

‘People with equal but opposite afflictions, propping each other up’: Sleep Solidarity and Fictions of Mass Sleeplessness

Abstract

The texts considered in this essay – *Sleepless* by Charlie Huston (2010), *Nod* by Adrian Barnes (2012), *Black Moon* by Kevin Calhoun (2014), *Sleep Donation* by Karen Russell (2014) – imagine an epidemic of fatal mass insomnia. They form a micro-genre I call ‘mass-sleeplessness fiction’ which emerged at the same time as the anxious discourse of contemporary ‘sleep crisis’. This paper argues that the texts adapt genre elements from the zombie apocalypse to conceptualize the deeply uneven effects of ‘sleep crisis’ and to identify forms of ‘sleep solidarity’ as an alternative to conventions of privatized and individualized sleep.

Mass-sleeplessness fiction is a micro-genre which imagines wakefulness as an epidemic, and in so doing turns the solitary experience of insomnia into a collective catastrophe. The cluster of texts considered in this essay – *Sleepless* by Charlie Huston (2010), *Nod* by Adrian Barnes (2012), *Black Moon* by Kevin Calhoun (2014), and *Sleep Donation* by Karen Russell (2014) – were published within a span of five years, and all depict an outbreak of fatal mass insomnia in North America. These narratives use the architecture of the zombie apocalypse (transmuted into an insomnia apocalypse) to construct scenarios of collective, public sleeplessness and, I argue, use the zombie genre’s imaginary of the crowd, pack or horde to construct emergent forms of sleep solidarity beyond the solitude of insomnia. Alongside representations of the horde in the street, all four texts also develop another, parallel set of preoccupations the private space of the bedroom that counterpoints the collective insomnia outbreak in the streets. Understanding the bedroom as a primary site of social reproduction – through its associations with the bourgeois family, and with heterosexuality, as well as with the optimization and renewal of labor power – this essay identifies the relationships between the bedroom and the street, private and public, the individual and the collective, as a crucial dynamic in these texts’ interest in mass insomnia. Moments of sleep solidarity ultimately emerge from these apocalyptic scenarios of mass sleeplessness and break open the strictures

of private sleeping to imagine alternative structures of mutual support between all those whose sleep is under threat.

In spite of their similarities in plot elements, the texts are diverse in tone and style. *Sleepless*, the earliest of the examples, revels in its pulp fiction elements, while Barnes's *Nod* is closest to self-consciously literary speculative fiction such as Will Self's *The Book of Dave* or Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy.¹ *Black Moon* is an ensemble disaster narrative that follows multiple characters attempting to find a cure for fatal insomnia. Russell's *Sleep Donation* (perhaps more properly considered a novella) depicts a charitable organization overseeing a program of sleep donation, and constructs a setting much more stable – and thus far more dystopian – than the other three novels' disaster narratives.

It is very striking that this group of fictions, all featuring fatal, contagious insomnia, should have appeared within this short period of time. One way of understanding these texts and their emergence from a specific social context is to read them alongside the discourses of 'sleep crisis' which have framed mass insomnia as both a public health problem and a social crisis. Matthew Walker's 2017 book, *Why We Sleep*, offers one example of a common rhetorical framing of these anxieties:

Many of us are beyond tired. Why? What, precisely, about modernity has so perverted our otherwise instinctual sleep patterns, eroded our freedom to sleep, and thwarted our ability to do so soundly across the night? (265)

This passage opens Walker's chapter on modern sleep problems, and is swiftly followed by the answer that 'we' spend too much time in front of light-emitting screens and enjoying 'late-evening television and digital entertainment' (265). By this account, any contemporary sleep crisis seems is really a crisis of entertainment that is just too fun to switch off at bedtime, and does not seem to take much account of people whose sleep is disturbed by untreated chronic pain or poor housing or swing shifts or the many other experiences more pressing than the motivation to switch off Netflix before midnight. As Benjamin Reiss puts it in his book *Wild Nights* (2017), this latter version of sleep crisis is in danger of obscuring the former:

In reality, our society is undergoing two sleep crises: a psychological one in which those who live in relative states of comfort try to wrestle their sleep into submission, and a more existential struggle experienced by those who are expected to sleep by the rules of others yet are denied the time, space and security to do so. (7)

By worrying away at the crisis in 'our' sleep, those who are *not* experiencing the extremes of sleep insecurity and sleep deprivation are eclipsing the sleep problems of the most vulnerable

– those who are malnourished, insecurely housed, precariously employed. To talk about ‘our’ modern sleep being diminished or threatened is to lose sight of a bigger and more uneven picture of sleep privation. Jonathan Crary’s book *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2013) goes some way to bring these two crises together, by suggesting that these two versions of sleep crisis have a common cause: the colonization, by capital, of the time of rest, whether that be through the 24/7 consumption of media which edges out time for idle daydreaming, or through the demand for always-on, productive wakefulness, felt especially intensely by strictly administered precarious workers. Crary’s book allows for the possibility that variations of non-sleeping might have their causes in common, even though the consequences are highly unevenly distributed. It is clear, then, that one of the issues at stake in the discourse of sleep crisis is how to navigate between the problems with my sleep and the problems with your sleep; to map those lines of topography that connect them, but also to recognize the differences in terrain. It is my argument in this essay that mass-sleeplessness fiction is a micro-genre emerging at a moment of particular pressure on sleep, which develops strategies to achieve this mapping.

