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Listening at Night
Toward an Ethnography of So(m)niferous Media

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Résumé de l'article

S'appuyant sur une recherche ethnographique menée auprès d'étudiants de premier cycle sur leurs pratiques d'écoute et de sommeil, cet essai développe un concept de « médias so(m)nifères » pour décrire comment les auditeurs/dormeurs utilisent les médias audio pour (re)médier leur expérience de la nuit. L'essai décrit les principales affinités théoriques et pratiques entre le sommeil et l'écoute, en adoptant une approche socioculturelle du sommeil éclairée par un travail critique dans les études du son et des médias. Le sommeil est repensé comme une expérience d'écoute inconsciente et à médiation sonore qui participe de manière ambivalente à la logique de marchandisation 24/7 décrite par Jonathan Crary et d'autres. Une découverte inattendue du travail ethnographique est que de nombreux dormeurs évitent délibérément les produits médiatiques sonores évidents pour dormir (par exemple, les listes de lecture et les podcasts de sommeil, les machines à bruit, les sons « naturels », les battements binauraux, etc.) et recherchent plutôt un contenu de médias sociaux qui attire l'attention. Plutôt que de s'endormir, les auditeurs semblent vouloir engager pleinement leur attention, tout en la fermant paradoxalement en même temps. Les médias so(m)nifères semblent ainsi travailler directement sur l'attention de l'auditeur, et non sur l'ambiance acoustique de l'espace de couchage.

LISTENING AT NIGHT
Toward an Ethnography of So(m)niferous Media

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What do the following have in common: the beauty blogs of make-up artist and Youtuber Manny MUA; episodes of the podcast *Other People's Lives* titled "I Was Stolen At Birth To Cover Up Chernobyl" or "The Naked Cuddler"; and *Let's Talk About Myths, Baby*, which styles itself a "modern, witty, sarcastic, honest—and curse-filled" podcast devoted to Greek and Roman mythology? These are all unlikely examples of media that people listen to in order to help themselves get to sleep at night. Digital media aside, sleepers have always mediated their sleep environments in terms of sound: simple acts like cracking a window, closing a door, or turning on a fan are as much about the regulation of airflow and temperature as they are about crafting an optimal, or at least functional, soundscape in which a night's sleep can occur. It is not farfetched to think of going to sleep as a practice (often a struggle!) of amateur sound design. From the perspective of the ear, which notoriously has no "lid" and remains perceptually open throughout the night, sleep appears as a constant negotiation of—and test of our ability to control—the sonic boundary between our bodies and our environments. How do we decide which sounds of the outside world to let into our sleep; which sounds we want to cancel out; and which supplementary sounds we might bring in to carry us across the threshold from waking to sleeping?

In seeking answers to these kinds of questions, I am positing a category of media artefacts (along with corresponding practices of self-mediation) that I call *so(m)niferous*: sonic media (including music) specifically designed—or creatively re-purposed—to regulate mood, mask external noises, and/or induce specific physical responses that bring sleep along with sound. Obvious examples might include: noise machines; earbuds, headphones and headbands designed for sleeping, with built-in "snore-cancelling" and streaming capabilities; streaming services promoting ASMR videos, binaural

beats and sleep playlists, etc. Less obvious examples, however, include the narrative-based, attention-grabbing social media content I mentioned above. In principle, such podcasts and blogs are created to share engaging content, capture attention and ultimately win the likes and subscriptions that translate into advertising dollars for the producers and catalyze acts of consumption in the followers. Yet, it is a curious and unexpected twist of my initial conception of so(m)niferous media that precisely *this kind* of social media content can be transformed, in actual listening practice, into a sonic sleep aid. In this essay I want to explore an emerging paradox in my ethnographic inquiry into listening at night, namely that not just noise and music, but "content" itself are consumed *not* as content, but as customizable atmosphere and cognitive cues to induce and maintain sleep, thus facilitating a non-conscious auditory experience of the night.

Of the formal and informal interviews I have conducted so far,[1] the example of Anaya is perhaps most illustrative of this sonic paradox that transforms going to sleep into a hyperattentive act. Anaya describes herself as an "obsessive" listener who, when encountering new music, might listen to the same track for an entire week. Yet she might more accurately be described as an obsessive *background* listener, who constantly curates playlists and seeks out noisy environments, like a bustling café or large campus cafeteria, to help her focus on school work. Music playing loudly over her home stereo, or the chatter and noise of a crowded eatery, have the paradoxical effect of channeling her attention on the task at hand, even when that task is as demanding as writing code or reading literary theory (she is a university student with a double-major in Computer Science and English).

