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# Listening with Insomnia

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### Article abstract

Insomnia is a disturbance of sleep, an “alarm bell”—or a signal to be listened to. This paper follows this signal to investigate what it means to “listen with insomnia” rather than against it (listening to fall asleep for future productivity). Through the analysis of the curatorial project *Freedom of Sleep* (21 April–16 May 2021), and my own experience of insomnia, which was the basis of the project, I develop a framework for listening *with* insomnia as a political practice. To this end, I draw on ideas of anxiety as a virtue and on the queer feminist theory of multi-level listening to positively reframe the common understanding of insomnia as an alarm bell. Rather than being seen as a depletion or a deficiency, “listening with insomnia” contributes to understanding insomnia as a resource, as an epistemology (a way of knowing).

# Listening with Insomnia

ANABELLE LACROIX

**“FATIGUE NOT AS EMPTY BUT AS OPEN.”<sup>1</sup>**

N ighttime as an “experience of listening anxiously and continuously”<sup>2</sup> feels familiar to those who cannot sleep. In darkness, the world is revealed by sound—it makes sense of the world we cannot see. The sound of the clock ticking situates the alarm in my room and gives a felt presence to the strict regulation of time that governs human experience. Insomniac, I am a listener. Awake, I am listening rather than sleeping with the aid of sleep tablets whose side effects are worse than insomnia. Commonly understood as an alarm bell, insomnia is a signal that something is wrong. For cultural historian Lee Scrivner, insomnia is produced by a modernity that is awakened by its shortcomings. Modernity was also produced by insomnia through the empowerment of nighttime in the artistic avant-gardes.<sup>3</sup> From a medical perspective, the alarm bell is understood as an “adaptive response” to stress and anxiety.<sup>4</sup> By insomnia, I refer to the modern medical condition defined as a real, or perceived, lack of sleep that has an impact on one’s daily activities. As

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1. Tom Melick, *A Little History of Fatigue*, Sydney, Rosa Press, 2021, p. 27.

2. Alain Montandon et Sylvain Ledda (dir.), *Les voix de la nuit*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2021, p. 28.

3. Lee Scrivner, *Becoming Insomniac: How Sleeplessness Alarmed Modernity*, London, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014. Avant-gardes such as the Surrealists, Futurists, as well as many writers celebrated sleepless nights.

4. This includes post-traumatic stress as well stress and anxiety not linked to a specific event but a broader concern about society. Luc Staner, “Sleep and anxiety disorders,” *Dialogues Clinical Neuroscience*, September 2003, vol. 5, no. 3, p. 249–258.

such, it impacts both day and nighttime. Insomnia is a disturbance of sleep, due to a difficulty in falling asleep or staying asleep, or when sleep is not restful. One non-medical treatment for insomnia is to focus on the act of listening to fall asleep.<sup>5</sup> To explore insomnia, however, from the angle of wakefulness rather than sleep is to perform a radical opening of insomnia instead of foreclosing its experience. From this angle, wakefulness is rooted in the tradition of philosophical vigilance and political resistance at night—when sleep is politically impossible, or a situation cannot wait—and in the history of warfare, with sleep deprivation being a form of torture.

I disrupt a “sleep positive agenda”<sup>6</sup> with its unproblematic rhetoric of sleep as a promise to boost wellbeing and productivity. Contributing to a critical understanding of how sleep is governed and politicised, this paper shifts the understanding of insomnia and fatigue from its framework of depletion.<sup>7</sup> Not only limited to the human body, insomnia is often costed in economic terms—as a loss of GDP. For this reason, issues with sleep have become an area of economic priority for governments<sup>8</sup> and a “public health epidemic” that affects approximately 40 percent of the population in the western world, and particularly those with lower income.<sup>9</sup> In the extractivist model of our late capitalist society, sleep is a resource for productivity. However, periods of wakefulness at night, such as during insomnia, were not always considered to be an illness and deficiency. Listening in the middle of the night was practised as part of

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5. This is critical research in relation to sound and insomnia that is beyond the scope of this paper. See for example: Heenam Yoon and Hyun Jae Baek, “External Auditory Stimulation as a Non-Pharmacological Sleep Aid,” *Sensors (Basel, Switzerland)*, no. 3, 2022, p. 1264; Iwaki Tatsuya, Hideki Tanaka and Tadao Hori, “The Effects of Preferred Familiar Music on Falling Asleep,” *The Journal of Music Therapy* 40, no. 1, 2003, p. 15–26.