Reiss’s *Wild Nights* offers some brief discussion of Russell’s *Sleep Donation* (he does not mention the other, earlier novels by Huston, Barnes or Calhoun), suggesting that the story takes ‘one step further’ the ‘dystopian portrait’ of commodified and straitened sleep that Crary depicts in *24/7* (213). Elsewhere, the conclusion of Michael Greaney’s *Sleep and the Novel* (2018), also mentions the grouping of what he calls ‘sleepless world’ novels discussed here. Greaney finds in them an ‘ally’ to the contemporary ‘sleep crisis narrative’ (212), arguing that the texts, with their message of shared sleeplessness, turn on its head the adage that in sleep rich and poor are alike. For Greaney, the sleep-crisis message, ‘we are now all of us chronically sleep-deprived citizens’ (213), serves exactly the same social levelling function as sleep once did; if everyone sleeps, ‘all social differences painlessly melt away’, and the same is true in its ‘counterpart’ in the ‘sleepless world’ (213). I want to suggest that there is a problem with this account of these texts: namely, that not everybody in these books *does* stay awake. It is a crucial plot element that most of the main characters remain able to sleep in a world in which more and more of those around them are suffering from fatal insomnia. The challenge therefore becomes one of recognizing the inequalities of sleep’s distribution rather than asserting a levelling commonality.

Mass-sleeplessness fiction is able to do this work of mapping inequalities in sleeplessness because of the way it explores the tensions between the individual and the collective, the private and the public. As Crary writes in *24/7*, ‘sleep needs to be understood

in relation to distinctions between private and public, between the individual and the collective, but always in recognition of their permeability and proximity' (24-5). I am therefore interested in trying to identify those aspects of this group of texts that recognize the sleeplessness of others and extend bonds of solidarity across differences of scale and intensity in the experience of sleeplessness. In these texts, the distinctions between public and private and between the individual and the group are persistently reconfigured in a series of ways: first, by using the architecture of zombie fiction to make the lonely experience of individual insomnia collective, and to place it in the public space of the streets; second, by making strange the private space of the bedroom as both a site of heteronormative reproductive labor and an individualizing and isolating location for the care of the self.

'Wearing out in the space of ordinariness'

A feature that recurs in all of these fictions is that their slow deaths by epidemic sleeplessness tend to take place in public. Those afflicted by the contagious insomnias tend to mass together in temporary camps: the Night Worlds of *Sleep Donation*, which are 'quasi-legal campgrounds for homeless and unemployable insomniacs' that look like refugee camps (202); the Midnight Carnival in *Sleepless* which becomes a camp for the homeless and displaced (149-60); or the 'insomniac carnival' with its 'shantytown of makeshift lean-tos and campsites' encountered by one of the characters in *Black Moon* (183). The recurrent setting of the insomniac encampment is therefore a literalizing metaphor for those displaced or homeless people who attempt to sleep (fitfully, precariously, if at all) and die (slowly, uneventfully) without shelter. The protagonists of these texts must encounter these encampments as the counterpoint to their own secure sleep. What the texts have in common is therefore not just the depiction of a crisis of public sleeplessness but also the positioning of their main characters, who are still able to sleep, in a position of sleep security that nevertheless becomes increasingly perilous. Rather than locating a sleep crisis only in 'our' shared sleeplessness, these texts represent the catastrophe of other people's wakefulness as the central feature of their narratives of mass insomnia. Because these fictions of mass sleeplessness imagine their protagonists as sleepers in a world without sleep, they ask not just 'Why can't we sleep?' but 'How should we respond to the sleeplessness of others?' – to homeless people or rough sleepers, to people who lack healthcare or a hospital bed, or to refugees attempting to sleep in temporary encampments.

Lauren Berlant's concept of 'crisis ordinariness' offers a heuristic for thinking about the relationship between these two versions of sleep crisis. As Berlant puts it in *Cruel*

Optimism, there is a tendency to redefine a scene of ‘slow death’ (an environment too diffuse and structural to become an event) as punctual crisis, ‘because as a structural or predictable condition it has not engendered the kinds of historic action we associate with the heroic agency a crisis implicitly calls for’ (101). So too with sleep crisis. For the people living it, sleep precariousity is not a sudden crisis, but ordinary life under long-standing conditions of stress. Berlant associates this experience explicitly with exhaustion and tiredness, as she describes the slow death of ‘a population wearing out in the space of ordinariness’ (101). Moreover, as Berlant notes, the inflationary language of crisis tends to take an entrenched and structural problem and transform its banal ordinariness into a crisis by attaching it to ‘freshly exemplary bodies’ (102) – in this case, the bodies of those who are living, in Benjamin Reiss’s description ‘in relative states of comfort’ (7). The concept of sleep crisis could therefore be understood as example of the transformation of environment into event – to use the terms Berlant adopts for thinking about ‘crisis ordinariness’ – a process which edges out the unexceptional, uneventful scene of precarious sleep with the dramatic ‘event’ of sleep crisis. By taking the crisis ordinary of precarious sleep and sharpening it into a crisis, mass-sleeplessness fiction clearly dramatizes the process by which an ordinary crisis is redefined into an extraordinary one. But these texts, with their massed encampments witnessed by secure sleepers, also reproduce and reflect upon the dynamics of sleep crisis ordinariness, in which secure sleepers are framed as the freshly exemplary bodies under threat from a newly intensified and urgent danger.

