Concerning Books

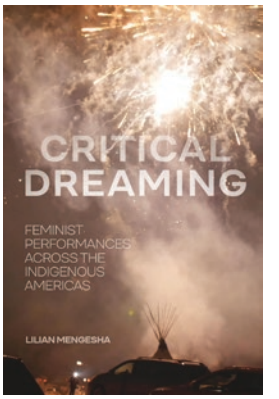
Lazy, Drowsy, Dreamy

Practices of Rest in Political Performance

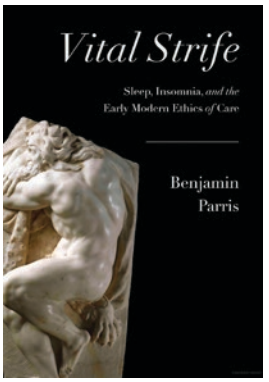
Danielle Drees



Revolting Indolence: The Politics of Slacking, Lounging, and Daydreaming in Queer and Trans Latinx Culture. By Marcos Gonsalez. University of Texas Press, 2024. $105.00 cloth, $34.95 paper, e-book available.



Critical Dreaming: Feminist Performances Across the Indigenous Americas. By Lilian Mengesha. New York University Press, 2025. $89.00 cloth, $30.00 paper, e-book available.



Vital Strife: Sleep, Insomnia, and the Early Modern Ethics of Care. By Benjamin Parris. Cornell University Press, 2022. $67.95 cloth, e-book available.



Rest Is Resistance: A Manifesto. By Tricia Hersey. Little, Brown Spark, 2022. $28.00 cloth, e-book available.

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In a recent performance of composer Nathalie Joachim's chamber piece *Note to Self* (2021), Joachim sang, over and over again,

> I'm supposed to be doin' so much more.
> I'm supposed to be doin' so much more.
> I'm supposed to be doin' so much more.

Her voice lingered in this repeated admission of failure. Then, a shift. A percussion quartet on the other side of the stage began to plink out a delicate instrumental response, triggering repeated samples of Joachim's own recorded voice that fragmented her lyric of regret into melodic syllables. These syllables no longer added up to an expression of frustration or failure. Joachim herself had stopped singing; she regarded the percussionists with a calm sense of repose.

But eventually Joachim snapped into the composition's next movement with a new lyric: "Maybe maybe maybe maybe maybe maybe maybe maybe if I took a nap... Just twenty minutes." The audience laughed. We could make the leap between these two sung lines: I should be doing so much more, but I am so tired and have no time to deal with my exhaustion. Maybe a 20-minute nap will fix it? (Joachim's words said yes, but her falsely cheery tone said no.) What happens between these two sets of lyrics—between admitting overwhelm and opting for an unsatisfying power nap? The intervening performance—in which Joachim's verbal solo became a collective, repetitive loop of fragmented vocal and percussion sounds—suggests what live performance can bring to the problem of unshakable, pervasive fatigue. In place of individual solutions, performance invites audiences to pause our solo litanies of exhaustion, recognize this feeling as shared, and reconsider it together.

Yet practices of rest—napping, dreaming, lazing about, doing nothing, indulging in relaxation—can seem like counterintuitive subject matter for live performance. They offer so little for a spectator to see, and they may even risk putting the spectator herself to sleep. Although going to the theatre is conventionally understood as a leisure activity, theatrical performances often work hard to captivate spectators' attention, viewing distracted or drowsy spectators as a failure. And in the context of performances meant to activate a political response, the subject matter of rest might seem dangerously quietist, urging audiences toward avoidant practices of self-care rather than engaging their energy toward protest or other action. But politically activating performances and practices of rest are not necessarily at odds. Joachim's lyrics echo a question raised in a recent political history of burnout: how do we live sustainable lives while "suffering the delay of a transformed world," while "trying to survive in the present" as that transformation takes longer and longer than we ever expected (Proctor 2024:86)? If we are exhausted, stupefied by the knowledge that we should still be doing so much more to change the world, can performance enact a response beyond a 20-minute nap?