6. Simon J. Williams, *The Politics of Sleep: Governing (Un)consciousness in the Late Modern Age*, London Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 21.

7. Jonathan Sterne, *Diminished Faculties: a Political Phenomenology of Impairment*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2021, p. 183.

8. Marco Hafner, Martin Stepanek, Jirka Taylor, Wendy M. Troxel, and Christian Van Stolk, *Why Sleep Matters—the Economic Costs of Insufficient Sleep: A Cross-country Comparative Analysis*, Santa Monica, CA, RAND Corporation, 2016.

9. This was declared in 2014 following research by the The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC); Ginger Pinholster, “Sleep Deprivation Described as a Serious Public Health Problem,” *AAAS Igniting Proress for The Next 175*, 14 March 2014, <https://www.aaas.org/news/sleep-deprivation-described-serious-public-health-problem> (accessed 6 June 2023) and Saverio Stranges et al., “Sleep Problems: an Emerging Global Epidemic? Findings from the INDEPTH WHO-SAGE Study Among more than 40,000 Older Adults from 8 Countries Across Africa and Asia,” *Sleep*, vol. 35, no. 8, 2012, p. 1173–1181.

day-to-day life prior to the industrial revolution.<sup>10</sup> Two periods of sleep, with a first and second sleep—or morning sleep—were punctuated by a period of wakefulness that was rich in activities, such as the reciprocal telling of dreams.<sup>11</sup> Across cultures, nighttime is traditionally a time for orality, for talking and listening.<sup>12</sup> What is the potential of listening at night when wakefulness is embraced rather than endured? In other words, to listen “with” insomnia rather than against it? Or, put differently, why loosen the grip of insomnia when we can tighten our ears?

Insomnia cannot be generalised, and many experiences and medical conditions have specificities that co-exist. Here I draw from my own experience of insomnia at night, and similar experiences by artists in the exhibition *Freedom of Sleep* (21 April–16 May 2021),<sup>13</sup> to speculate on what we might learn from insomnia as a material, as an agent, and as a worldview. While insomnia is not exclusively nocturnal, experiences of insomnia reflect on dominant temporalities that regulate the 24/7 society. By investigating wakefulness in a society that is already beyond sleep, *Freedom of Sleep* aimed at challenging the idea of sleep as a resource and refuge, promoted by the wellness industry, and sleep as resistance—as the last frontier to capitalism.<sup>14</sup> Inspired by experiences of insomnia, *Freedom of Sleep* explored desynchronization between bodies and society, arguing for a reconsideration of life’s rhythm outside of the traditional binaries of sleep and wakefulness, day and nighttime.

To investigate the potential of listening with insomnia, I first consider the qualities of listening in darkness. To explore nighttime listening is also to acknowledge its difference with listening during daytime, sonically and politically. This is explored in the work of Méryll Ampe in a sound installation with low frequency bass and sonic textures that enhance the specificities of listening in the dark with, and beyond, the ear. Insomnia becomes an agent for listening acoustically through sound and non-

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10. Insomnia appeared in the medical field as a medical problem during the mid-nineteenth century. Gaspard Aebischer and Philip Alexander Rieder, “Awaking Insomnia: Sleeplessness in the 19th Century through Medical Literature,” *Medical Humanities*, vol. 46, no. 3, 2020, p. 340–347.

11. Roger A. Ekirch, *At Day’s Close: Night in Times Past*, New York, Norton, 2005, p. 301–306.

12. Nighttime listening appears as a distinctive genre in literature, as a narrative trope and power to the imagination. Alain Montandon, *Dictionnaire Littéraire de la Nuit*, Paris, Honoré Champion, p. 841.

13. *Freedom of Sleep* (21 April–16 May 2021) at Fondation Fimenco, Paris, <https://freedomofsleep.online> (accessed 27 August 2023).

14. This idea underpins Jonathan Crary’s critique of the 24/7 in Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, London, Verso, 2014.