What Anaya describes is a kind DIY "brain hack" in which she uses familiar or repetitive sounds in order to (imaginatively) disengage certain

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1.   To date, I have conducted 8 formal interviews with university students who had recently taken my courses in communication and cultural studies. Students responded to my open request (which I circulated *after* final marks had been submitted to avoid ethical ambiguity) for volunteers to be interviewed virtually about their listening and sleeping habits. The bulk of the interviews took place during the height of the pandemic and of online learning (June and July 2021), both of which brought questions of (lack of) sleep, (lack of) daily rhythms, and questions about attention to the fore of many people's minds, myself and my students included. I have also conducted a number of informal interviews with colleagues and acquaintances, which have anecdotally supported many of the key themes and problems I present in this piece. All names of the interviewees presented in this piece have been changed.

parts of the brain and re-channel those mental energies elsewhere: "[With a]rtists that I love, I have playlists of songs that I've heard a million times over, and I know what's going to happen, I know the chord progression and the lyrics, so I can just turn my 'music brain' off and focus on what I am doing while that's playing in the background." For Anaya, the control of the background or ambient sound becomes not just a mode of sonic self-control, but a kind of disavowed self-deceit as well: part of the brain is being tricked into the *passive* attentiveness of background listening, while the *active* attentional energy that is freed up by that distraction is presumably redirected to other task-oriented brain areas. The brain, of course, may not actually work like this; but from an ethnographic perspective, it is crucial to describe and contextualize precisely the *imaginative* practice of a listener who uses music to tweak the brain and enhance productivity.

The same logic of productivity through aural distraction applies to going to sleep as well. Despite the proliferation of sleep podcasts and playlists, Anaya avoids audio material that we might initially think of as so(m)niferous (e.g., soothing nature sounds, lo-fi beats, guided meditations, digressive sleep podcasts, etc.) in favour of punchy narrative content:

> My parents used to tell me stories to put me to sleep as a kid. I think that's where this comes from. I like narratives, so if you're going to put me to sleep, you're going to have to plan your story [laughs], have a structure. I feel like it kind of tires me out in a way, mentally, at least.... so that I just kind of conk off.

Aside from the intrusive ads that typically play before a popular sleep podcast like *Sleep With* Me, it's the very premise of progressively boring, sleep-promising narration that irks Anaya: "When you put on a sleep podcast, it's like they're telling you, 'Oh, you're gonna be asleep by the end of this.' And then a little part of my brain goes, 'How about NO! I'm going to prove your wrong!' [laughs] I don't know if that's just a 'me thing,' or...."

This may well be an idiosyncratic listening strategy (a "me thing"), yet a similar practice (and even a similar rhetoric of "tiring out" or "turning off" the brain) emerged in most of the interviews I conducted. A significant number of listeners re-purpose attention-grabbing audio media into so(m)niferous media, and re-invent attentive listening as a mode of sleeping. In what follows, I shed light on this unexpected mode of cognitive/auditory self-control and sketch out how an ethnographic approach to sleeping and listening can contribute to critical sound studies of rhythm in contemporary capitalism.

I want to begin by delineating why listening and sleeping are essential and complementary components of the ethnographic study of the night. What ties listening, sleeping and the night together is a certain conceptualization of *rhythm* that I approach from two perspectives: (1) the rhythmanalysis of Henri Lefebvre (1991), where rhythm serves as a key category that describes the operation (and facilitates the critical analysis) of contemporary capitalism; and (2) theories of affective listening that have emerged in recent years in the field of sound studies, especially in the work of Annahid Kassabian (2013) and Steve Goodman (2010). Affect in sound studies, like rhythm for Lefebvre, opens up an analytical path for understanding how abstract, systemic patternings of social and economic life interact with the lived materiality of bodies. Our subjectivities and experiences are not so much prior to the affects and rhythms that traverse them as they are themselves produced by rhythmic and affective movements. Capitalism, and the media industries that it depends on, are perhaps the ultimate rhythmic and affective drivers of contemporary life, which means that the critical-theoretical analysis of capitalism needs to attend to—*listen* to—the phased opacities of bodily and affective rhythms, the interstices in consciousness and cognition where the rhythms of capitalism make themselves felt. And we are rarely less conscious and cognizant (and hence more sensitive to such rhythms) than at night, when we sleep.

