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Bedtime Stories: Audiobooks, Podcasts, and Reading as Listening (and Sleeping)

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article se concentre sur le genre du « podcast pour s'endormir » en examinant la phénoménologie contradictoire qui nous mène à lire, écouter et s'endormir tout en même temps. La première partie catégorise l'écoute des livres audio et des podcasts comme une lecture aurale à travers une définition élargie de l'auralité et d'une logique du contrôle médiale. L'article propose ensuite le concept de la *lecture so(m)nifère* pour décrire le paradoxe de l'inattention audio-textuelle qui médiate l'expérience de s'endormir. À cet effet, le podcast *Sleep With Me* (2013) par Drew Ackerman sert d'exemple central. Enfin, l'article contextualise la lecture so(m)nifère des livres audio et des podcasts dans le discours de la littérature pour les enfants (en particulier les histoires au coucher), se posant des questions critiques sur la subjectivité des lecteurs so(m)nifères dans le *sleepscape* contemporain.

Bedtime Stories: Audiobooks, Podcasts, and Reading as Listening (and Sleeping)

JOSH DITTRICH

I n the last ten years, the popularity of audiobooks has grown exponentially, as millions of listeners everyday read novels, memoirs, biographies—indeed, every genre on the market—with their ears. Moreover, since podcasts are consumed using the same subscription services and devices as audiobooks and offer users an even more rapidly expanding array of content and customizable listening options, there is good reason to describe podcast listening as the same kind of *aural reading* as listening to audiobooks. As I argue in Part 1 of this essay, listening to podcasts and audiobooks activates a mode of attention and affords a degree of control over the flow of information which, from a medial perspective, is indistinguishable from reading text in print and on screen.

As much as audiobooks and podcasts have become part of a neoliberal model of mobile, multitasking productivity—making it “possible for you to read when your eyes are busy,” as Jeff Bezos remarked in 2013 when his online bookstore acquired the audiobook and podcast streaming service Audible¹—these audio materials have recently taken on the more traditional role of a bedtime story for many readers. Yet the nightly routine of falling asleep while reading an audiobook or reading a sleep-inducing “sleep podcast” (like Drew Ackerman’s *Sleep With Me*,² which I discuss in Part 2) vexes the medial status of such listening-as-reading. Re-purposing an audiobook into a sonic sleep aid or consuming the audio content of a sleep

1. Cited in Thy-Huong Ha, “America’s Unhealthy Obsession With Productivity Is Driving Its Biggest New Reading Trend,” *Quartz.Com*, 31 March 2017, <https://qz.com/924075/audiobook-readers-obsessed-with-multitasking-are-driving-americas-biggest-new-reading-trend> (accessed 5 November 2022).

2. Drew Ackerman, host and creator, *Sleep With Me*, produced by Night Vale Presents (podcast), MP3 audio, 2013–present, <https://www.sleepwithmepodcast.com/> (accessed 27 July 2023).

podcast that is meant precisely *not* to be listened to effects a fundamental change in the cognitive and attentional situation of the reader. Instead of actively attending to, and controlling the flow of, the narrative content, the reader's attention (and, perhaps, their status as subject or agent) fades into unconsciousness, and the matter of the story merges with the material texture of the sonic environment. In this way, the aural reading of a sleep podcast connects to the children's literary genre of the "going-to-bed book," which shifts textuality from a storytelling to an ambient mode. In the lulling rhymes of the going-to-bed book (be it a classic like Margaret Wise Brown's *Goodnight Moon* (1947)³ or an ironic rewriting like Adam Mansbach's *Go The Fuck To Sleep* (2011),⁴ both of which I discuss in Part 3), the sonorousness of the text pushes the narrative to the background of the reader's attention without necessarily replacing it with anything in particular in the foreground. Aural bedtime stories would seem to transform the reading of audiobooks and podcasts back into listening again, positioning readers as passive audience members of a quasi-radio-like broadcast whose phatic or companion-like function supersedes the specifics of whatever content it offers. Sleep, then, redistributes or remediates what counts as reading and listening and what counts as textual signal and background noise in bedtime's mediated soundscape.

In what follows I explore the contradictory phenomenology of reading and listening while falling asleep by: (1) making a case for audiobook and podcast listening as aural reading through a shared logic of self-control; (2) proposing a concept of *so(m)niferous reading* to describe the paradoxical mode of audio-textual attention that mediates the experience of going to sleep, even as sleep itself remediates the status of text and sound; and (3) contextualizing the contemporary audiobook/podcast version of *so(m)niferous reading* in the discourse of children's literature and bed-time stories. The top-down, go-to-sleep imperative that characterizes the history of parents reading bed-time stories to children helps to raise critical questions about the subjectivity and agency of *so(m)niferous* readers, which we might begin to hear in the contemporary mediated sleepscape.

3. Margaret Wise Brown, *Goodnight Moon* [1947], Illustrated by Clement Hurd, New York, Harper Collins, 2007.

4. Adam Mansbach, *Go The Fuck To Sleep*, illustrated by Ricardo Cortés, New York, Akashic Books, 2011.

I. AUDIOBOOKS, PODCASTS, AND AURAL READING

As much as contemporary debates on reading in literary and media studies rightly involve questions of machine reading, data mining, and artificial intelligence,⁵ I suggest that there is an equally compelling argument that considers reading and listening, or *reading as listening*, and examines the evolving medial, aesthetic, and attentional dimensions of reading as an aural process.