Figure 1. Alona Rodeh, *The New Moon in the Old Moon's Arms*, site-specific installation at Fondation Fimincio as part of the exhibition *Freedom of Sleep*, 21 April–16 May 2021. © Martin Argyroglou.

acoustically with vibrations and sonic imagination. I turn to the drawing practice of Aodhan Madden and Rosie Isaac to expand on non-acoustic listening with psychologist and philosopher Charlie Kuth's concept of listening to anxiety as a virtue.<sup>15</sup> I also draw on Gloria Anzaldúa's notion of multi-level listening as a rhythmic balance between listening to the self and the other to explore the ethical aspects of listening with insomnia. Considering insomnia as a virtue rather than something to be suppressed, and as a material in the work of the artist, I turn to the philosophies Emil Cioran and Emmanuel Levinas, for whom insomnia holds an epistemic position. Insomnia may be a way of knowing the world and a form of accountability. As such, Insomnia, through multi-level listening, can be apprehended as a constituent material rather than a disease and a depletion and as an epistemology that may allow for positive orientations and reorientations of the self and the collective.

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15. Charlie Kurth, *The Anxious Mind: An Investigation into the Varieties and Virtues of Anxiety*, Cambridge, London, The MIT Press, 2018.

*Freedom of Sleep* was an exhibition and public program that took place at Fondation Fiminco on the grounds of a former pharmaceutical plant in the eastern suburbs of Paris. It was one part of an ongoing curatorial investigation on the implications of the desynchronisation between our bodies and society. The curatorial project is grounded in my own experience of not sleeping—having chronic insomnia—which provided a basis for exploring the potential of desynchronous mechanisms, for rethinking rhythms and routines. In this project, I use the term desynchrony—a state of not being in synchronisation—with the prefix de- meaning “out of” to assert a process of undoing, of falling out of a dominant rhythm.<sup>16</sup> The exhibition combined different aspects of this topic, exploring our relationship to time, labour, normativity and darkness through a large collective project.<sup>17</sup> For the purpose of this essay, however, I will focus on how “listening with insomnia” in the exhibition created sonic agency and allowed an understanding of insomnia as an epistemology.

From an understanding of listening occurring “with” and beyond ear, both acoustically and non-acoustically, the curation of the exhibition included all forms of media, such as installations, video, drawing, and performance. In this paper, I focus on the sound installation *One Night* (2021)<sup>18</sup> by Méryll Ampe, situated in its own gallery space above the main hall, and a series of drawings by Rosie Isaacs and Aodhan Madden titled *Brain Blankets* (2021)<sup>19</sup>, placed in the first gallery upon entering the exhibition. I focus on these works because they were commissioned works that responded closely to the curatorial premise and were born from the artists’ own experience of insomnia. Both artworks complement one another as sonic and non-sonic works that support an understanding of listening to insomnia beyond the auditory. An attention to sound and listening was materialised at the centre of main hall of the exhibition by a listening space delimited by four speakers on stands and seating arrangements that were reconfigured for performances and

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16. Desynchrony is synonymous with asynchrony that is more commonly used.

17. The curatorial project included over 30 artists across installations and performative works, with new commissions and a selection of existing artworks.

18. Méryll Ampe, *One Night*, site-specific sound installation with speakers, subwoofers and mattresses, 12 m x 6 m, Fondation Fiminco, Romainville, 2021.

19. Aodhan Madden & Rosie Isaac, *Brain Blankets*, mix materials on paper, 200 x 200 cm, Fondation Fiminco, Romainville, 2021

public programs to host audiences in different listening situations.<sup>20</sup> Leaving a large section of exhibition space flexible, this listening zone operated in two ways: as a space for focused attention on sound and listening; and as a space for sitting, meeting, and talking among audiences and school groups (see Fig. 2). The entire exhibition was always filled with sounds and their reverberations across the open space of the main hall, as well as in the other gallery spaces.<sup>21</sup> Listening with insomnia thus took place as an experience across the entire exhibition.



Figure 2. Listening space as part of *Freedom of Sleep* at Fondation Fimincio, 21 April–16 May 2021, curated by Anabelle Lacroix. © Martin Argyroglo.