Sleep is itself a rhythmed activity which, in the history of modern sleep science, has been technically defined by the graphical waves of the electroencephalograph (EEG), which tracks changes in the collective hum of the brain during the various stages of sleep (Kroker 2007). Defining sleep as an "object" in this technoscientific way produces, I argue, an unexpected secondary definition of sleep as sound. *Sleep is a cerebral sound*: its waves are transcribed by the EEG, and its vibrations resonate within—and are listened to—by the sleeper's body. In the act of sleep, the body listens to its internal soundtrack *and* to a cosmic one simultaneously, since the state of sleep is an entrainment of internal circadian rhythms with the planetary rhythm of day and night. Rhythmanalysis implies not only the parsing out of individual rhythms that may be felt by the body in daily (and nightly) life, but also establishes a fluid epistemological scale for apprehending the entanglement of the body's rhythms in micro- and macrocosmic processes: the ebb and flow of the tides as much as of neurochemicals. Rhythm, I argue, offers itself as a key concept to complement recent new-materialist and eco-materialist takes on media and aesthetics (Parikka 2015; Peters 2015; Smith 2016; Starosielkski and Walker 2016; Cubitt 2017), and opens a

significant area for ethnographic work that seeks to explore how sleepers and listeners experience the (non-)experience of the night.

Furthermore, as Matthew Wolf-Meyer has shown in his extensive ethnographic work on sleep (2012), sleep is an index of the processual (mis)fit between an individual's everyday life and the spatiotemporal rhythms imposed on it by institutions, cultural and medical norms, and ultimately, capitalism.[2] For Wolf-Meyer, the processual approach attends to minute differences for what they reveal about pervasive social rhythms and norms and how they affect people's everyday experience, (including how they seek to alter that experience through drugs and medicalization). My own methodological approach involves yoking together the processual/rhythmed concept of sleep with the technoscientific definition of sleep as sound, reaching out to the method of transductive ethnographies of sound (Helmreich 2007; Hagood 2017 and 2019). Transductive ethnography mobilizes a technical process from audio engineering to describe the processes of mediation by which subjects and objects are co-constituted within circuits of sound and communication. For Helmreich, transductive ethnography describe the layers of mediation involved in transforming the alien environment of the deep-sea floor into an immersive soundscape that human listeners can know and experience. For Hagood, transductive ethnography describes how tinnitus sufferers, audiological equipment and discourses of disability all gather around the phantom phenomenon of tinnitus itself. In my case, I explore how sleep is experienced and imagined as a state of auditory (in)attention through sonic remediation, and how would-be sleepers transform sleep from a state of rest or non-work into an attentional task that they accomplish precisely by ignoring.

For Lefebvre, and for the purposes of rhythmanalysis, it is less a matter of defining rhythm in and of itself, than it is a task of immersing the analyst, from the outset, in a proliferating, expansive and self-imbricating polyrhythmicity. Like a good vitalist, or perhaps post-vitalist thinker, Lefebvre's concepts are not so much premises as *processes*, always already underway, multiplying and enfolding themselves in ways that are both sensuous and abstract. Rhythm is liveable and palpable in the body, fundamentally in excess of rational understanding; yet under the right conditions, rhythms are available—and indeed, indispensable—to

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2. Two recent—and excellent—humanistic approaches to the fraught culture and biology of sleep are Ben Reiss's *Wild Nights: How Taming Sleep Created Our Restless World* (2017) and Matthew Fuller's *How to Sleep: The Art, Biology and Culture of Unconsciousness* (2018).

intellectual insight and the critical-theoretical analysis of capitalism and its effects.

For Lefebvre rhythm describes the patterned movement of energy through space and time, an obscure material-energetic process in which repetition leads to differentiation; differentiation leads to recurrence; and recurrence gives rise to the dialectical tension of development within cyclicality. On this tension, Lefebvre juxtaposes the operations of *cyclical* and *linear* rhythms. The former he describes as "undulations, vibrations, returns and rotations [...], from the microscopic to the astronomical, from molecules to galaxies, passing through the beatings of the heart, the blinking of the eyelids and breathing, the alternation of days and nights, months and seasons and so on" (84). Cyclical rhythms posit a sweeping continuity of matter at all scales, experienced through a quasi-Bergsonian, intuitive duration of the *ear*: "[The rhythmanalyst] listens—and first to his body; he learns rhythm from it, in order consequently to appreciate external rhythms. His body serves him as a metronome" (29). In contrast to this vitalist cyclicality, Lefebvre poses linear rhythms which measure mere repetition: "the fall of a drop of water, the blows of a hammer, the noise of an engine [. . .] the repetitive tick-tock of the clock" (84–85). Linear rhythms are associated with the fragmentation of time, with industrial or labour time, monotony and fatigue. Linear rhythms predominate in capitalism, interrupting or displacing cyclical rhythms, including the moments of restoration, recommencement and imaginative and aesthetic expansiveness offered by the cyclical passage of time.