Mass-sleeplessness fiction charts the relationship between the ordinary, structural unfolding of slow death and the urgency of crisis through another recurrent trope involving the search for a cause of their cases of mass insomnia. In the texts, there is a dynamic that emerges between free-floating, catastrophizing speculation (in which the causes of the mass insomnia are diffuse and multiple, and usually imagined to be a product of current social conditions) and precise and specific biological causes. In *Sleepless*, for instance, the mass insomnia is explicitly described as being caused by ‘mutated BSE prions, simple proteins that had folded into shapes so baleful and malicious that spread their geometry to any healthy proteins they came into proximity with’ (76), but it eventually transpires that the novel’s prion disease is a result of a genetically modifying pesticide gone wrong rather than an unlucky spontaneous mutation (101). *Black Moon* also initially offers the reader a fairly concrete hypothesis for a biological cause as the novel’s Dr. Ferrell (a therapist who treats combat veterans with sleep disorders) wonders if the mass insomnia could be caused by a ‘mammalian prion, ticking in the thalamus’ (35). But this apparently specific explanation is

present only as a prelude to an absolutely bravura taxonomy of possible causation, of which I'll quote only a small portion:

Maybe it was the toxic dust of fallen towers, the ash creeping into our lungs. Maybe it was some ancient spore released by the melting ice. Maybe it was the earthquakes and tsunamis they summoned. Maybe it was the hole in the ozone, the collapse of the upper atmosphere. Maybe it was the betrayal by the banks. Maybe it was the dead surpassing the living. Maybe it was the ground choking on garbage and waste. Maybe it was the oil blasting freely into the ocean, or the methane thawing at the bottom of the sea. Maybe it was the overload of information, the swarms of data generated by every human gesture. Maybe it was the networking craze, the resurrection of dead friendships and memories meant to be lost, now resurfacing like rusted shipwrecks to reclaim our attention and scramble our sense of time. (39)

The rest of the chapter mentions everything from autotune to chemtrails to corn syrup, in a litany of collective anxieties too big to be contained in a relationship of cause and effect. The same technique of the aggregative list recurs on a smaller scale in both *Nod* and *Sleep Donation*. The former represents a TV news report, speculating with increasing frenzy in on the causes of the initial outbreak of mass insomnia:

A maniacal cavalcade of ideas was spilling out of their mouths: a solar storm had kept us awake all night; magical mystery waves broadcast by cunning terrorists were to blame! Microwave overload! (176-7)

Sleep Donation first reports some popular rumors about the outbreak, suggesting it is 'connected to the oceans' tides, magnetism, the poles, the hemispheres, the net of light and shadow on the globe' (176-7), before imagining media speculation similar to the TV news in *Nod*. The causes of the crisis event are ascribed to more general fears about modern life and its consequences:

According to these professional Cassandras, sleep has been chased off the globe by our twenty-four-hour news cycle, our polluted skies and crops and waterways, the bald eyeballs of our glowing devices. (180-1)

At the same time, the two waves of insomnia in *Sleep Donation* have a carefully explained clinical cause: the first wave is the consequence of a malfunction of the neuropeptide orexin, while the second wave of sleep disorders is ascribed to a 'nightmare prion' (611) which spontaneously mutates and can then be transmitted from person to person. The negotiation between the specific and the diffuse causes in all of the texts is therefore slightly different, but seems consistently to lay out an opposition between a sudden and unforeseeable crisis

and a broader, slower, potentially more structural set of circumstances underpinning the situation.

Even within the specific cause (usually ascribed to prion disease) and the diffuse list of causes, there are also some tensions and contradictions, however. Prion disease, at least initially, implies a concrete and definite cause – what Huston’s *Sleepless* calls ‘the shape of sleeplessness’ (76). *Sleepless*, *Black Moon* and *Sleep Donation* seem to take their descriptions of prion disease and the symptoms of fatal familial insomnia (FFI) from D.T. Max’s popular science book *The Family that Couldn’t Sleep* (2006). As Michael Greaney observes in a footnote to his brief discussion of the ‘sleepless-world novel’, Max’s book took this ‘hitherto obscure malady’ and brought it to the attention of a large audience of non-scientists and non-clinicians (216 n.3). The appearance of Max’s book certainly goes some way towards answering the question of why this cluster of similarly themed novels should have appeared in just a few years. The prion which causes FFI is a chance mutation that is then inherited, and therefore seems to place the mass sleeplessness crisis in these texts in the realm of unlucky chance. At the same time, because of the legacy of BSE and of the association between the prion disease kuru and cannibalism, prion diseases have become a pathology with a distinct cultural history that associates them with an almost allegorical crime-and-punishment narrative of retribution. In *Sleepless*, what initially looks like a spontaneous prion mutation is actually the result of attempts to optimize and maximize agro-industrial production; in *Sleep Donation*, the spontaneous prion mutation is only the second wave of insomnias, emerging after the first which seems to have a more uncertain, possibly environmental, origin.