20. The 15-meter-high hall used to be the factory's boiler room. The listening space presented a range of sound artworks, such as a slow and subtle song by Félicia Atkinson, a voice-filled piece by Geoff Robinson recorded upon waking and falling asleep, and a work by Clare Milledge and Tom Smith that filled the large industrial space like a cathedral. Artworks mentioned are: Félicia Atkinson, *If There Is No Where*, 2020, 10'32 min; Clare Milledge & Tom Smith, *Strigiformes: Binocular*, 2017, 10'50 min and Geoff Robinson, *I Am Asleep in Your Night Yet to Come*, 2020, 17'02 min.

21. The exhibition was composed for 3 floors with several gallery rooms. Video and sound works were arranged to consider sound bleed as an enhancing experience that created a soundtrack to the exhibition as a whole.



## QUALITIES OF NIGHTTIME LISTENING

In Méryll Ampe's sound installation *One Night*, the audience was invited to lie down on single mattresses placed in the centre of a dark space in between two subwoofers (speakers designed for low-frequency sounds) and two speakers (see Fig. 3). The darkness experienced in the installation, with its blacked-out window, points to listening in one's bedroom.<sup>22</sup> *One Night* brings forth the specificities of nighttime listening, facilitated by the physical properties of sound as well as the poetic aspects of the night. Sound textures are amplified, and the air is more homogeneous as the colder temperature allows sound to travel further, enhancing sonic qualities in a quieter environment. As early radio makers and historians of nighttime radio have noted, listening at night is distinctively different than during the day; it may be eerie and uncanny. Sounds are more accessible to the ear, and one's own attention is different when removed from the obligations of daytime business and care. For broadcaster José Artur, who points to the specificity of listening to the radio during the dark hours, "daytime radio is heard while nighttime radio is listened to."<sup>23</sup> With radio and other media, listening at night has greater intensity, physically and psychologically, with the quality of voices and sounds bringing presence in the solitude of the wakeful night.<sup>24</sup> Ampe's installation also speaks to a tradition of concert performance in the dark to enhance acousmatic listening—listening to sound when its source is invisible, sound is released from its visual signifier. For me, listening to *One Night* felt like listening with the entire body, whereby the boundaries of my body dissolved, as when I "listen with insomnia." Limits between the self and sound disappear.

In *One Night*, listening with insomnia is beyond the eardrum, it is a sounding. For musicologist Nina Sun Eidsheim, listening is always sounding, a vibrational practice that involves all organs.<sup>25</sup> Méryll Ampe's composition immersed the audience in an experience of "listening with insomnia" and with all organs. The practice of listening started with the artist's own insomnia. As such, the work speaks *from* the artist's experience of insomnia rather than making art *about* the condition. The artist

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22. The installation wasn't experienced in full darkness but rather in a darkened space, with a small amount of light coming from a small, distant and unreachable skylight.

23. Marine Beccarelli, *Micros de Nuit : Histoire de la radio nocturne en France, 1945–2012*, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2021, p. 14. Translation by the author.

24. David Hendy, "Listening in the Dark," *Media History*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2010, p. 217.

25. Nina Sun Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2015.





Figure 3. Méryll Ampe, *One Night*, site-specific sound installation with speakers, subwoofers and mattresses, 12 x 6 m, Fondation Fiminco, Romainville, 2021. © Martin Argyroglo.

used low frequencies—or bass—to evoke several states of consciousness experienced during insomnia. Recordings captured reverb that was played back in the room and re-recorded. The feeling of disorientation and time distortion are reinforced by the work's site-specificity. Static, white noise, unfolded with incursions of other sound textures, such as rattling or sounds layered with a composition that was at times dragged, elongated, and durational or sometimes accelerated, which alluded to my own psychological and physical states during insomnia whereby restlessness spreads across body and mind. In the work, “listening with insomnia” was engaged through a sense of duration and attention to perception that was reinforced by the sonic composition and loop of the piece. *One Night* created a visceral experience of being outside of the linear rhythm of one's own body. With this sound piece, the artist brought to the fore the immediate environment of the audience as a factor of experience—the gallery space and its echoing feedback loops—in relation to the interior space of the listener. Listening as the mediator between the self and the environment was emphasised, creating a greater porosity that facilitated an attunement with what is not usually audible because of the dominance of bass and its material resonances.

