asian sleep as circulatory potential to the affective and visual grammars of collectivity? It might require reconceiving the memetic event as a more communal entanglement of deeper histories that contest the temporalities of global capitalism. It might mean looking at the Sleepy Asian not only through the white colonial gaze but also through a lens of potential transnational connection and solidarity.

Notes

1. For instance, Nathan Kleitman, who is often described as the father of modern sleep research, sought to apply his research on alertness and a consolidated sleep schedule to the US Army and Navy’s work shifts, sending reports to the military in 1942, one of which included the statement: “A sleepy fighter is a menace to himself and his comrades, but not to the enemy.” In 1948, Kleitman spent two weeks on a US Navy submarine called the USS Dogfish, experimenting with a shift schedule that broke up the crew’s regular work hours and extended their blocks of recreation time so as to stave off napping. See Matthew Wolf-Meyer, “Where Have All Our Naps Gone? Or Nathaniel Kleitman, the Consolidation of Sleep, and the Historiography of Emergence,” *Anthropology of Consciousness* 24, no. 2 (2013): 105.
2. Matthew Wolf-Meyer, *The Slumbering Masses: Sleep, Medicine, and Modern American Life* (Minneapolis, 2012), 181–82.

3. I use the term “racial information capitalism” to bring together theories of racial capitalism, as developed by black studies, Indigenous studies, and critical ethnic scholars like Cedric Robinson, Jodi Melamed, Jodi Byrd, Alyosha Goldstein, Chandan Reddy, and others, and information capitalism, which Christian Fuchs describes as the informalization of capitalism, whereby “contemporary societies . . . bas[e] their operations predominantly on information, which is understood as processes of cognition, communication, and cooperation, and on information technologies.” See Christian Fuchs, “Labor in Informational Capitalism and on the Internet,” *Information Society* 26 (2010): 180.
4. Naomi Smith and Simon Copland, “Memetic Moments: The Speed of Twitter Memes,” *Journal of Digital Social Research* 4, no. 1 (2022): 27.
5. Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (London and New York, 2012), 142.
6. Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London and New York, 2013), 126.
7. Ralph Jennings, “Why Asians Sleep in Public: Two Answers from Taiwan,” *Forbes Asia*, 27 October 2015, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ralphjennings/2015/10/27/why-asians-sleep-in-public-two-answers-from-taiwan/?sh=288dd58a7c04>.
8. Iyko Day, *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism* (Durham, NC, 2016), 16.
9. *Ibid.*, 15.
10. *Ibid.*, 12.
11. Iyko Day, “Exclusion Acts,” *Artforum*, 13 May 2021, <https://www.artforum.com/columns/iyko-day-on-asian-hate-through-the-prism-of-anti-blackness-249892/>.
12. The colonial disciplining of sleep and “sleep hygiene” is of course not specific to early Chinese migrant workers. Public schools in the Philippines during American colonization, for instance, provided instruction to children on proper health habits, including the benefits of sleeping ten to twelve hours a night under a mosquito net. See Warwick Anderson, *Colonial Pathologies: American Tropical Medicine, Race, and Hygiene in the Philippines* (Durham, NC, 2006), 117.
13. See Jodi A. Byrd, Alyosha Goldstein, Jodi Melamed, and Chandan Reddy, “Predatory Value: Economies of Dispossession and Disturbed Relationalities,” *Social Text* 36, no. 2 (2018): 3.
14. Fuchs, “Labor and Informational Capitalism,” 187. I owe the insight that the sleepy Asian meme visualizes informational labor to Huan He.
15. Fuchs, “Labor and Informational Capitalism,” 187–88.
16. For more on how social media “are realigned within the terms of the technology industries” to generate augmented reality, automation, and intelligent environments, see Sarah Kember, “The Becoming-Photographer in Technoculture,” in *Photography Reframed: New Visions in Contemporary Photographic Culture*, ed. Ben Burbridge and Annabella Pollen (London and New York, 2020), 226, 225–33.
17. Smith and Copland, “Memetic Moments,” 26.
18. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (Cambridge, MA, 2016), 95.
19. For more on the political and artistic practices of sleeping in public, see Danielle Drees, “Napping in Public: Feminist Practices of Care in Sleep Performance Art,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 41, no. 3 (2020): 1–28.
20. Jean Ma, *At the Edges of Sleep: Moving Images and Somnolent Spectators* (Berkeley, 2022), 36.