Rest, writ large, is not an entirely new subject for performance studies. Earlier performance scholarship has plumbed the psychoanalytical and surrealist potential of staged dreams, inspired by Sigmund Freud and advanced in texts like Marjorie Garber's *Dream in Shakespeare* (1974), and the militant potential of daydream, seen in the work of Frankfurt School utopian Ernst Bloch (1954–59) and picked up in influential writing by José Esteban Muñoz (2009) and Kathi Weeks (2011), among others. A recent cluster of books carves out new space for performance scholarship in studies of napping, lazing, and related aesthetic styles and content centered around rest but not limited to dream. Marcos Gonsalez's *Revolting Indolence: The Politics of Slacking, Lounging, and Daydreaming in Queer and Trans Latinx Culture* (2024); Lilian Mengesha's *Critical Dreaming: Feminist Performances Across the Indigenous Americas* (2025); and Benjamin Parris's *Vital*

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Strife: Sleep, Insomnia, and the Early Modern Ethics of Care (2022) all take up, via artistic and literary criticism, the question of what performance can do with exhaustion and its antidotes. *Rest Is Resistance: A Manifesto* (2022), a first-person narrative documenting the work of performance artist Tricia Hersey, offers another perspective on the same question. Through unexpected archives of live and recorded performance, visual art, and literature organized around practices of rest, the authors propose interventions in the legacy of humanist study and aesthetic critique—particularly the Enlightenment touchstones of vigor and the sublime. When political performance scholarship values napping seriously as part of its repertoire, it reveals the assumption that alert, rigorous attention underlies sound aesthetic judgment and calls this premise into question.

These books develop a constellation of key terms with rest at its center, mining both the literal daily experience of sleep—a semiconscious, semivoluntary state of doing nothing—and a set of other practices associated with rest for their novel contributions to performance studies and aesthetic judgment. At the most literal end, Parris's *Vital Strife* reads dramatic scenes in which characters such as Hercules, Hamlet, Macbeth, and King Lear slumber, in order to track a changing philosophical-theological understanding of sleep, and the concurrent emergence of insomnia as a nascent term, across early modern English drama and poetry. In the classical and early Christian writings that inform Parris's readings, sleep is a dangerous break from the careful cultivation of virtue. But across the early modern period, sleep's meaning flips. Sleep comes to be understood biopolitically, as a recuperative practice of self-care, while insomnia, in contrast, comes to seem dangerous.

By introducing Stoic ideas of "cosmic care" and "cosmic cohesiveness," as represented in Seneca's drama *Hercules Furens* (c. 50 CE, in a 1561 translation by Jasper Heywood), Parris complicates the trajectory from "sleep is bad" to "sleep is good." Parris's reading of Stoicism presents self-care in this context as unexpectedly communal. Parris argues that inheritors of Seneca like Heywood and Shakespeare write plays in which "any given body in the cosmos is connected [...] with any other body that likewise forms a part of the cosmos" (79), and that scenes of sleep demonstrate this universal interdependence. The necessary interdependence of sleep demands that the individual, vigilant self-care we more conventionally associate with Stoicism slacken. In sleep, the conscious, selfish mind of a Hercules or a Lear relaxes, and their cosmic interconnectedness emerges. (For readers familiar with feminist and disability theories of care, this interpretation of self-care as, in fact, always communal and interdependent will not come as such a surprise.) Parris's book deals most fulsomely with commonly assigned literary texts, focusing on representations of sleep and insomnia in the early modern English canon: dramatic tragedies along with Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590/96) and John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667). A lone woman author, Margaret Cavendish, merits a reading in the coda.