The recurrent aggregative lists seem to gesture towards broader, structural conditions, as the predictable, ordinary conditions that wear people out – polluted food, air and water; malnourishment; overwork – form part of the incantation of causes. But it is also possible to read these frantic lists of increasingly wild and impossible causes as parodic of some of the crisis language that is associated with anxiety about negative social effects that is framed through the language of public health catastrophe. Sleep crisis is one such example, but others might include attempts at societal diagnosis of a crisis in the ability to pay attention, a crisis in conversation or social skills, or a crisis of resilience. Each of these examples takes a clinical diagnosis (insomnia, attention deficit disorder, autism, anxiety disorders) and turns it into a cultural weapon. These texts take this tendency to use illness as a metaphor for cultural commentary and expose their jeremiad-ish tone to critique. My argument, then, is that through the listing that overdetermines the causes of these imagined insomnia outbreaks,

mass-sleeplessness fiction doubles up the discourse of sleep crisis, intensifying it and, at the same time, through the recurrent image of the encampment, undercuts that discourse with the presence of the ordinary, banal rough sleeper. The thing missing from all of the lists of causes is an increase in people without a secure bed to sleep in.

In these books, rough sleepers appear in a spatially significant way, as the texts move their settings physically by taking their sleep crises from ‘our’ bedrooms to the everyday, public spaces of sleep privation where there is already a population, in Berlant’s words, ‘wearing out in the space of ordinariness’ (101). Unfolding on the streets, in a crowd, mass sleeplessness serves as a powerful disruptive force to the cultural norms of the domestic and the private that are associated with conventional, healthy sleep.

The Zombification of Rough Sleep

By using the architecture of the zombie narrative, these fictions of mass sleeplessness are able to identify differences in scale and intensity that cross lines between individual, private experiences and public, politicized ones. The zombie apocalypse offers a set of resources for imagining masses of people, in contrast with the narrative fiction’s usual techniques for representing the individual and their immediate interpersonal relationships. It is significant that recent zombie literature (as distinct from zombie movies) has often used elements of either plot or style which emphasize prose fiction’s difficulty with the depiction of large groups of people and preference for a tight focus on individual characters, in contrast with screen media’s capacity for panning and balancing foreground and background. One feature of zombie novels of the same era as these mass sleeplessness novels, such as Max Brooks’s *World War Z* (2006) and Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One* (2011), is a preoccupation with how to fashion narrative forms that can accommodate the collective and the individual – whether that’s the interweaving of the mass of survivor testimonies in Brooks’s novel or the cliffhanger conjoining of protagonist and horde at the end of Whitehead’s. Mass sleeplessness fictions make use of a similar tension between the novelistic preference for individual characterisation and the zombie genre’s aesthetic of the horde. It is this formal quality that I want to overlay on the texts’ concern with the sleep crisis of ‘our’ individualized sleep and the structural crisis-ordinary of massed rough or precarious sleepers.

All of these fictions are very knowing in their deployment of zombie genre elements. In *Nod*, for instance, the protagonist Paul refers more than once to the sleepless members of the post-apocalyptic cult as zombies and identifies the whole scenario as somehow clichéd, ‘a

comfortable, familiar apocalypse [. . .] rehearsed in a hundred or more big budget movies’, an impression which has its origins in ‘an endless loop of snuff porn: annihilation by nuke, war, economic catastrophe, and/or zombie attack’ (171, 123). In *Sleep Donation*, a donor who has given too much sleep and put himself into sleep debt ‘stumbles around . . . like a zombie’ (919), while in *Black Moon* a character walks through a street full of people ‘aimlessly roaming’, ‘shouting and growling’ and ‘shuffling’ with a characteristic zombie gait (57-8). Later, the first insomniac encountered by two teenage road-trippers is a diner owner who, one of them thinks, ‘Looked like he’d been buried alive but fought his way out’ (125). In *Sleepless*, the association is not just between zombies and the sleepless, but between zombies, the sleepless and the homeless. Parker, the main character, remarks:

Driving down Skid Row had always been a prospect not unlike visiting the set of a George Romero movie. But with the advent of the sleepless prion, that effect had started to envelop the whole city. The sidewalks, malls, movie theaters, tourist attractions, beaches, and restaurants becoming populated with stiff-necked, shuffling sleepless.

