

# A COLLECTIVE WAKING

## a Good Symptom essay by Rana San

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I

*February 28, 2022 Seattle*

*A woman is studying dreamers. She notices a tendency among three of them to give in to dark situations occurring in the dream. I hear her say, "A dream allows a person to dream, not surrender," as she tries to understand what leads them to give in as opposed to soaring above the situation, when everything is possible in a dream.*

"A chair affords sitting, a button affords pressing.... When I make films, I'm thinking about how I can use space as affordance." I am talking to dream-diarist and documentary filmmaker Takahiro Ueno. In *A fiction right after you wake up*, Ueno puts his silent dreams in gestural dialogue with storyteller Yasunori Kokubun's travel photography, establishing a new terrain for text, image, and body to relate. "The presence of a camera introduces another dimension to spatial dynamics. A camera also has its power of affordance, influencing a performance... So I need to be careful with where I put a camera in space."

I track down an article about psychology and architecture from an ecological perspective written by J.J. Gibson in 1977. Gibson posits that whether something is "climb-on-able or fall-off-able or get-underneathable or bump-into-able"<sup>1</sup> affords the ways we relate to and make use of it.

What do dream spaces afford us?

"Let me dream on it" is a phrase I use often. When faced with a choice or conflict that doesn't immediately reveal its truest course, I feed it to the dreams. "Show me \_\_\_\_\_." The results are mixed, though I frequently receive a response in the murky language of familiar people enacting absurd scenes, often requiring decoding. Other times, the message is abundantly clear and guides me forward.

While seeking counsel at one particular crossroads in my life, I was introduced to a community of healers. I asked my dreams to show me if this was the correct course for me.

*October 8, 2017 Seattle*

*I walk into the Spiritual Intuitive Development class and look for a place to sit. I'm there early, there are only a few people in the room. There's a woman at the front of the room with long big curly hair and we exchange inside jokes. I'm a bit nervous.*

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<sup>1</sup> "The affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill... Different layouts afford different behaviors for different animals, and different mechanical encounters." (J.J. Gibson, ["The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception"](#), 1977)

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Upon waking, I received a text from a close friend: "CHERIEEEEEEE! Had a dream about us last night: we were late to psychology class at the uw. Random! -M."

Yet there's only so much one's own sleep can reveal. If a dream affords the enactment possibilities untethered from the limits and laws of waking life, what lies beyond the individual's dream? What more is possible?

I came to Social Dreaming<sup>2</sup> in 2021 as a means to survive the solitary toil of the pandemic, meeting online weekly with a global network of dreamers to connect, relate, and gain new understandings of ourselves and our collective (unconscious) concerns. Social Dreaming is a tool for communities, whether in moments of calm, change, or crisis. By following a liminal logic of free-associating to one another's dreams and dream imagery, each "matrix" becomes a space of emergence, of possibility. For me, this practice generated creativity, conversation, closure, and a heightened curiosity about and concern for fellow Zoom-boxed strangers. Collectively, it shifted our awareness, presence, and—as one social dreamer framed it during the group reflection following a matrix—"the way that we world."<sup>3</sup>

## II

*February 2, 2018 Seattle*

*I am in two plays being performed in adjacent spaces concurrently, for two different audiences. My character is the only one that crosses over so my exit from one scene in one play is an entrance into another scene in the other play. One of the plays feels like a staged version of my life while in the other I feel like an extra in someone else's story.*

For dream-recorder and multi-hyphenate artist Leslie Cuyjet, new modes of expression emerged when the pandemic pressed pause on her usual medium of dance. *Choreography Study: 1993* pairs a dream recording in the odd register of her waking voice with home videos from gymnastics camp and swimming competitions, crafting a dreamscape occasionally and endearingly interrupted by a genuine yawn or lapse in memory. Cuyjet's dad digitized and shared these "little exhibits" of home videos with her over a long-term letter correspondence—she says they became specimens that exemplified her upbringing, something she didn't always have language to talk about. So she pursued this new terrain. The film draws inspiration from Maya Deren's 1945 *Study in Choreography for Camera*, a short silent film through which dancer Talley Beatty's movements are sequenced with precision in multiple settings, creating