Although Parris reads the sleep and insomnia of imagined English kings, his argument for the political and theological intertwining of rest with interdependent care resonates most closely with Hersey's *Rest Is Resistance*, a text asserting a 21st-century link between rest and Black liberation. *Rest Is Resistance* is a personal document of the author's artistic work as the Nap Minister, a performance artist-cum-clergyperson who hosts Group Napping Experiences. Hersey argues for the value of rest in collective experiences—crafted gatherings that invite her spectator-participants to nap alongside one another. Hersey uses her book to extend the concept of rest beyond these collective naps, encompassing meditation, bodily movement, social media fasts, and daydreaming under the category of "resistant rest." Some of the practices Hersey links to rest sound perilously trendy (there is no better place to read about social media fasts than on social media itself), but Hersey argues that resistant rest cannot be reduced to a post or to-do list. Instead, it must be understood within a larger liberatory framework that counters racial capitalism. Like Parris, Hersey places sleep within a political-theological frame in order to argue for a shift in how we value rest, from seeing rest as a failure of individual productivity to understanding rest as a form of direct-action resistance to the exploitation of Black Americans that haunts US history.

Hersey's archive comprises the performance art pieces that she developed and hosted. A longtime multihyphenate artist and teacher, Hersey began hosting Collective Napping Experiences in Atlanta out of her own feeling of unshakeable exhaustion. Collective Napping Experiences

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were immersive, participatory installations, held in affordable community spaces, primarily aimed at Black women and informed by theological and political writing on Black liberation. Hersey crafted spaces where her participants felt comfortable lying down and allowing themselves to sleep. Sometimes they cried; sometimes they recounted their dreams. At least one participant imagined that Hersey had covered her with a comforting blanket while she slept. (Since Hersey notes she is careful not to touch participants without consent, this participant report speaks to how Hersey's ethic of care seeps into participants' sleep.) Throughout the book, Hersey offers meditations and proposals for readers who want to craft a napping practice for themselves. *Rest Is Resistance* becomes a performative text, a way of "plac[ing] into the archives" Hersey's community performance work, which "started with me trying to save my own life while basking in the sweetness and power of my Ancestors' lives" (39). It is clear that these were not meant to be once-in-a-lifetime encounters with rest: instead, a Collective Napping Experience might inaugurate a deepening, ongoing personal practice of resting informed by critiques of racial and economic injustice.

Gonsalez shares Hersey's reading of rest as an act of resistance, along with her focus on North American theorists and artists of color, but Gonsalez's *Revolting Indolence* focuses on the aesthetic styles, rather than the practical experiences, associated with rest. Gonsalez's vocabulary for indolent aesthetic styles is particularly luscious: the artworks he studies are, in his words, cheesy, kitschy, tacky, slackerly, quirky, cartoony, muddy, snuggly, plushy. (His aesthetic lexicon will make you want to seek out the kitschy and plushy in your own life, looking to be seduced by indulgent tackiness.) Audiences to these artworks might so luxuriate inside their gloopy styles that they are able to move beyond worrying about resistance in its conventional forms: "sensing out indolence," Gonsalez writes, "broadens the horizons of what counts as activism and what activism can look like" in trans and queer Latinx cultures (75).

Gonsalez's archive of indolence is also interested in the memorable: in films and TV shows you already know (*Paris Is Burning* and *RuPaul's Drag Race*) and in the indelible event of the Pulse nightclub shooting. But part of Gonsalez's method—what he calls "critical otiosity," or unfruitful reading—is to be overindulgent, overinvested, perhaps even cringe-worthily into his objects. Thus, his archive is always deeper and to the side of what you would expect: not RuPaul's television episodes but a brief and much-rewatched clip of contestant Valentina's failure at lip-sync. Not the dancing at the center of trans/queer nightlife, but the lounging figures in murals and photographs who are off to the side of the main show. Not *Paris Is Burning* the film, but the DVD extras that show glimpses of minor character Angie Xtravaganza. (Is there any critical method more queer than obsessively rewatching DVD extras?) Most significantly, in a middle chapter of *Revolting Indolence*, Gonsalez turns to poetry and essays written in response to the Pulse nightclub shooting, claiming this as a canon worthy of critical study, a corpus that should be read not just as evidence of death but as an archive of the "joys, pleasures, and indolent indulgences" of trans/queer Latin nights (92). Gonsalez's book stands out as particularly teachable in undergraduate, as well as graduate, classes: the chapter on Pulse literature could write itself into a syllabus, and his chapter on *Paris Is Burning* is a welcome, fresh addition to commonly assigned texts on the film by bell hooks and Judith Butler.