One exception Lefebvre notes to linear and cyclical rhythms is provisionally named "appropriated" time, and elsewhere referred to as "strong" time. He allows for moments, usually but not necessarily aesthetically motivated, in which the bodily and abstract experience of time is suspended:

> [Appropriated time] is a time that forgets time, during which time no longer counts (and is no longer counted). It arrives or emerges when an activity brings plenitude, whether this activity be banal (an occupation, a piece of work), subtle (meditation, contemplation), spontaneous (a child's game, or even one for adults) or sophisticated. This activity is in harmony with itself and with the world. It has several traits of self-creation or of a gift rather than of an obligation or an imposition come from without. It *is* in time: it *is* a time, but does not reflect on it. (85)

The unspecified plenitude of such de-rhythmed stretches of time serves as a kind of refuge and a potential alternative to the incursions of capitalist-

linear rhythms on experience. But it is also loosely configured throughout the text as crucial for the passage from the lived experience of rhythms to epistemological and critical insight into those same rhythms. Certain moments of appropriated time are "methodologically" (although that is surely not the right word) crucial to what rhythmanalysis can claim to know about capitalism: "No ear, no piece of apparatus could grasp this whole, this [urban] flux of metallic and carnal bodies. In order to grasp rhythms, a bit of time, a sort of meditation on time, the city, people, is required. [...] To release and listen to rhythms demands attention and a certain time" (39, 41). What is most provocative in Lefebvre's project of rhythmanalysis, then, is the positing of "certain" moments, "bits" of time, durations or experiences that are de-rhythmed, yet indispensable for making sense of the lived temporalities of rhythms. These moments are of an aleatory, spontaneous, and not-necessarily-conscious nature, rather than rigorously constructed epistemological framings of experience; and moreover, they are implicitly or explicitly figured throughout the book as moments of *listening*. Listening, for Lefebvre, is the privileged sensory mode that negotiates the duality of rhythms as lived-materialist and rational-abstract, *if* it can hold itself open to rare, fleeting moments of "appropriated" time.

How does this theory of listening as a kind of spontaneous critical-embodied practice square with recent theories of affective listening, which also theorize listening at the thresholds of bodily and subjective experience? To answer this, I want to turn briefly to Jonathan Crary's *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2013) as both a kind of sequel and a foil to Lefebvre's project on rhythmanalysis. *24/7*, from this perspective, describes the annihilation of the possibility of "appropriated" time and the fugitive conditions of sensory optimism (listening, attention) sketched out by Lefebvre. For Crary, the compulsory techniques of self-management and self-promotion—along with the constant coercion to work and/or consume—associated with the digital economy, social media and wireless devices have abolished the interplay of linear and cyclical time that was constitutive of any "certain" moment outside of the capitalist mono-rhythm: "24/7 steadily undermines distinctions between day and night, between light and dark, and between action and repose" (17). Crary, a distinguished visual scholar, figures 24/7 primarily in visual terms. Noting the 24/7 economy/culture requires perpetual illumination (of cities, factories, workplaces and homes) with electric lights, not to mention the illumination of the retinal cells of human eyes by LED screens at any hour, Crary describes the key visual impact of 24/7 as "an immense incapacitation of visual experience"

(32). The human eye has lost its ability to perceive texture, shadow, nuance (both literally and figuratively), its optic sensitivity blunted by the glare of LED screens and the limited range of consumerist, instrumentalizing views such devices afford.

> An attention economy dissolves the separation between the personal and professional, between entertainment and information, all overridden by a compulsory functionality of communication that is inherently and inescapably 24/7. Even as a contemporary colloquialism, the term 'eyeballs' for the site of control repositions human vision as a *motor* activity that can be subjected to external direction or stimuli. The goal is to refine the capacity to localize the eye's movement on or within highly targeted sites or points of interest. *The eye is dislodged from the realm of optics and made into an intermediary element of a circuit* whose end result is always a motor response of the body to electronic solicitation. (76–77, second emphasis JD)

What is implied here is a history of human vision associated with inner agency and autonomy in balance with its capacity to make attentive observations about the outer world. When the eye is "dislodged from the realm of optics," so are the viewer's attention and critical reason dislodged from their inner world, just as much as the outer world dissolves into an arrhythmia in which night and sleep may still stubbornly persist, but against generalized conditions of glare and insomnia that reduce their rhythmic status to a mere technicality.