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<sup>2</sup> [Social Dreaming](#), developed by Gordon Lawrence in the 1970s, is "an embodied opportunity to activate the collective unconscious through the sharing of dreams and associations in a supported space. Using meditation to access a state of reverie, the matrix weaves dream imagery and free associations into a rich tapestry of connections. Previously hidden meanings and unspoken truths buried within our shared cultural ecosystem emerge. A novel mode of engaging, the matrix cultivates a sense of unity and opens channels onto creativity and deep connection." Accessed March 5, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Women's Social Dreaming Matrix: Winter Light, hosted by Susan Webb, M.D. February 2022.

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a geographical continuity<sup>4</sup> only film can accomplish. A seamless dance across environments.

"When I'm in the act of [editing], it feels like I'm making a dance...dealing with pacing, rhythm, and narrative, whether that's linear or not." I get giddy when Cuyjet names exactly what thrills me as a dancer and film editor. She is framed in a luminous rectangle on my screen, chatting with me across time and space from her bright room, three hours ahead in New York. "Maya Deren's film gave me the permission to look at movement in film in this way of charting a path, or charting a journey."

Filmmaking and film editing are choreography, the intentional arrangement and organization of frames (bodies) in space and time—the making of a dance.

What does choreography afford us?

"It's a container for... It's a funneling of... A holding space for..." Cuyjet is cupping her hands in the air as her mind reaches, palms supporting the invisible form of an innate truth that refuses to be named. "You kill a dance when you put words to it." Noted.

And yet I persist, retracing Ueno's insight: "Choreography guides the body to perform certain movements by using a score. In filmmaking, a camera guides the body to perform certain movements, capturing images and affecting the body. The hands are forced to perform. This is the camera's affordance, its score. The camera functions as a device to cause someone's confession, make someone talk about something in a different way."

Choreography allows the body and mind to experience and witness motion, stillness, gesture, and expression outside of everyday movement, within a contained moment. If a choreographed body affords playing with possibilities through specified sequences of motion and form, through formal control of time and space, "how does choreography enact rather than simply reflect social order?"<sup>5</sup>

This is a question the Laboratory for Social Choreography at Duke University sets out to explore by creating the conditions for participants to form new understandings of themselves and others through performance. As an embodied inquiry, Social Choreography is a collective waking up, setting the stage to, as Audre Lorde put it, "attempt the heretical actions our dreams imply and some of our old ideas disparage."<sup>6</sup> Participants experiment and rehearse the society they want to see into existence. This is a queer practice in the way Alexis Pauline Gumbs applies the word in her forward to Ntozake Shange's *Dance We Do*: "an approach to life that values the unfamiliar, awkward, and difficult as a pathway to new possibilities beyond the

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4 "...Deren's ideas of 'creative geography,' using motion and editing to connect different geographic locations and metaphysical concepts," give us language for this formation of new terrains. (The Museum of Modern Art, "[MoMA Exhibition Illuminates the Legacy of Visionary Experimental Filmmaker Maya Deren](#)", 2010)

5 Andrew Hewitt, *Social Choreography: Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement* (Duke University Press, 2005), p25.

6 Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Crossing Press, 1984), pp38–39.

reproduction of the world as we already knew it.”<sup>7</sup>

What happens when everyone in the room is audience member and artist, observer and observed? What more becomes possible?