Mengesha shares Gonsalez's desire to broaden the horizons of what counts as activism and further pursues the broadest understanding of her titular key term, "critical dreaming." Mengesha's performances of critical dreaming are not literally performances of sleep. Instead, Mengesha uses *critical dreaming* to name a repertoire of decolonial performance strategies that "emerge through an embodied and sensorial reimagining of movement, time, and space," in active and collective ways (3). While this key term is so wide-ranging as to be (perhaps intentionally) somewhat difficult to pin down, the stakes of Mengesha's project are crystal clear: her archive demands accountability for the deaths and disappearances of Indigenous women across North and Central America. Like Gonsalez, who is concerned with the deaths of trans and queer Latinx people, Mengesha argues that artworks prompted by killings of Indigenous women are not here to prove these lives were valuable—they obviously were—but to stitch and bind the lost richness of their lives back into cultural memory. Performances of critical dreaming pick up and run with the fundamental nonproductivity of dream. Against a settler desire to cross colonization off the to-do list, to be done with the repercussions of

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colonial violence, Mengesha's selected performances refuse this finality, and more specifically they refuse to let disappeared Indigenous women go. Through this theorization of critical dreaming, Mengesha speaks back to the utopian turn in performance studies. Critical dreaming is not a performance strategy that gestures to the horizon—it is instead about remaking the here-and-now.

Mengesha is concerned with performances that move toward collective effects and toward saving lives. Her objects of analysis are haunted by the specter of Indigenous women treated as disposable, and they often present "indigestible" experiences to viewers and critics, who might be put off by their shocking or slovenly aesthetics—but then find themselves unable to stop thinking about them. *Critical Dreaming* recurrently reads a handful of artists working in live performance, with a particular focus on multiple works by Rebecca Belmore (Anishinaabe) and Regina José Galindo. (How exciting to find extended readings of these two underexamined and prolific artists.) Although as performance scholars we often think of ourselves as grappling with the ephemeral, Mengesha's archive is one of unexpected endurance, of a refusal to be disappeared or written out of the story. The birchbark material Belmore used to create a colossal megaphone for *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to Their Mother* (1991) is a "material upon which one can transmit ideas over time," in the form of "pots, bowls, and writing," along with canoes (90–91). Even more lasting—and more disturbing—are the plastic bags that enclose performers' bodies in Galindo's performance artwork *No Perdemos Nada con Nacer* (We Lose Nothing with Being Born; 2000) and Lara Kramer's (Oji-Cree) dance piece *NGS: Native Girl Syndrome* (2013). The plastic bag props from these performances will outlive us all. Mengesha organizes her chapters so that these materials—plastic bags, birchbark, skin, and nails—emerge as concrete surfaces yoked to ideological concepts, grounding each chapter in a memorable, tangible object that vibrates with meanings imbued by performance.

Gonsalez's, Hersey's, and Mengesha's books are all attentive to the role of white Euro-American power in their deployment of rest and dream. Gonsalez and Mengesha both contest the hold that white scholarship has had on trans/queer theory and performance studies through their own explicit, committed turns to trans and queer theorists of color (Gonsalez) and the overlaps and distinctions between Black and Indigenous Studies (Mengesha). Hersey tracks the racial sleep gap in the US—the average difference in quantity and quality of sleep between Black and white people—from its original records, in slave testimonies of extreme overwork, through to her own father's experience working exhausting hours for low pay before dedicating his leisure time to community work in the Black Church. These three books are about reclaiming time for rest and dream within communities that have been systematically deprived of such freedoms. Parris's book, then, answers a complementary question: What is sleep for people in power—not just white Europeans generally, but the heroes, kings, knights, and angels in the English literary canon? The tragedy, Parris suggests, is that these powerful figures need restorative sleep but cannot understand what that sleep shows them about interdependent care. Hercules, after murdering his family and falling into a deep slumber, rejects his father Amphitryon's "therapeutic touch," turning away from the "mutually sustaining and reciprocal relation of care" Amphitryon offers despite the great harm Hercules has done (95). Lear, having voluntarily given up power by handing his kingdom over to his daughters, turns out to be a "ruler who never learned the art of self-care" and is therefore unable to let go of his "hypervigilant sovereign hangover" and manage his own need for sleep (130–31). What is the relationship between these early modern Anglophone representations of sleep and power and the projects of enslavement and colonization that Britain embarked on in the same historical period? The inability of powerful but exhausted protagonists to accept care in these dramas suggests dominant cultural values that "hang over" into later periods.