Reading back to Lefebvre from this perspective, we *could* note his emphasis on the ear and listening as part of a strategy that recuperates moments of "appropriated" time from the rhythmic flux of contemporary capitalism. Yet there is an evolving discourse around the ear and noise that has been fundamental to the development of sounds studies, and which also might create an opportunity to rethink both Lefebvre's auditory optimism and Crary's ocular pessimism. Crucial work in sound studies (not to mention in modern sound culture more broadly as it cuts across engineering, acoustics, design, architecture, and music composition) has been devoted to material and aesthetic questions around noise and to techniques of listening to, through, with and against it.[3] Parallel to the visual trajectory

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3.   For a succinct take on a massive literature, see the entry on "Noise" by David Novak in *Keywords in Sound* (Novak and Sakakeeny 2015), 125–138. A major trajectory within the noise literature that is of relevance to my intervention here is the *commodification* of noise via mobile listening devices with noise cancellation capabilities. The shift from noise as sounds-we-have-learned-to-ignore (Schafer 1977) to sounds-we-are-compelled to-ignore-by-buying-expensive-headphones (Hagood 2019) is a key indication of the auditory dimension of 24/7 culture.

Crary traces from Joseph Wright of Derby's painting *Arkwright's Cotton Mills by Night* to the 24/7 glare of LED screens is an auditory history of the noise of industrialization and urbanization (Schafer 1997; Thompson 2002; Bijsterveld 2008), not to mention the instrumentalization of music as a way to control worker productivity and externally modulate the rhythms of daily and nightly life. On this latter point, a single, if now defunct, corporate brand can summon entire genres of music composed or curated for the background: Muzak.[4] Muzak refers to a more or less arbitrary range of musical styles whose operative elements could be reduced to tempo and rhythm. In Lefebvrian terms, Muzak becomes the metronome that displaces the rhythmanalytical idea of body-as-metronome. In workplaces, Muzak's famed "stimulus progression" programming was designed to use ascending patterns in rhythm and tempo to counter, minute-for-minute, the "Industrial Efficiency Curve," that is, the psychology and physiology of worker fatigue.[5] Its off-work programming (which went 24/7 as of January 1942, decades before cable and satellite television) was designed to relax and soothe in domestic environments (and was even proven effective in slaughterhouses), as well as to create upbeat commercial spaces for boosted sales.[6] Muzak re-cast music as a temporal design element that would impose an external pulse on the inner rhythms that traverse work and personal life.

4. See Joseph Lanza's ironically laudatory account in *Elevator Music: A Surreal History of Muzak®, Easy-Listening, and Other Moodsong®* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004). But this history is surely more complicated. Indeterminate music (e.g., John Cage) and ambient music (e.g., Brian Eno) have been influential in much experimental art music and raised serious aesthetic questions about performance, instrumentation and listening. I am here making a heuristic distinction between such "art" music that speaks to, complicates or problematizes how we listen aesthetically vs. music that is used contextually in ways that disinvite our conscious, attentive engagement with it or reflection on it.

5. It is worth noting that Anson Rabinbach's exhaustive (no pun intended) cultural history of fatigue in the 19th and early 20th century concludes with his assertion that after World War II the technoscientific paradigm of the productivist human body (including techniques to enhance productivity and minimize fatigue) came to an end. It is likely that the science of sleep (just gaining legitimacy in the post-war era) as well as the work-enhancing powers of Muzak stepped in to fill the void left by the long 19th century's materialist, positivist conception of the body at work. See Rabinbach, *The Human Motor* (1990).

6. On 24/7 programming, see Lanza, p. 45. On the use of Muzak in agribusiness, Lanza cites a 1973 *Rolling Stone* article: "'There was a situation when the National Stockyards in Illinois had too many 'dark cutters,' which happens when the release of adrenalin makes the blood congeal and the meat turn. They put the Muzak in and it calmed the cattle as they went to the hereafter'" (152). On Muzak as a sales booster, see Sterne (1997).

In the 1980s, Muzak shifted from the "stimulus progression" model to "quantum modulation," that is, apparent changes in tempo, rhythm and musical "colour" that in fact conceal a plateau of affective intensity (Sterne 1997; Goodman 2010). Muzak, in other words, sought to manipulate workers/consumers directly at the level of affect, to manufacture a mood, rather than discipline a body. The way to overcome the bodily and mental limits of worker/consumer inertia was to bypass them altogether and directly target the more pervasive and profound level of affect. For Goodman, this amounts to a shift from a disciplinary society to a neoliberal society of control, and it manifests itself in sonic terms by the deployment of strategies of sonic branding (viral audio, hooks and earworms) that are meant to operate below the threshold of conscious listening. Such branding is not meant to sell particular products (as "jingles" did in the past), or even to facilitate acts of consumption (as Muzak in shopping malls sought to do). Rather it seeks to "catalyze the [very] motivation to consume," to create sonic and affective associations between virtual consumers and brands that will coalesce in the not-too-distant capitalist future (145).

