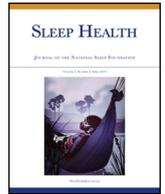




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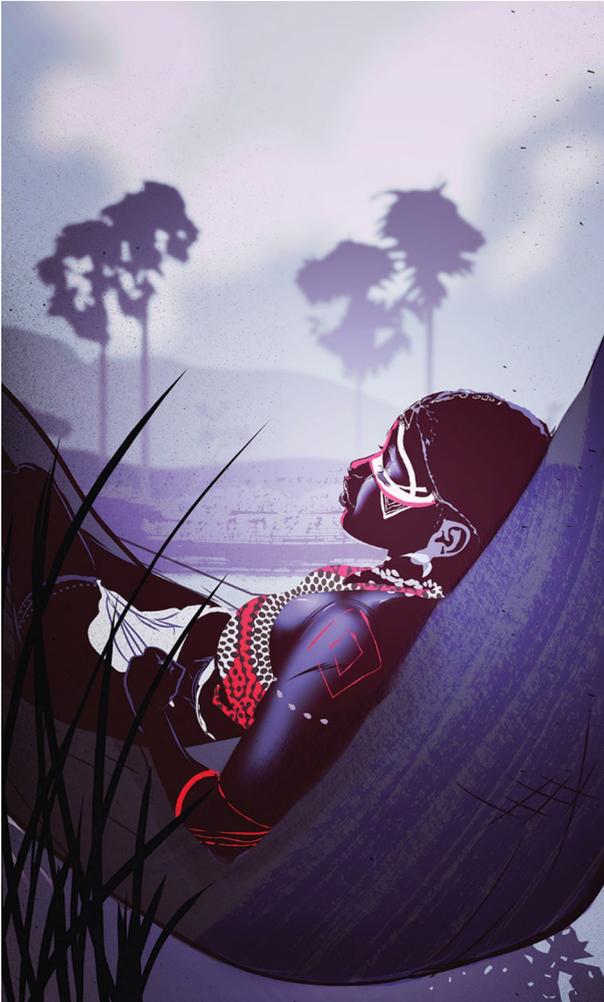
Sleep Health

Journal of the National Sleep Foundation

journal homepage: sleephealthjournal.org

Cover Art

Sleep on the Congo



[Afua Richardson. *Sleep on the Congo*, 2014. Credit for the journal cover and the image above: Afua Richardson].

The beautiful image on the cover of this issue, *Sleep on the Congo*, is the result of work by two great African-Americans, who never met each other. The poet, Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri in 1902 and died in New York City in 1967. The artist/illustrator, Afua Richardson was born in New York City in 1980. First came the poem.

I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

The Negro Speaks of Rivers
Langston Hughes, 1921, *Crisis Magazine*¹

This poem was written in 15 minutes on the back of an envelope on a train heading to Mexico by a then 19-year-old Hughes.² It was published by *The Crisis*, a publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which at the time had been in existence about 10 years. This was the start of his career and this is possibly his best-known poem.³ Besides being a poet, he became a social activist, novelist, playwright, and columnist and was probably the best known African-American literary figure until his death in 1967.

Then came the illustration. At first glance, *Sleep on the Congo* is just an illustration of a young Black woman sleeping. Her brightly colored garments and ornaments contrasted with the gray hazy background draw attention to the woman's sleeping state and suggest that it is night time. With our focus on the woman, we are forced to observe her gentle features, her closed eyes, and her overall relaxed posture; all in a way that makes her presence peaceful and calm yet strong.

The Black woman drawn with bright colors and exuding strength is characteristic of Richardson and her other works. Even though she is still young, Richardson is already known for "her vivid colours, striking characters and non-traditional representations of [super] humanity".⁴ Richardson has worked with Marvel and DC comics to create several artworks that center on strong Black women – characters that are mostly excluded from mainstream comics. Her most notable work is her illustration of the 2016 *Black Panther* spin off, *Black Panther: World of Wakanda*, a comic series written by Roxane Gay and Yona Harvey.⁵

Unlike most of her commissioned works, *Sleep on the Congo* was published by Richardson on her Tumblr account in February 2014.⁶ She extracted *Sleep on the Congo* from her 2014 Black History

Month illustration for NPR Books and Code Switch, *Blood and Water*.⁷ In *Blood and Water*, Richardson illustrates Hughes' poem, *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*. While illustrating the poem, Richardson imagined Hughes daydreaming of visiting Africa as the train chugged along to Mexico. Interestingly, Richardson's inspiration to illustrate peaceful sleep by the Congo River came from her experience living on Governor's Island in New York City as a child. Positioned at the end of the island, she found comfort in the tug of the three rivers as they intersected, their high and low tides, and their dependable rhythms. Thinking of the importance of rivers for trade, ritual and rhythm, she "imagined a woman of an indigenous tribe near the Congo, painting herself so she will be disguised and hidden from disincarnate beings when traveling in her dreams".⁸

In the poem, Hughes mentions four main rivers: Euphrates, Congo, Nile, and Mississippi. Although these rivers are all natural, inanimate and presumably apolitical, the Congo River has been ascribed the most negative connotation in popular and historical writings about Africa. In popular Western imagination, the Congo has been imbued with evil, danger, darkness, and savagery. This conceptualization of the Congo River was most significantly furthered by colonial explorers such as Henry Morton Stanley and authors, such as Joseph Conrad and his book, *Heart of Darkness*.⁹ As Chinua Achebe notes, Conrad describes the Congo as the antithesis of civilization that is saturated with grotesque and inscrutable darkness.¹⁰ While this perception of the Congo is obviously spurious since the Congo River is inanimate, it has unfortunately persisted into modern times.

Given this history of associating the Congo with turmoil and mysterious insanity, Richardson's *Sleep on the Congo* works to reclaim the image of a river that has historically been stripped of all power and goodness. Instead of being a place of incomprehensible African primitivity, it reimagines the Congo as a place of peaceful rest and comfort. By using a phenomenon as universal and mundane as sleep, *Sleep on the Congo* normalizes a place that has historically been politicized.

Sleep on the Congo also works to counter the underrepresentation of black women in art about sleep. In this illustration, the young woman's beauty and strength seem to be enhanced by her sleeping state thus making sleep important not only for resting but also for its rejuvenating qualities. While many artists have different views of sleep, Richardson believes that her art and sleep are co-dependent. As she notes, "if I take from the hours I need, it will take from me." On some days, she forfeits sleep to put down the images in her mind. On other days, she prioritizes sleep so as to get a clearer image with which to convey her message.⁸

As a work that challenges preconceived notions about black women and Congo, *Sleep on the Congo* as an illustration out of a comic also challenges the boundaries of what is considered art. The

categorization of comics as art is a recent phenomenon that has not yet taken root in the world of high art.¹¹ Furthermore, the publication of art on social media platforms such as Tumblr is still not considered legitimate. Richardson's choice to publish *Sleep on the Congo* on Tumblr is thus radical as it not only challenges the notion that art only belongs in museums but also reaches a wider diverse audience. The illustration's online publication overcomes the limitations of conventional publication platforms like museums that are often inaccessible to many people based on their class, race, and geography.

If not for its artistic brilliance, *Sleep on the Congo* will remain relevant because it is a piece in which Richardson, a young black female artist, has creatively used sleep to craft a counter-narrative about the Congo and Africa; about comics and their artistic characteristic and about black women as central figures.

Disclosures

The authors have declared that they have nothing to disclose.

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