*One Night* opens possibilities for understanding insomnia beyond the literal experience of listening during a time of unwanted wakefulness. As media theorist Eleni Ikoniadou argues, the use of non-audible sounds such as infra-bass creates an alternative mediated space that allows for the understanding of “the relationship between sound, body, space and machine” as being heterogeneous.<sup>26</sup> This space of listening brings forth a complexity of relations. The non-audible rhythmicity allows for a deeper understanding of insomnia’s relationship to time, as both a concept and method uncovering “the unfamiliar, inaudible and sometimes the unnamable.”<sup>27</sup> In the work of Méryll Ampe, a merging of spacetime conveys the phenomenological experiences of time stretch and compression, which I also experience during my own insomnia, and it is achieved by sonic means—and is political.

In *One Night*, the awareness of audience members to non-audible rhythmicity and its relationship to spaces, bodies, and machines generates a critique of the unbreakable structures of time and extractivist routines that are socially constructed. On the one hand, the title of the work suggests a distinctively nocturnal experience of insomnia and how it may be seen as dissolving structures that hold up daytime. Nighttime may offer a practice of “rewriting” daytime, as in urbanist Nick Dunn’s manifesto for the nocturnal city, which is demonstrated through night walking.<sup>28</sup> Structures of daytime traditionally operate along the binary division between day and night that was used to mark the division between labour, leisure, and sleep before the industrial revolution, and still regulates life in the dominant nine-to-five working day. Wakefulness at night through walking or listening during insomnia (outside of the activities of labour and consumption) contributes to stepping out of dominant temporalities. The non-audible and binary rhythm of day and night is challenged through the physical experience of the sound piece, as well as sound’s capacity to distort our experience of time by accelerating, stretching, and looping. In a clockwork world, shaping and reshaping our experience of time provides a space for resistance. This is what I have called a *practice of rhythming otherwise*.<sup>29</sup> Listening “with” sleeplessness is

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26. Eleni Ikoniadou, *The Rhythmic Event: Art, Media, and the Sonic*, Cambridge, London, The MIT Press, p. 2.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

28. Nick Dunn, *Dark Matters: A Manifesto for the Nocturnal City*, Winchester, Zero Books, 2016, p. 88.

29. Anabelle Lacroix, “Freedom of Sleep: A practice of rhythming otherwise,” Evelyn Wan (ed.), “Algo-rhythms: living in and out of synch with technology,” *Kunstlicht*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2022, p. 66–73.

here framed as a way of listening beyond the ear, of paying attention to rhythm, time, the body, and its environment.

Listening beyond the ear in Ampe's installation acquires a further meaning in clairaudience—or listening for sounds that are not present to the ear (listening that is beyond the ordinary sense).<sup>30</sup> Ampe's piece enhances the night's own sonic qualities and the specificity of listening in the dark, not only by paying attention to frequencies felt in the body, and to the wider scale of life rhythm, but also by stimulating sonic imagination. Acousmatic listening gives an uncanny feeling that is reinforced in Ampe's piece with the distortion of voice and spiralling reverb. When the bass intensified, the sound activated my own memories and wandering thoughts that are non-auditory. For David Toop, clairaudience opens to spectral and irrational realms, "listening then is a question of discerning and engaging what lies beyond the world of forms."<sup>31</sup> Such listening requires "a rejection of cultural norms"<sup>32</sup> because it requires listening to atmospheric sounds that are usually blocked out by established hierarchies of sounds as noise. Listening beyond the ear at night, Toop hears distant music, a resonance that makes present elements from the past. Nighttime here facilitates the exercise of listening to inaudible sounds to make present other narratives. Listening in the dark is not always a sinister resonance but stimulates auditory imagination. The characteristic of darkness to enhance sound and a sense of listening is intensified by waiting during the long hours of insomnia, stimulating auditory perception and sonic imagination to a point that becomes almost sublime. Listening transforms through imagination and listening to the self.