What is crucial here for my purposes is that this turn signifies an alternate, non-screen-based version of the 24/7 working-listening-sleeping day-night. The eye's dislodgment from the optical field does not precede, but may even have been produced by, the ear's dual dislodgement from auditory and attentive processes. Precisely because the ear is always "open," it is fair to say it is also always filled or occupied, either by ubiquitous music in public; music selected for us by streaming services (which can traverse public/private space with the use of blue-tooth enabled headphones); or music that we hear in our heads, virally and hallucinatorily, as earworms. Such conditions effectively abolish the possibility of "appropriated time" because the affective and cognitive rhythms of capitalism predominate even and especially when they are not acoustically present. It is no accident that Goodman's chapter on "The Earworm" begins with a literary epigraph about a sleeper awoken by a sound he heard literally *in* his sleep. The earworm is heard in and by the sleeping brain not only when conscious listening is suspended, but in the absence of any actual acoustic stimuli. Unlike some nocturnal ambient sound that makes its way into the texture of a dream, the earworm heard by the "always on" sleeper/listener is a processing artefact of a brain played like an instrument, or instrumentalized, by predatory sonic branders. The actual production of "music for sleeping" and other sonic sleep aids in the early 21ˢᵗ century would merely be the formalization of a colonization of sleeping that already occurred as a colonization of listening in the background music and sonic virality of the 20ᵗʰ century.

There is a curious temporal and causal logic to this model of sonic-affective flow: affect is conceived of as *pre*-mediating a range of responses and working unilaterally and *toxically*, that is, affecting listeners as a diffuse, largely unperceived, and ultimately noxious technocultural environment. But if that is the case, then what are we to make of the so(m)niferous media examples I introduce at the beginning of the essay, in which attention-grabbing social media content is re-purposed as auditory (non-)stimulus for sleeping? Do such examples prove my point that 24/7 culture has achieved its predominance primarily as an *auditory* culture, and only belatedly as a culture of networked screens and bleary eyeballs? Or do they suggest a potential counterlogic within 24/7, in which the auditory might open up some time in daily-nightly life for the production of counter-rhythms, in which something like a "certain" moment of Lefebvrian "appropriated time" might coincide with the time of sleep?

Sonic affect appears to be a one-way street, which divides listening into a primary, non-conscious process of susceptibility or vulnerability to affective modulation, and a secondary process of conscious, rational listening that tries, and usually fails, to catch up with affective flows already in progress. Steve Goodman writes, "Before the activation of causal or semantic, that is, cognitive listening, the sonic is a phenomenon of contact and displays, through an array of autonomic responses, a whole spectrum of affective powers" (2010: 10). On a similar note, Annahid Kassabian, in *Ubiquitous Listening*, notes that the listening subject is not prior to the act of listening, but is rather a residue left behind by the flow of affect (qua sound or vibration) through a body. A key example of that affective flow is her description of watching a commercial for long-distance calling plans for mobile phone service. The ad depicts families or couples separated by great distances, yet happily and meaningfully connecting with each other on their cell phones (and taking advantage of the great deal on this calling plan, etc.). Kassabian describes watching the commercial at a moment in her life of separation from family and loved ones, with her eyes instantly welling up with tears at the sentimental imagery and music of the ad, an affective response that is subsequently quashed when the critical-rational aspect of her listening self kicks in and understands the ad for the manipulative piece of commercial posturing that it is. What is crucial here is that affect consistently precedes and frames, and usually contaminates, cognitive listening. Affect, like sound, can move faster than the speed of thought, and consciousness and self are usually lagging behind the prior work of affect.

A similar temporal gap is of increasing interest in recent work on cognition that explores the interactions between conscious thought and what N. Katherine Hayles calls the cognitive unconscious (2017). The human cognitive unconscious refers to all the information processing carried out by the nervous system "to keep consciousness, with its slow uptake and limited processing ability, from being overwhelmed with the floods of interior and exterior information streaming into the brain every millisecond" (10). Hayles examines how cognition is distributed across a range of conscious and nonconscious processes in the human nervous systems, and this raises, for me, an interesting implication for the science of sleep: can sleep be conceived of as the temporal-cognitive lag in which non-conscious processes supervene to help catch consciousness up with the informational (for Hayles) and affective (for me) flows that traverse the body? Here I suggest that nonconscious experience of sleep is akin to a kind of nonconscious affective listening, that is, to an opening-up of the body and mind to the perception and processing of nonconscious affects. This would mean that sleep, like listening, is a kind of cognition (albeit a nonconscious one), in which the brain is engaged in informational work that does not require, or is in fact hindered by, the deliberation of consciousness. Sleep's nonconscious cognition would include the processing of all the noise of 24/7 sonic capitalism in addition to attending to the sound "itself" of sleep, insofar as we can understand sleep metaphorically/literally as sound *qua* the phased modulation of the brain waves recorded by the EEG. As a form of non-conscious cognition and non-attentive listening, sleep would thus be constantly catching up and recalibrating itself according to the internal and external information that, in principle, exceeds it, streaming across our nervous systems 24/7, and leaving us with only 8 hours a day (optimistically) to keep up. From this perspective, sleep would cease to be a slowing down of body and mind, a rhythmical pause or caesura of conscious and cognitive life; instead sleep would be an acceleration, a bodily speed-up to adjust and adapt to a 24/7 flow of biological and affective information. Sleep would thus be enfolded into the anti-rhythm of the 24/7 information economy, with its imperative of constant connectivity and its promise of an asymptotally receding up-to-date-ness.