Zombie jokes were common. Gallows humor being about all the situation made room for. (34)

The rough sleepers of Skid Row were always zombies, the novel suggests, but *Sleepless* takes this ordinary scene and hypertrophies it, drawing attention to the protagonist’s position as (relatively) safe sleeper in both scenarios. The first thing that the figure of the zombie is able to do in these texts, then, is to establish a distinction or boundary between the infected and the uninfected, but also to make the breaching of that boundary the essential peril of the plot. The faces pressed up against a plate-glass window, the hands reaching through a splintering door: these are the images that represent the threat of the horde breaking into the barricaded places of safety occupied by the still-healthy protagonists. The allusions to the zombie plot therefore set up an opposition between the sleepless masses in public spaces and the enclosed privacy of the (temporarily) secure sleeper.

The sleepless in these texts borrow some of their binary-troubling power from the zombie too; Marc Leverette’s analysis of the zombie ‘living dead’ as ‘an apparent deconstruction of our every ontology’ (187) applies as much to these sleepless walkers as to the walking dead, as the sleepless occupy both sleeping and waking, unconscious insensibility and conscious alertness – as in Maurice Blanchot’s aphorism, ‘Whoever does not sleep cannot stay awake’ (265). Not sleeping makes the insomniac notionally awake but not alert. Moreover, the walking dead, those who have been zombified in a process of social

death, are also who cannot lie down and rest. Zombie scholarship has identified the zombie's disposable (or already disposed-of) body as a richly meaningful symbol of many other vulnerable bodies, from people suffering from AIDS or addiction, to people with disabilities or, crucially, experiencing homelessness.² The zombie's heritage in histories of imperialism and the transatlantic slave trade are also an important part of its capacity to signify instances of marginalized and precarious life, and bodies that are treated only as exploitable instruments. On the other hand, ever since George Romero's zombies lumbered through a shopping mall in *Dawn of the Dead*, the zombie has also been associated with capitalism's drive for relentless consumption. With these zombie associations in mind, the massed insomniacs of these texts could be seen to represent an equivalent nightmare wish-fulfilment of always-on capitalism, as described by Jonathan Crary – an unsleeping horde carrying out the demand for 24/7 alertness to hypercompliant and horrifying effect. It might therefore be possible to think of the zombie insomniac (the *inzomniac*?) as a zombie subtype specifically emerging from the era of cognitive capitalism and the attention economy, in which both production and consumption are imagined not through productive or consuming bodies, but instead by cognitive capacity pushed to the limits of perpetual alertness. In contrast with a brainless, will-less, hungry zombie body, the *inzomniac* represents a cognitive capacity stretched to the point of collapse.

If the *inzomniac* is the final avatar of always-on capitalism for the most exploited and precarious, then the barricaded secure sleeper would seem to represent those who, living in relative comfort, feel their sleep to be under threat – those people who, as Jim Horne puts it, 'are well fed, well housed, and in full employment' (188) but to whom a crisis in sleep is most often ascribed. The analogy here, I think, is between the individual effects of insomnia, the specifically individualizing effects of neoliberalism, and the individual sleeper, barricaded into their bed and attempting to rest. One of the hallmarks of neoliberalism is of course the offloading of structural problems onto the individual, and then offering to sell you solutions to those problems; neoliberalism instructs that rather than organizing in your workplace to request flexible working hours, you should instead buy a daylight alarm clock, thereby transferring the problem from your working conditions to your sleep regimen, and the solution from your workplace to your bedroom. Even as rough and precarious sleepers are not well housed or rested, more secure sleepers feel their sleep to be under threat and attempt to create a barricade of weighted blankets, white noise machines, and biomonitors.

In the texts, we certainly see characters attempting to barricade in a small, safe portion of rest for themselves. In *Black Moon*, two girls separated from their families sleep

together on a mattress ringed by wind-chimes and tripwires; in *Nod*, a man and a rescued child sleep in an apartment high above a stairwell filled with trashed furniture. It would therefore be a mistake to read mass-sleeplessness fictions as only interested in the sleep crisis of the mostly secure, or only interested in structural sleep privation. The books intricately construct scenarios which show the interdependence of both secure sleepers and precarious sleepers. In the texts, these small pockets of safer sleep must be spaces which can begin to include strangers and defend their sleep too, and can only be temporary staging-posts to giving everyone back their sleep. If the massed, sleepless zombies make the conditions of the most marginalized few into the conditions of the many, then those who are still able to defend their sleep discover a responsibility to extend aid to the sleepless. There are therefore two interpretative strands that these fictions' zombie heritage makes it possible to bring together: first, a more clearly articulated vision of the relationship between sleep crisis and the uneven pressures enacted upon the subjects of 24/7 capitalism and, second, an imagined vision of the kind of sleep solidarity that would extend outwards from isolated individuals managing and defending their own sleep into a collective demand for rest.

'Endless familial permutations'

If the street is the place in which the sleepless horde takes on its symbolism as a representation of the collective, then its symbolic counterpart is the private bedroom. All of these texts use the bedroom as a space in which the norms of social behavior (including, but not limited to, the norms of sleep) are reproduced at the heart of the family, and to which the sleepless horde represents a disturbing presence.