### **INSOMNIA AS AGENCY FOR MULTI-LEVEL LISTENING**

In the exhibition *Freedom of Sleep*, artists Aodhan Madden and Rosie Isaac explored insomnia through a collective drawing practice in a series of three works on paper titled *Brain Blankets* (2021).<sup>33</sup> The large, coloured works hung delicately from the wall, with marks of folds that were traces of the artwork's making as letters sent between the

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30. I take the concept of clairaudience from sound theorist and musician David Toop. Toop also uses his personal experience of listening to sounds in his house at night, "Listening Deeply to Sound and Silence," to develop an understanding of the nature of listening as a medium. David Toop, *Sinister Resonance: the Mediumship of the Listener*, New York, Continuum, 2010.

31. David Toop, 2010, p. viii.

32. *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

33. *Brain Blankets*, mixed techniques on paper, 200 x 200 cm, 2021.

artist studios in Paris, France and Melbourne, Australia throughout the pandemic (see Fig. 4.). The works resided with each of the artists for a period of time; they resulted from the implementation of their thoughts and experiences of insomnia on paper, like a nighttime diary. The title and dimensions of the works refer to “weighted blankets” that are used to relieve the feeling of anxiety at night. Weighted blankets speak about the technology of the self as it has been reappropriated by neoliberalism for perpetual self-optimization.<sup>34</sup> The artists’ nocturnal thoughts and anxieties included ruminations about greenwashing (with the inclusion of cut ups from ads for more sustainable cars), the role of media in conspiracy theories, the persistence of gender stereotypes, and entrepreneurial individualism. These drawings develop an aesthetic of anxiety about the intersecting conditions of neoliberal capitalism that is beyond language and outside pathological and medical frameworks.



Figure 4. Aodhan Madden & Rosie Isaac, *Brain Blankets*, mix materials on paper, 200 x 200 cm. Fondation Fiminc, Romainville, 2021. © Martin Argyroglo.

34. Han Byung-Chul, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and the New Technologies of Power*, London, Verso books, 2017, p. 28.

These works expose a practice of listening to the self, framing insomnia as an instrument for emotional attunement—or multi-level listening. To explore listening in their work, I turn to queer-feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldúa's practice of multi-level listening, which aims at reaching a rhythmic balance between truly listening to oneself and to others, including their needs.<sup>35</sup> Multi-level listening is, therefore, not centred on the self; it is internal as well as environmental, listening acoustically and non-acoustically, attuning to the inaudible. Multi-level listening is also a practice of care, an ethical standpoint. For Anzaldúa, who engaged in queer community justice as an activist, also working as a teacher, writer, and poet, to be right to others also includes listening to the self. Multi-level listening means negotiating a relational space—it keeps us in check with others and our environment's needs, as well as our own. This attuning is directed by one's own condition. For Anzaldúa, as a Chicana artist, it is to rewrite reality from an indigenous point of view, as such multi-level listening facilitates the creation of knowledge and a shift of reality's grip. As in Anzaldúa's writing, Madden and Isaac's works open space for concern rather than suppressing what troubles one's conscience in insomnia. With *Brain Blankets*, multi-level listening may help to deal with anxiety by recognising what prevents one from sleeping, opening a space for agency rather than foreclosing its experience by complying with diurnal society.

When provoked by anxiety, insomnia may be framed positively by considering the value of this emotion as an impetus for change and a moral compass.<sup>36</sup> In the work of Isaac and Madden, anxiety is rethought as the agent who speaks. As such, for philosopher Charlie Kurth, anxiety is a virtue that should be listened to, particularly when acting upon moral issues and making decisions. Drawing upon the writing of Martin Luther King Jr. and the abolitionist movement more broadly, Kurth demonstrates that having the anxious feeling that something is wrong triggers ethical questions that lead to action upon an issue. There are many different medical conditions and experiences of insomnia; however, considering anxiety in insomnia may help to re-evaluate it positively and provide an alternative understanding of the medical condition. Insomnia as a virtue in a society that is largely affected by trouble with sleep can resist existing stigmas around insomnia. Wakefulness can open political

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35. Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, Durham & London, Duke University Press, 2015.

36. Charlie Kurth, *The Anxious Mind: an Investigation into the Varieties and Virtues of Anxiety*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2018.

space and shift the locus from the individual to the collective. Isaac and Madden point to the construction of gendered roles in their work that are personal but refer to the working of society as a whole.

