

Broken sleep, broken worlds

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Dear friends,

You may have observed that I've been pondering the nature of our broken worlds, in particular how this has deep effects on our bodies. From immovable structures, (self)imposed or otherwise, to external features of capitalist system(s) which offer a guise of stability and security but, in reality, limit human agency to capitalist realism, we are conditioned to work above all. This is of interest to me, as I continuously engage with friends and colleagues who suffer with physical ailments derived from constant exposure to high-stress environments. We are so conditioned with this that even our language fails adequately describe how aversely we react to our experienced environments, and often exact even further tolls on ourselves by internalising that which should be processed communally. Just today, I was talking to friends about self-imposed structures that condition agency under the guise of anti-capitalist movement, but in reality, exact tolls on mental health that are tantamount to the same violations of self and community. Sound familiar? No? Let me expand.

Let's first turn to First Peoples' perspectives on the role of emotional, cultural, social and place-based tolls on the body. Experienced through connection with country and community, the phenomenon of embodied trauma shows a severing, or disconnection between a person and their community, country or role. We might understand across much of the global south and in First Nations communities the world over that existence is fundamentally relational and cyclical. Here, disruptions to right relations (i.e., caring for country, community, and so on) manifest as embodied distress. For many knowledge systems, there is an inherent recognition that human bodies exist within intricate webs of kinship, relationship, and responsibility that extend beyond human communities to include more-than-human relations, ancestral connections, and spiritual dimensions, as well as connections to place. Colonial capitalism has systematically targeted these relational networks through land dispossession, (cultural) genocide, and the imposition of extractive temporalities that sever these connections as they did in enclosures before them.

The enforced separation from land-based practices, ceremonial rhythms, and intergenerational knowledge transmission creates conditions where trauma becomes inscribed in both 'individual bodies' and in collective, intergenerational experience, bodies, lands and thought. Globally, a great deal of First Nations healing traditions understand wellness as emerging from balanced relationships between physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual dimensions—a harmony of (eco)systems that oppressive systems deliberately disrupt through the colonial project's ongoing violence.

First Nations frameworks for understanding embodied distress may centre concepts of balance, reciprocity, and cyclical time that stand in direct opposition to capitalism's linear extraction, accumulation, and exploitation. Our body's manifestation of illness under stress represents, not personal 'malfunction', a profound truth-telling about the violation of natural laws and proper relations—the body bearing witness to the unsustainability of systems that fragment our fundamental interconnectedness with all relations. So, yeah, our systems are pretty fucked for us as humans—and this is nearly universal.

In a "western" paradigm, the human body exists as a biopsychosocial system where trauma becomes inscribed upon both psychological memory and a kind of somatic reality. The body's stress response mechanisms, evolved for acute survival situations, become chronically activated under persistent socioeconomic pressures, leading to allostatic load and physiological dysregulation. I'm going to hurl some more words at you now and we'll regroup in a moment—don't hold your breath. Neuroendocrine pathways, particularly the

hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal, translate emotional distress into inflammatory cascades, immunosuppression, and literally altered gene expression through epigenetic modifications. With capitalism's increasing precarity, fascist authoritarian turn, and global distress, comorbid with relentless productivity demands and insecure socioeconomic conditions, creates a state of perpetual hypervigilance that fundamentally contradicts our neuro/biological need for rhythmic alternation between engagement and restoration. This systematic mismatch between our 'evolutionary design' and contemporary socioeconomic structures manifests as embodied distress –the body's material critique of systems that violate its fundamental requirements for regulation, connection, and meaning. So, yeah, capitalism also messes up our sleep patterns, capacity for rest and renewal, and we get into even more trouble.

Sleep offers a fundamental 'neurobiological rhythm' where the brain undergoes essential maintenance processes: synaptic homeostasis, memory consolidation, and metabolic waste clearance. Capitalist temporalities systematically destabilise and disrupt this through productivity imperatives and chronobiological destabilisation [1]. First Nations frameworks understand sleep as an important liminal and connective state which supports connectivity with ancestral knowledge, wisdom from dreams, and other spiritual dimensions, an ontologically rich experience. Colonial capitalist temporalities deliberately fragmented these through 'settler time' [2] the imposition of mechanistic, production-oriented temporalities that sever people from rhythms and dream-based knowledge systems which secure to cultural continuity and healing practices.