'In dreams we have forgotten we have had many mothers. We have had many fathers, brothers, and sisters. Even as children we have parented many children of our own in our own dreams. [. . .] Playing out endless familial permutations is one of the many tasks the mind tackles while we sleep, our bodies on hold' (34). This is the observation made by Dr Ferrell, the therapist in *Black Moon* who specializes in trauma-induced sleep problems, on his first appearance in the novel, as he associates dreams with liberation from the conventional family. One of the recurrent notions in these mass-sleeplessness fictions is of the sleepless world becoming a dreamscape – the 'land of Nod' emerges in *Nod* or, as a character thinks in *Black Moon*, 'Whatever lived there was now here' (7). The fantasy abolition of the bourgeois family is one of the things that migrates from dreams into waking hours once the insomnia apocalypse begins.

Within the sociology of sleep, there is an argument with a substantial pedigree that suggests that sleep has become ever more isolated and privatized in parallel with the history of capitalist modernity. Norbert Elias's work on the history of manners, for instance, suggests that the tendency from the middle ages onwards has been towards increasingly solitary and private sleep:

To share a bed with people outside the family circle, with strangers, is made more and more embarrassing. [. . .] Only if we see how natural it seemed in the Middle Ages for strangers and for children and adults to share a bed can we appreciate what a fundamental change in interpersonal relationships and behavior is expressed in our manner of living. (168)

The sociologist Simon Williams suggests that the waning of these more sociable sleeping arrangements ran alongside an increase in the normativity of the dormative, or the emergence of rules and practices that constrained sleep behavior. Williams also associates this movement away from public sleep with a broader shift in values towards self-containment and self-mastery which suggests that the increasing tendency to 'individualise and privatise' sleep is also associated with the depoliticization of sleep, or its decoupling from structural thinking about social change (xiii). Of course, there are limits to this linearly chronological account of sleep's privatization, since the people who are most likely to share sleeping quarters are those not treated as full members of society – those in prisons, hospitals or homeless shelters – but those modes of institutional sleep nevertheless take place out of view and in closed environments. There are therefore two consequences to this broad history of the privatization of sleep, which seems coeval with the emergence of a self-sufficient capitalist subject: first, if sleep is, by norm, placed firmly within the private sphere then it is not available to political transformation; second, problems with sleep become personal problems, not social problems. As Reiss puts in in *Wild Nights*, 'Whether or not the loss of sociable sleep was to blame for disordered sleeping, it's arguable that when sleep began to be shut off from social life, walled away behind closed doors, it became less pleasurable, more pressurized, more fragile, and more subject to the vagaries of individual psychology' (32).

This history of the privatization of sleep sheds some light on one strange, recurrent feature of some of these examples of mass-sleeplessness fiction: that the novels of Calhoun, Huston and Barnes all begin with a man whose partner can't sleep. The disaster that takes over the public spaces of the streets with mass insomnia begins, for these three writers, in a heterosexual couple's bedroom. Park and Rose in *Sleepless*, Paul and Tanya in *Nod*, and Biggs and Carolyn in *Black Moon* – each couple is the epicenter of the unfolding catastrophe

around them. In these three novels, the main, male protagonists are also apparently immune to the plague of sleeplessness, and the narratives all come to rest in significant ways on these men's relationships with their sleepless partners. The novels are almost outrageously full of anxieties about the private space of the bedroom being breached by paranoia about infidelity (in *Nod* and *Black Moon*), or otherwise becoming dysfunctional (as in Biggs's and Carolyn's infertility in *Black Moon*). In two of the novels (*Nod* and *Sleepless*), the male protagonists kill their partners (with Park, in *Sleepless*, laying out Rose's body in their daughter's crib). Carolyn, in *Black Moon*, disappears out of the bedroom skylight, slipping out of her marriage and her bedroom at the same time, by an exit her husband cannot reach. The bedroom thus becomes a space that represents heterosexual relationships as private and enclosed, but never quite as impermeable as their central male protagonists would have hoped.

Black Moon offers a particularly dramatic set-piece that illustrates the association of the bedroom with both normative practices of sleep and with a stifling heteronormativity. Two young men, Chase and Jordan, tear off the wallpaper in Chase's bedroom, uncovering 'a sci-fi geek's apocalyptic vision' that Chase had painted on the wall years before, and which Chase imagines Jordan interpreting as 'an omen, a prophecy of some kind', like the predictions he has been making of a 'world without sleep' (71-3). For Chase, the mural he painted represents not a prediction but a representation of his own teenage doubts, when he told his parents he didn't think he would be able to fulfil the expectations of productive and reproductive futurity:

He had come to their bedside when he was sixteen, woken them in the middle of the night to say he didn't think he could do it. [. . .] He had listed his fears involving relationships, having kids, a career'. (72)

Chase's fears of queer failure surface at night, and he has to seek out his parents in bed to share them. Nevertheless, he papers over all of these feelings. The episode of Chase's papered-over bedroom therefore dramatizes the idea that sleeping spaces privatize experience and reinforce expectations of heteronormativity and productivity. As he and Jordan peel off the wallpaper, however, the latter (singing '*Come Armageddon, come*') undermines Chase's carefully buttressed heterosexuality by offering a kiss, proposing to him that fixed sexualities will be 'one of the things we'll lose when we stop sleeping' (74). If the bedroom is imagined to be the primary location of the activities (sex, sleep, the fostering of the subject as a private individual) necessary for social reproduction, then mass insomnia – or, the transfer of bedroom problems out into the street – unleashes energies that disrupt everything that is normally consigned to the private and domestic.