### **WAKEFULNESS AT NIGHT AS ACTIVISM**

Understanding insomnia from the angle of wakefulness rather than sleep highlights a long history of wakefulness at night as resistance in various forms of activism. Today, as sleep is considered preparation for work, embracing insomnia as resistance might mean embracing fatigue for hijacking productivity the next day. Wakefulness at night also provides a space for what is otherwise not possible during the day because of imperatives of work and care. This is a form of activism with time. For example, nighttime was crucial for self-education and social organising in proletarian movements.<sup>37</sup> Nighttime activism also involves direct action, with political insurgents and resisters being known as “those who do not sleep.”<sup>38</sup> This rings true during wartime like with the Second World War but also in the wake of feminist movement. Listening “with” rather than against insomnia may foster a political space of resistance.

A process of thinking with insomnia as a resource, as explored by multi-level listening in the work of Isaac and Madden, and recognising anxiety as virtue, finds an echo in the work of other insomniacs. The experience of insomnia is a feature of Emmanuel Levinas’ and Emil Cioran’s philosophies whereby insomnia is unescapable and becomes a prism for understanding the world. As such, insomnia may be seen as an epistemology—as a phenomenological source of knowledge-making. Not only seeing insomnia as a sight of insight, Lévinas developed his theory of just ethics from this experience.<sup>39</sup> For Lévinas, the emergence of subjectivity of being is beyond words and defined in the nocturnal space of listening in which “nothing responds to us but this silence.”<sup>40</sup> In this space, the subject only exists as a relational being that has a responsibility towards the other. As for Plato, wakefulness becomes a duty for doing

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37. Jacques Rancière, *La nuit des prolétaires : les archives du rêve ouvrier*, Paris, Éditions Fayard, coll. « Pluriel », 2012.

38. Jacqueline Mesnil-Amar, *Ceux qui ne dorment pas. Journal, 1944–1946*, Paris, Éditions Poche, 2010.

39. Emmanuel Lévinas, and Seán Hand (éd.), *The Levinas Reader*, Oxford, Cambridge, B. Blackwell, 1989, p. 29.

40. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Existence and Existents*, Alphonso Lingis (trans.), The Hague and Boston, Martinus Nijhoff, 1978, p. 58.

good.<sup>41</sup> In the work of Lévinas and Cioran, insomnia is also “hyperconsciousness,” a sensible way of knowing.<sup>42</sup> Cioran, who lost his sleep as a young adult, described himself roaming the silent streets of the small medieval town of Sibiu for hours on end: “What I thought in consequence and later composed was ‘born’ during those nights, [...] the nights of Sibiu became the source of my view of the world.”<sup>43</sup> The praise of insomnia—to borrow from Levinas’s eponymous book title—which underpins the understanding of insomnia as an epistemology, has to be measured and contrasted: “insomnia is a *vertiginous lucidity* that can convert paradise itself into a place of torture.”<sup>44</sup> The force of insomnia lies in this ambivalence, in its faculty to illuminate impasses and shortcomings as much as to challenge oneself through the darkest hours. Through Cioran and Levinas, the understanding of insomnia as something to be suppressed may be challenged by considering insomnia as a form of knowledge production, as a space for listening and for just ethics.

The Covid-19 pandemic helped bring attention to insomnia because of its impact on anxiety and sleep. However, insomnia remains taboo and overmedicalised, experienced as the slow violence of the 24/7 continuum, with its pressure to produce and perform. Like environmental devastation, insomnia is something to cope with and manage. If reclaiming sleep is, for some, the last frontier to capitalism, I suggest that embracing insomnia and its vertiginous lucidity can offer a space of resistance against the generalised numbing of consciousness of neoliberalism, which is killing any desire to take political action.<sup>45</sup> It means acknowledging anxiety as a virtue for tuning in to what may be morally dubious, questionable, and one’s own concern. “Listening with insomnia” is a practice of multi-level listening because we find the rhythmic balance between the relational back-and-forth of listening to the self and our environment. During insomnia, listening shapes a relationship with the world that is different than during the day. Considering Lévinas’ contribution to just ethics,

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41. For Plato, wakefulness at night was the philosopher’s duty for the wellbeing of citizens. Albert Joosse, “Nights of Insight: Plato on the Philosophical Qualities of the Night,” *The Values of Nighttime in Classical Antiquity*. Leiden. Brill. 2020.