Indeed, Parris asserts that the 16th- and 17th-century texts he studies are already exhausted by the vigorous expectations of the European Renaissance. They display "humanist fatigue," or the "intellectual weariness and skepticism" brought on by the demands of "vigilant care and self-discipline" found in the Renaissance's particular blend of classical and Christian thought (2). A transnational project of continual self-improvement (with possible repercussions in the afterlife) is exhausting stuff. Although Parris, a great coiner, names the term, all four texts grapple with something like *humanist*

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fatigue. Hersey, in her personal narrative, does so in the most straightforward and relatable way. After recognizing academia as the heart of what she calls "grind culture" during her graduate studies, she "ran directly to the dance and theater department," following an intuition that she needed to reconnect her brain and her body, and signed up for a ballet class (138). All of us who teach dance or theatre classes might reflect seriously on Hersey's suggestion that embodied performance is what makes the university survivable.

But Mengesha and Gonsalez go furthest with the repercussions of something like humanist fatigue in their related but distinct readings of Kant, which stretch the capacities of contemporary performance studies into larger interventions in aesthetic philosophy. For each, Kant's aesthetic judgment hangs over (or perhaps looks down its nose at) the kinds of lazy or dreamy artworks to which they attend. Received Enlightenment values of rigor and mastery are at odds with the nonproductive (Gonsalez) or never-finished (Mengesha) performances that offer alternative possibilities for aesthetic and political value. Gonsalez identifies in Kant's system of aesthetic judgment—particularly the judgment of the beautiful and the sublime—a demand for critical vigor. But key to the vigor we might all recognize in Kant's aesthetics is, for Gonsalez, something "suppressed." This is the "indolent vigor" Gonsalez identifies in a figure from Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, "the Carib," an Indigenous non-European character so unintellectual and irrational that he cannot even feel boredom (18–20). The committed indolence of the Carib seems to provoke and energize Kant, in Gonsalez's reading. For Gonsalez, the Carib's indolent vigor is "the ultimate affront to Enlightenment rationality," motivating an imperial-aesthetic project of "'enlightening' as many [people] as possible across all corners of the globe" into becoming vigorous, hardworking subjects (22). The Latinx artworks and performances Gonsalez reads, some emerging from the very part of the globe where Kant imagined the Carib would laze, point to the ultimate failure of this enlightening project to wipe out the pleasures of indolence worldwide.

Gonsalez's choice to stage his intervention in dialog with Kant stands out because it shifts the origins of Western productivism away from Max Weber's familiar conjunction of Protestantism and the Industrial Revolution as the birthplace of our work ethic. (Indeed, Weber can barely be found in any of these texts.) By refocusing an antiwork critique on Kant, Gonsalez more pointedly implicates the project of aesthetic judgment—our inherited project, as performance critics—in a legacy of anti-trans/queer, anti-Latinx cultural devaluation. At times in his introduction, Gonsalez seems almost ready to give up the project of aesthetic judgment entirely, and a reader might start to consider the indolent pleasures of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, as it were. But Gonsalez instead moves toward the method of critical otiosity as, potentially, a form of critique that embraces indolent vigor. What he really urges readers to do is *wallow* in the bathwater. In the book's final chapter, Gonsalez reads Justin Torres's chapter "Trench," from *We the Animals* (2011), a scene of "lazing about in the mud" that fills a hole in a young boy's backyard (132). "There is something enticing down below in the mud" (133), Gonsalez writes, and plunging into the muddy trench with Gonsalez to meet the worms and wallow in the gloop is a practice that Hersey might call "brain love" (93). It makes your critical faculties feel good.