As Silvia Federici writes, ‘our consciousness is very different depending on whether we are with 10,000 women in the streets [. . .] or alone in our bedrooms’ (61). Mass sleeplessness thus breaks open the private seclusion of the bedroom and the norms that are associated with private sleep and the spaces of family life, sexuality, and the individual, and forces all of these norms and structures to open up to political interpretation. As Paul observes in *Nod*, ‘sex had been trying to go public for a long time before *Nod* was spawned’ (200), and mass insomnia, when read as a semi-ecstatic apocalypse (as in Jordan’s ‘*Come Armageddon, come*’), marks the bursting open of those private spaces and norms into something more chaotic but also potentially more liberatory. Once mass insomnia hits, new kinds of relationships start to surface. In *Nod* and *Sleepless*, for example, we see the nuclear family reconfigured, as characters care for the children of others, and both novels end with an imagined future for children adopted by men who aren’t their fathers.

Sleep Donation is the exception to the other texts’ close focus on a heterosexual couple, but it too cracks open the private sleep of the family in ways which are full of disruptive potential. Russell’s novella sees Trish, a sleep-donation worker, observing a suburban couple with a young baby whose sleep is found to be the most effective cure for the outbreak of mass sleeplessness. Trish persuades the couple, the Harkonnens, to donate their baby’s sleep to the non-profit that employs her, by sharing with them the story of her sister’s horrific death from fatal insomnia. In a story that is fascinated by giving, by the ways in which donation can tip into exchange, obligation and debt, and how giving can also be a sort of contagion or infection, the parents’ ability to offer their child as a sleep donor becomes the central knot that represents the problem of giving in the text. Trish thinks of a ‘set of laws’ which she imagines must govern ‘exactly how much a particular individual can give to and receive from another. Some hydrology of human generosity’ (695), but these laws are not concrete and Baby A’s parents diverge markedly in their attitude to donation. For the baby’s mother, ‘the physics of giving and receiving’ seem not to apply (686). In a liquid excess of compassion, she represents an overflow of giving:

In her womb, Baby A was formed inside a tidaling generosity.

Glucose, oxygen, proteins, fats: all transferred from the mother’s bloodstream to the bloodstream of the baby. (710)

For Mr Harkonnen, in contrast, the only way to resolve the demands made on the baby’s sleep are for an equivalent exchange: Trish should give up the same amount of sleep, since it was she who ‘infected’ them with the story of her sister’s suffering and encouraged them to donate in the first place. Trish’s intervention into their family therefore exposes their

radically different philosophies: for Mrs Harkonnen, we should live ‘as one body’ (681) without the mechanisms of transaction that rely on differentiated individuals and family units; for Mr Harkonnen, after taking Trish on a tour of the night-time economy that has sprung up to offer new cures for insomniacs and nightmare avoiders, the answer is a contract that turns a donation into an exchange and reinforces the boundaries between individuals. There are two radically different ideas of the family at work here, one of which reinforces the idea of the family as a closed but protective unit, and the other which dissolves it away in its ‘tidaling generosity’. One of the things that contagion shows in all of these texts is that any attempt to barricade off a family into a household or an individual into a bedroom will only be a temporary solution to an epidemic which breaches all boundaries and crosses all borders. In this situation, the tidaling generosity of sleep solidarity is the only course of action. The private places of sleep inhabited by dormative individuals within normative families become sites of unrest in these scenarios of mass sleeplessness, and restless bodies mass together, ‘as one body’, in the streets.

Towards Sleep Solidarity

It is clear from these examples that there are two significant spaces of sleeplessness in these texts: the private, barricaded bedroom of normative sleeping practices and the exposed, precarious encampment of massed rough sleepers. Loosely, these are the sites of a late-capitalist sleep-crisis perceived to be encroaching on secure sleepers and the slow-death exhaustion of crisis-ordinariness. If the history of sleep is the history of the development of the individual subject as self-contained, self-determining actor and of the domestic as the private, enclosed space of social reproduction, then mass-sleeplessness fiction systematically questions those norms of heterosexuality, family life, privacy, productivity, and self-optimization that are bundled together in the location of the bedroom. Each of these texts make efforts to establish some affiliations between different forms of threatened sleep through mass sleeplessness itself, by making it the event that breaks open the spaces of private sleep and makes sleep solidarity a necessity.