### III

March 13, 2022 Seattle

*There are people whose minds have been programmed to do what The Programmer wants. They all live inside a large house with many rooms, and their interactions are all calculated based on what The Programmer wants to see play out. Conflicts arise and occasionally, someone's consciousness overrides the programming to the point that they manage to escape the house. But they are programmed to return at the end of the day. Every day, these interactions play out. And every day, they begin again. I am sad to watch from afar that they have no hope of escape.*

Cuyjet's premiere presentation of *Choreography Study: 1993* was a live performance in a Brooklyn brownstone. It involved projecting the work onto the underbelly of a stairwell as she slid down the stairs on her back, trailing a JBL speaker. Ueno smiles when he tells me the Japanese title of *Camera Lucida* (明る い部屋) by Roland Barthes<sup>8</sup> translates to “bright room.” Dream technologists have developed devices that can induce lucid dreaming through audio and visual cues like stimulating the eyes with light during REM sleep. For some reason, it takes me multiple viewings (five?) of *A fiction right after you wake up* to notice the correlation between a photo of a distant lighthouse and Ueno's dream of playing Red Light / Green Light. Cuyjet seeks out what she calls “glimmers”—points of connection in her writing and choreographic practices, moments of unknown<sup>9</sup> when the body shows up to be a vessel through which work pours forth—potential energy made kinetic. Halifu Osumare says about the proximity of dance to text, “...as we grow as a society, we have to become more literate in being able to read the body.”<sup>10</sup>

Performance. Language. Dream. Film. Dance. Text. What do these bodies of work afford us? Or, as I scribbled one blurry morning during a Social Dreaming matrix reflection, “What are we rehearsing toward?”

“In a dream I can believe anything. Any incoherence, craziness. I can't doubt anything.... We forget how to doubt in the real world. There are many fictions in reality, in waking life.” Ueno suggests

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7 Alexis Pauline Gumbs, foreword to Ntozake Shange, *Dance We Do: A Poet Explores Black Dance* (Beacon Press, 2020)

8 The book that sparked *Good Symptom's* method of inquiry and brilliant title.

9 “I am not afraid to not know what I am about to do. I trust the spirit and I trust what I know. Then there is a moment before you begin to choreograph when the blood rushes to the memory and you are filled with all the things known and unknown... This is a sacred place and moment.” Otis Sallid interviewed by Ntozake Shange in *Dance We Do*, p78.

10 Halifu Osumare interviewed by Ntozake Shange in *Dance We Do*, p53.

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collective acceptance of harmful stories and structures reinforces their grip. Maybe dream spaces and dance stages afford dress rehearsals for constructive doubt. For critical skepticism. For questioning, facing, and dismantling the fictions we readily perpetuate. For waking up.

Maybe one of art's—in particular literary- and dance-media art's—myriad affordances is to give form to inner worlds so that we may recognize our proximity to other perspectives, and to each other.

Maybe by chasing the words I'm killing the dance.

In *Lost in Language & Sound, Or, How I Found My Way to the Arts*, Ntozake Shange found the words for when words don't suffice, "...the body has a grammar for these constructs, which are not beyond articulation, but of another terrain."<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps the "incapacity to name"<sup>12</sup> and the attempt to do so anyway affords a new language—to speak its vernacular is to become, as Shange says, "translingual" in order to dream what more is possible and, upon waking, to give it form.

*October 30, 2017 Seattle*

*I am lucid and wandering through a house. A small butterfly-winged red elephant and a woman in a red dress with light curly hair appear and invite me to follow them. We enter a room where the elephant points to a large crayon-like object in a box with many other colors. I pull it out, only to find it is transparent, but when I put it to paper it draws white. A white ferret appears in the room, then disappears in a cloud of smoke. The woman says, "I want to show you where Elephant lives!" We crawl through a cave-like opening filled with dangling strips of fabric. It opens out into a room that leads to another which leads to another. "I'm so excited to finally meet you!" She shares my enthusiasm and smiles brilliantly as we enter the third room. There are boxes everywhere, it's dark and dusty, attic-like. "You all in Dreamland must be thinking, 'When is this Rana going to finally wake up?'" She is quiet and looks at the floor. I fear I have offended her. I meant it in the sense that they finally reached me, it was time to meet Elephant. Then she says with excitement, "Let's do this!"*

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<sup>11</sup> Ntozake Shange, *Lost in Language & Sound, Or, How I Found My Way to the Arts: Essays* (St. Martin's Press, 2011), p89.

<sup>12</sup> "The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance." Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (Hill and Wang, 1980), p51.