From this position of understanding physical effects of capitalist "structures" on the body, we should now turn briefly to how we engage with this as human 'agents' against systemic capital/colonial 'structure' . Or engage once again with the structure and agency debate to try and negotiate some space for individual and collective resistance to (self)imposed harms.

We've discussed before how the tension between 'structure' and 'agency' exists within a dialectical framework where subjects are simultaneously constituted by and constitutive of social structures. Foucault offers a prominent example in which he discusses how power operates through repression and through productive processes that shape subjects' self-understanding and perceived possibilities [3]. Althusser offers interpellation, which discusses how ideological state apparatuses produce subjects who misrecognise our structural determinations as freely chosen identities [4]. And late capitalism's particular innovation lies in its capacity to subsume resistance through commodification while naturalising its contradictions through increasingly sophisticated cultural technologies that manufacture consent while concealing structural violence behind 'discourses' of individual responsibility and meritocratic fantasy [5]. So, there are myriad theoretical frames through which to understand capitalism's bullshit. Some of them empower us to take action as resistance, such as literally 'sleep as resistance' , others suggest that structural reform must be negotiated or seized through activist transformation. But either way, the violence of capitalism is long conceived as a physical violence –whether by spear or by ideology.

First Nations conceptualisations, on the other hand, fundamentally reconfigure structure-agency binaries through relational ontologies, where personhood emerges through kinship networks extending beyond individual humans into communities. Agency exists far beyond individual autonomy through responsible participation within complex reciprocal relationships across deep time [6]. Colonial capitalist structures operate through what ongoing settler colonial governmentality and violence and deliberately targets First Nations relational autonomy through ontological impositions that fragment collective governance systems and connection to country. Resurgence movements have conceptualised decolonial agency beyond 'individual liberation' ('take the white hand') as the revitalisation of governance systems, ceremonial practices, and language reclamation that restore proper relationships. There's powerful resistance offered here, and more powerful futuristic thinking available

in relation and conversation.

Contestation of these interlocking systems of ‘embodied exploitation’ requires multi-dimensional approaches grounded to ‘the transformation of silence into language and action’ [7]. Prefigurative politics that embody different temporalities and ontologies such as degrowth movements, create practices that honour biological rhythms and ecological limits while resurgence frameworks articulated centre Country’ s reclamation and revitalization, also serving as pathways toward communal healing. Disability justice movements offer crucial insights into sustainable activism ways of being that honour bodily limits and interdependence as sources of wisdom rather than limitations to overcome [8]. These convergent movements gesture toward social arrangements fundamentally organised around *care* relationships rather than capital accumulation, where thriving becomes possible through the cultivation of social infrastructure which recognises vulnerability and interdependence as foundational to human flourishing rather than impediments to productivity.

Food for thought,

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1. c.f. Matthew, W. (2018). Why we sleep: Unlocking the power of sleep and dreams. Scribner.
 2. Rifkin, M. (2017). Beyond settler time: Temporal sovereignty and indigenous self-determination. Duke University Press.
 3. Foucault, M. (1977). Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison. Pantheon Books.
 4. Althusser, L. (1976). Positions (1964-1975): Freud et Lcan, la philodphie comme arme de la révolution. Éditions sociales. (no, I didn’ t read this in French, I just couldn’ t find my reference for the English translation)
 5. Jameson, F. (2005). Postmodernism, or, The cultural logic of late capitalism. Duke Univ. Press. (yes, we’ ve been calling it late capitalism since as early as 1991)
 6. Simpson, L. (2017). As we have always done: Indigenous freedom through radical resistance. University of Minnesota Press. (strongly recommend)
 7. <https://electricliterature.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/silenceintoaction.pdf>
 8. Piepzna-Samarasinha, L. L. (2018). Care work: Dreaming disability justice. Arsenal Pulp Press.