This brings me back to my media examples from the beginning of the essay and the strange logic of attention-grabbing media-turned-sleep-aid. I view this ethnographic approach as not only a total contradiction to the spirit of *24/7* as sketched out by Crary, but also as a necessary continuation of that research. The *24/7* model, as the predominant critique of a capitalist

mediascape whose implications are as far-reaching for the current moment as a book like *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was for the 1930s and 1940s, not only invalidates, but, for me, paradoxically *invites* some consideration of the possibilities of individual variation within the generalized socio-technical and economic condition described in the book. 24/7 may exert a relatively homogenous coercive pressure on all neoliberal subjects of a global capitalist regime, but this does not necessarily exhaust the potential of differential responses to that pressure in the form of daily-nightly practices and lived experience. One of the curious responses I have *transduced* in my ethnographic work is precisely the curious attentional logic around so(m)niferous media that converts affectivity to unconsciousness; listening to sleeping; and rest into a mode of work. Let me now return to those paradoxical examples from the start of this piece, and suggest a concept of "attention masking" to describe this so(m)niferous practice.

I was struck by how many of the interviewees explicitly avoided more conventional noise machines, sonic apps and devices designed to soothe affectively and gradually lull the mind to sleep. Instead, sleepers sought out sonic material that would engage attention and facilitate not paying attention simultaneously. Rather than sound being enlisted to curate an ambience or atmosphere conducive to sleep, sound is called upon to make ambience disappear into a single focal point of mediated attention that functions like an on/off switch for the waking state. Here is what one interviewee, Beatrice, had to say on this point:

> But right now, and for the past few years, [to get to sleep], I need to hear people talking. So what that is for me is usually podcasts, or YouTube videos, commentary videos or people just having conversations, something I don't need to engage in, but something that just acts as some kind of background talking. [The content] matters a little bit, […] like, for example, I have tried audio books, [but] I can't [fall asleep to that] because I think that['s] something that I need my brain to engage in, to understand the story. But for podcasts, the kinds of things I listen to… it's mainly conversational, so it's very passive, so I don't really need to engage in it. Yeah, I fall asleep to that very quickly.

Beatrice goes on to describe a particular effect of listening to the same podcast multiple times, where the familiarity of the story ("I was stolen at birth to cover up Chernobyl") lends it a soporific effect of a particular kind. The repeated listening does not dial down the spoken content to the affective textural materiality of the voice, the "grain of the podcast" as it were. Rather, knowing the story in advance makes it possible both to follow the story attentively and *not to pay attention* to it at the same time:

"I like it better when I'm relistening as opposed to listening for the first time because […] I know what happens, so I can kind of tune it out a little more, without worrying about the story." And when I asked Beatrice if listening to voices talking in a language she didn't understand would have the same soporific effect, she said, "I haven't tried it, but I don't think so because I have to partially engage in it […]. I *do* need to understand what I'm listening to."

Another interviewee, Khaled, spoke to a similar paradox of sound engaging and de-activating attention simultaneously. Khaled works in audio production and considers himself to have an undiagnosed case of attention-deficit disorder. So sound is a key trigger of affective and cognitive responses for him, activating his mind and his professionally trained listening *habitus* on a number of levels. On the transition to sleep through listening, he says:

> In order to get to that point where I can shut down and not think about anything, I find that I need to almost drown out everything that's going on in my head with background noise. So most people would usually, you know, maybe listen to calming music, or some alpha waves or something like that. For me, I usually fall asleep to videos, sports debates, maybe movies, something where there's dialogue, so that the internal dialogue that I have in my brain kind of shuts down because I don't have space to interpret that alongside everything else that's happening.