The texts offer examples of attempts to weave between these spaces and offer a topography of different forms of sleeplessness, ultimately constructing some forms of sleep solidarity between those who sleep and those who stay awake. In *Nod*, for instance, the final encounter between Charles and the novel’s writer-protagonist, Paul, sees a reminder of the latter’s obliviousness to rough sleepers, as Charles accuses him of a form of sleepwalking through his former life:

I saw you, you know. Before! I saw you step over some smelly drunk on the sidewalk one day. Was he sleeping? Was he dead? You didn't care! You didn't see him, Paul! To see anything you'd have to stay awake for days, right? (261)

Paul's comfortable privilege, as a sleeper in a world of mass insomnia, is just an intensification of his oblivious inattention to zombified rough sleepers in his pre-apocalyptic life. Russell's *Sleep Donation* goes further, and explicitly invites the reader to overlay scenes of crisis-ordinary rough sleep and apocalyptic mass insomnia:

Long before the sleep crisis, our downtown was a maze of sidewalk asylums. Immobilized people form a human shrubbery behind the courthouse, their lips whispering, their pink and brown palms extended, flat fronds shivering with need.

Which is all to say: nothing the least bit strange to us, about public psychosis. (210-12)

In a world with inadequate access to housing or healthcare, the absence of a bed for the night or the lack of a hospital bed synecdochally represent precarious life. Without healthcare or a place to sleep, the people who occupy the *Sleep Donation*'s 'quasi-legal campgrounds for homeless and unemployable insomniacs' (202) – those who have been turned away from hospitals overloaded with non-sleepers – are representatives of the familiarly invisible, zombified masses. But Trish, *Sleep Donation*'s main character, eventually visits one of these Night Worlds and finds there people already beginning to offer mutual aid, 'people with equal but opposite afflictions, propping each other up' (1145-6). The beginnings of sleep solidarity emerge from the communities of people who support each other across the differences in their sleep disturbance.

As *Sleep Donation* has it, 'It is a special kind of homelessness [. . .] to be evicted from your dreams' (59). The fiction of mass sleeplessness uses the genre elements of the zombie apocalypse, which charges the space of the home and the street with meaning, in order to construct a form of sleep solidarity that would recognize and protect the vulnerable positions of those amongst us whose sleep is most fragile – people who are homeless or precariously housed, asylum seekers, refugees and internally displaced people. But these texts also recognize that the assault on the sleep of the most vulnerable is just one aspect of the strictures placed upon the sleep of everyone by the neoliberal demand that we become responsible for our own productivity and rest. Through these narratives, it is possible to identify the inequalities that underpin both the 'sleep crisis' of late capitalism's always-on, technologically augmented colonization of rest time and the slow, persistent exhaustion of those who are homeless, displaced, or lacking healthcare. If sleep crisis would threaten to make us all rough sleepers, its depictions in the fiction of mass sleeplessness also encourage

us to break out of the private and individualized forms of sleep into which we have been enculturated and extend sleep solidarity to others in order to survive.

¹ Huston, the author of *Sleepless*, has previously written successful crime novels, including a horror-noir series involving a vampire PI – The Joe Pitt Casebooks – and it is easy to see *Sleepless* and its genre roots emerging quite clearly from Huston’s previous work. For more on Huston’s work, see his publisher’s profile: ‘Charlie Huston’, *Penguin Random House*, accessed August 20 2019

<<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/authors/68931/charlie-huston/>>. *Nod* was planned as the first of a trilogy (the sequels were to have been titled *Pod* and *God*) but Barnes was diagnosed with a brain tumor while writing the novel. He died in 2018, before the trilogy could be completed. *Nod* includes a code from Barnes explaining his illness and the book’s history. See also Dan Kois’s interview with Barnes in *Slate*: Dan Kois, ‘The Creepiest Book of the Year Imagines a World Without Sleep’, *Slate*, November 28, 2015, accessed August 20 2019 <<https://slate.com/human-interest/2015/11/nod-by-adrian-barnes-the-creepiest-book-of-the-year-imagines-a-world-without-sleep.html>>.

² Anna Mae Duane, for instance, argues that the zombie functions as a metaphor that short-circuits the ‘kill or cure’ binary logic of attitudes to disability, in ‘Dead and Disabled: The Crawling Monsters of *The Walking Dead*’ in *Zombie Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sarah Juliet Lauro (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 237–245. Richard Brock understands the figure of the zombie to represent an othering conflation of race and culture shaped around notions of contagion in ‘Of Zombies, AIDS, and “Africa”: Non-Western Disease and the “Raciocultural” Imagination,’ *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture* 12.4 (2013). Travis Linneman, Tyler Wall and Edward Green write about media descriptions of zombie criminals as part of ‘a larger ideological frame that normalizes state violence and conceals the fundamental inequalities of late capitalism’, including poverty, homelessness, and racism: Travis Linneman, Tyler Wall, and Edward Green. ‘The walking dead and killing state: Zombification and the Normalization of Police Violence.’ *Theoretical Criminology* 18,4 (2014): 506-527.

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