42. Willis G. Regier, “Cioran’s Insomnia,” *MLN*, vol. 119, no. 5, 2004, p. 995.

43. Michel Jakob, E.M. Cioran and Kate Greenspan, “Wakefulness and Obsession: An Interview with E. M. Cioran,” *Salmagundi*, no. 103, summer 1994, p. 124.

44. Emil Cioran, *Sur les cimes du désespoir*, André Vornic (trans.), Paris, Éditions de L’Herne, 1990, p. 4. My emphasis.

45. This is expressed by Jonathan Crary as an “incapacitation” and homogenisation of consciousness. See Crary, 2014, p. 33; and Ivor Southwood, *Non-Stop Inertia*, London, Ropley, Hants, Zero Books, 2011.



his “horrifying silence” should rather be understood as the mechanisms of silencing, or that is the slow violence of the “normalised quiet.”<sup>46</sup> Insomnia cannot be fully grasped; it may be slow and long-lasting. This context, listening with insomnia as an exercise in multi-level listening during periods of unwanted wakefulness, may offer some respite for negotiating the self and its values, and further, as a way of knowing the world across day and nighttimes.

“Listening with insomnia” rather than against it becomes a political practice for those who cannot wait. Insomnia is one of those urgencies that encapsulates the contemporary violence of the hegemonic experience of routinised life. In exploring insomnia as an alarm bell, not as one to be suppressed for productivity but as positive, ethical, wake-up call, is to open an understanding of insomnia as an epistemology. The force of insomnia is its capacity to disturb and to stir. When possible, within the varied experiences of insomnia, when anxiety, uncertainty, and wakefulness are embraced rather than endured, insomnia can be generative. Rather than listening for sleep, listening “with” insomnia demands a tightening of the ear. Rather than sleep, wakefulness can activate a new conscience and launch a movement. Insomnia cannot let things rest—it requires a response.

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46. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, Paperback, 2011, p. 6.

# Listening with Insomnia

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## ABSTRACT:

Insomnia is a disturbance of sleep, an “alarm bell”—or a signal to be listened to. This paper follows this signal to investigate what it means to “listen with insomnia” rather than against it (listening to fall asleep for future productivity). Through the analysis of the curatorial project *Freedom of Sleep* (21 April–16 May 2021), and my own experience of insomnia, which was the basis of the project, I develop a framework for listening *with* insomnia as a political practice. To this end, I draw on ideas of anxiety as a virtue and on the queer feminist theory of multi-level listening to positively reframe the common understanding of insomnia as an alarm bell. Rather than being seen as a depletion or a deficiency, “listening with insomnia” contributes to understanding insomnia as a resource, as an epistemology (a way of knowing).

## RÉSUMÉ :

L'insomnie est une perturbation du sommeil, une « sonnette d'alarme », ou un signal à écouter. Cet article explore ce que signifie « écouter avec l'insomnie », plutôt que contre elle (écouter pour s'endormir pour une productivité future). À travers l'analyse du projet curatorial *Freedom of Sleep* (21 April–16 May 2021) et de ma propre expérience de l'insomnie, qui était à la base du projet, je développe un contexte pour écouter *avec* l'insomnie en tant que pratique politique. Pour y parvenir, je m'appuie sur les idées de l'anxiété en tant que vertu et sur la théorie féministe queer de l'écoute à plusieurs niveaux pour apporter une compréhension positive de l'insomnie comme une sonnette d'alarme. Plutôt que d'être vue comme un épuisement ou une carence, « l'écoute avec l'insomnie » contribue à comprendre l'insomnie comme une ressource, une épistémologie (une forme de savoir).

**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE :**

Anabelle Lacroix is a curator and PhD candidate at the University of New South Wales. Working with exhibitions, public programming, and radio, she is interested in the expanded fields of curating and writing, involving performance, sound, speech, and publishing. As part of her research on creating public programs she develops curatorial methods for sleepless bodies, for rhythming otherwise, as a form of institutional critique. She previously worked at Liquid Architecture and at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, as a curator for public programs.