Khaled explicitly avoids the ostensibly soothing effects of lo-fi beats, meditation music, white noise, etc. because they create too much mental space for his thoughts. He often refers to his thought patterns and attention in acoustic terms: his thoughts are "loud" and need to be "drowned out" with correspondingly loud media. Likewise, ambient sound apps or noise machines create too much space in which his thoughts "resonate" or are "amplified" in the diffuse sonic background. Yet, curiously, the attention overload of a crowd of sports commentators in vociferous debate about the perennial Lebron/Jordan GOAT question seems to lull the attention to sleep precisely because it is so acoustically strident.

I call this curious logic "attention masking," playing on the concept of sound masking, which involves covering up intrusive or unwanted environmental sounds with more desirable, or at least neutral, sounds.[7] Sound scholars from R. Murray Schafer to Alex Blue V. (2017) to Mack Hagood (2019) have described the limitations of sound masking practices

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7.   For a technical discussion of the acoustics, physiology, and communicative and design possibilities of sound masking, see "Mask" (Augoyard and Torgue 2005: 63–77).

because they don't address root causes of undesirable sound, offering only temporary, fragile solutions that reinforce the conditions they mask (respectively pollution, racism, and ableism in Schafer's, Blue V.'s and Hagood's accounts). The personalized ambience of sound masking ambivalently reconciles individual users to (racially or ecologically) toxic environments and to the constant pressures of the neoliberal information economy which they, as individuals, ultimately lack the agency to resist. The sonically remediated individual is ambivalently empowered to tolerate an environment that is socially or ecologically inhospitable.

Attention masking for sleep preserves the ambivalence of sound masking, but changes the logics of sound and listening with it. In attention masking, would-be sleepers are *not* using sound media to mask noisy environmental sounds in order to create a sleep-conducive ambience. In fact, sleep seems to be deliberately disregarded as a desirable state, or object, or ambience. Attention masking means using sound as deliberate *non-ambience* to engage attention *away* from sleep, deferring sleep while paradoxically defining it as a (non-)attentional state which attentive listening facilitates. Sleep, then, becomes an auditory process that the listener will both ignore and succumb to.

Mack Hagood, in *Hush: Media and Sonic Self-Control*, has written about such shifts in attention in terms of phenomena like tinnitus and techniques like noise-cancellation, arguing how "empty" media are nevertheless implicated in questions of attention, affect and self-control:

> Studying the widespread use of media without content shifts our attention to *the ability to shift attention itself*—the abilities to see or not see, feel or not feel, and hear or not hear that media afford, moving the site of our analysis from the phenomena of media representations to the phenomenological and ontological affordances of media technologies and protocols. (22)

What the listening practices of my interviewees suggest is an internal transformation of the self-regulatory function of sound media in Hagood's account, in which noise masking is stood on its head. In the attention masking practices of the particular mediascape that my interviewees inhabit, it is attention itself that has become noise: scattered, irregular, haphazard, without pulse, without rhythm. Hence the need for attention masking, fighting "bad" attention with "good" attention, or homeopathically adding more "bad" attention to the system to activate the system's internal defense mechanisms, or short-circuit it altogether. In attention masking, attention primes a sensory and physiological response that maintains both

attentive engagement and a kind of "mere" listening to sounds that are indistinguishable from the sound of sleep.

It is ironic that such a practice of attention masking is transduced precisely around the attention-commodifying artefacts of digital capitalism (social media posts, YouTube videos, etc.), and this irony marks, for me, such attention-masking practices with a kind of ambivalence. Can we think of attention masking in relation to notions of quiet and sovereignty, as Alex Blue V. (expanding on the work of Kevin Quashie) has suggested of black subjectivity, noise and quietness (2017)? Do attention maskers subvert the commodity logic of social media content and the incessant incursions of its rhythms into our conscious and unconscious lives, carving out a space where attention can just rest, and just be? Is there a potential politics of (non-)attention tied to the politics of sleep, revealed in shared moments of what Lefebvre imagined as "appropriated time"?[8] Or are such attention-masking practices simply the proof of an absolute lack of alternatives and of the subjugation of the night, and the need to sleep, to the rhythmic beat of the attention economy? If I am unable to resolve such ambivalences for now, I have at least transduced a new field of interaction in sound, sleep and media where those questions can resonate.

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8.   A range of contemporary artists are exploring the political possibilities of rest as resistance in an emerging anti-24/7 aesthetics/politics, among them Jenny Odell, Nap Ministry, Mendi + Keith, and the Bureau of Noncompetitive Research. Josie Roland-Hodson's "Rest Notes: On Black Sleep Aesthetics" explores key connections between race, sleep and politics in contemporary Black arts.

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