Mengesha also takes up a project of critical negotiation with Kant and his Euro-Enlightenment colleagues in what she terms a "polycognitive" method of "embracing both Indigenous and Western sciences in tandem, rather than substituting or creating hierarchies of one over the other" (86). The fruits of polycognitive criticism emerge particularly in Mengesha's reconceptualization of the sublime, through her reading of Belmore's birchbark megaphone. This colossal megaphone is a tool for speaking and listening to the land. Mengesha contrasts Belmore's *land* with the Western art historical *landscape*, an aesthetic strategy for framing and delimiting sublime nature, for scaling the land down to human understanding. For Mengesha, the unknowableness of land that extends beyond what the human eye can master as landscape is not a limit case in our aesthetic capabilities. Instead, following Native sciences, this is the way of the world: "all life encounters a sense of both the known and the unknown relationships among bodies, land, and atmospheres" (88). Mengesha proposes a "relational sublimity" in place of Kant's "shock and awe" sublime (86): performances like Belmore's can align participants in a reciprocal loop with the land. Mengesha's archive of performances that

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set off toward unknown, unmasterable outcomes—performances that respond to fears of dispossession and disposability—opens up alternative aesthetic strategies for responding not to fear of the wild but to fear of domination. While we all could grapple with the legacies of humanist rigor and Enlightenment vigor in our critical practices, Mengesha most clearly links them to the particular history of performance studies and its "ugly inheritance from colonial anthropology" (3), its desire to know other cultures intimately through a kind of aesthetic mastery. For Mengesha, this inheritance goes back to the display of Indigenous Americans in early modern Europe as spectacles—the period in which Parris identifies nascent biopolitical reason in English scenes of sleep.

The simultaneous development of Enlightenment aesthetic philosophy and biopolitical strategies of colonization emerges as a key moment that contemporary North and Central American performances of laziness and dreaminess can contest. As a subject of performance studies, practices of rest offer new ways of linking time periods and histories of aesthetic judgment. Sleep is both a universal activity of animal life and a deeply context-dependent human obsession: we all do it, but we often have so much *trouble* doing it. These books identify unexpected alignments between particular obsessions with the human acts of rest, work, dream, and critical thought in different historical moments. Attending to the daily practice of sleep prompts scholars not only to rethink inherited legacies of aesthetic judgment but also to retrain their own critical practices. They find they have to *slow way down*. Mengesha challenges too-fast critical responses that automatically write off a performance as excessively violent or derogatory; Gonsalez lingers on paintings of people lounging on couches.

Is this sort of slow looking and careful thinking so different from what might more conventionally be called close reading? Although these texts' interventions in the critical legacies of humanism and the Enlightenment are striking, their most persuasive contribution is to reorient our critical faculties toward objects and practices that—because they are about rest—do not call out for attention. These books turn our focus to queer partygoers who are not dancing but lounging near the dancefloor; to Indigenous women who are not giving legal testimony of their suffering but whispering it directly to the land itself; to Black activists who are not marching in the streets but napping alongside one another. Even to kings who are not reigning but trying to relinquish their power. Reading an archive of live performance is key to differentiating these critical celebrations of rest from biopolitical injunctions to optimize sleep in order to maximize productivity. Performances of sleep, rest, and dream invite spectators to slow down and witness otherwise private experiences. These performances ask spectators to turn our collective attention to fundamental everyday encounters with a version of life not built around productivity, optimization, or teleological behavior. Such a way of living is not merely somewhere on the horizon: it is in our here-and-now, if we can only slow down and spend time seeing it.

These books reminded me of what it feels like to encounter a work of art that is so good, or so surprising, it throws you off your critical game. You just lean back and indulge in spectatorship. You let go of your plan to write about it. Performances like these cannot be mastered by critics, but we can give them our slow, luxuriating, unfruitful attention.

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