A recent study of audiobooks by Danish media and sound scholars Iben Have and Birgitte Stougard Pedersen identifies what the authors call the intersensoriality of audiobook reading, in which the text-based consumption of media content that *is* reading is not “just” visual, but acoustic and tactile.⁶ Borrowing from work on mobile listening, Have and Pedersen conduct interviews with audiobook readers who describe the “polyaesthetic” and synergistic relations between audiobook reading and the environment. In these interviews, the aural consumption of the narrative is enhanced by, and itself enhances, the listener’s experience of the mobile environment (while jogging, commuting, gardening, etc). Contrary to Michael Bull’s well-known work on iPod listening, which emphasizes the listener’s withdrawal from the environment into a customized, aestheticized bubble,⁷ Have and Pedersen show that listener attunement with text *and* environment is deepened by the intersensorial attentional engagement afforded by auditory reading. In a way, audiobooks remind us that human reading is an always embodied and environmentally situated act whose attentional scope and temporality are always shaped by all the senses at once and in constant interaction with the reader’s surroundings. The embodied and environmentally tuned “attentionality” of reading may well be *the* decisive indicator that reading is happening in the first place, with considerations of the medium of reading (print, screen, voice, etc.) subsequently contouring each individual “event” of

5. See, for example, the October 2022 conference “Reading Minds: Artificial Intelligence, Neural Networks, and the Reading Human” at the annual meeting of the Society for Literature, Science & the Arts, where I initially presented some of the ideas developed in this essay. How changing textual technologies affect the cognitive and attentive process we call reading is of course a foundational question in media studies. The rise of generative AI and neural networks re-orient that human problem in computational terms. N. Katherine Hayles’ work—especially *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2012 and *Postprint: Books and Becoming Computational*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2021—has been central in resituating the technical act of reading across such evolving human-technological couplings.

6. Iben Have and Birgitte Stougard Pedersen, *Digital Audiobooks: New Media, Users, and Experiences*, London, Routledge, 2016, p 12.

7. Michael Bull, *Sound Moves: iPod Culture and Urban Experience*, London, Routledge, 2007.

reading. In “What Should We Call Reading?,” Mara Mills writes, “Reading is an event that occurs between bodies, devices, symbols, and environments—if any of these vary, reading changes.”⁸ This non-medium-specific definition of reading seems at first too general to be analytically useful, but I show how the openness of media, senses, and abilities that Mills has in mind with this expanded definition helps to identify and study unique multimodal practices of reading (especially those at the threshold of waking and sleeping) that usually fall out of traditional studies of reading and literacy.

A recent PMLA issue devoted its “Theories and Methodologies” section to the topic of “Aurality and Literacy,” and those essays situate this embodied and intersensorial aspect of reading in a rich literary-historical context, spanning the ancient Mediterranean to the digital present. Christopher Cannon and Matthew Rubery, in their editorial introduction, write that aurality refers to “all the ways writing and hearing, the outlining of shapes and speaking, are interleaved in the production and dissemination of texts”⁹ and that “the concept of aurality calls for a literacy always attuned to the sonic dimensions of texts.”¹⁰ Textuality, then, would appear to be a multimodal and multisensorial phenomenon in its core, an interface between an inward, cognitive and imaginative process and the outward navigation of social reality that is both linguistic and environmental, and that resonates across the sounds on the page, the mind of the reader, and the clamor of the social world tuned in to (or tuned out of) via text. Such a social and environmental, that is, *aural* mode of textuality recalls the work of literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (conspicuously absent from the essays collected in “Aurality and Literacy”), whose entire theory of literature (heteroglossia) is talk-based, and for whom the practice of literary writing is an attempt to capture the texture, cadence, and unique ideological valences of *spoken* social languages, the complexity and spontaneity of which always exceed the ear (and hence the pen) of the writer.¹¹ It is well known that one of Bakhtin’s exemplary “heteroglossic” writers, Feodor Dostoevsky, dictated his novels—and in a crucial intermedial sense, writers don’t even need to write physically to be writers: they

8. Mara Mills, “What Should We Call Reading?,” *Flow*, 3rd December 2012, <https://www.flowjournal.org/2012/12/what-should-we-call-reading/> (accessed 4 June 2023).

9. Christopher Cannon and Matthew Rubery, “Introduction to ‘Aurality and Literacy’,” *PMLA* 135 no. 2, 2020, p. 351.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 353.

11. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” Michael Holquist (ed.), Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (trans.), *The Dialogic Imagination*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981, p. 259–422.

are highly sophisticated listeners and speakers. As Cannon and Rubery note, “The dictated text is the production of the poet or novelist as well as of a culture that is neither oral nor literate but fully and constantly both.”¹²

If literacy implies aurality not only in the production and dissemination of texts but also in their reception, then textuality’s listened-to-ness opens the possibility for media and sound scholars to expand what counts as reading, following the lines sketched out by Iben and Have above.¹³ I want to argue specifically that reading *reading* from the perspective of sound and media leads us to a definition of reading as a user-directed process of control, and self-control. In their essay “Aural Speed-Reading: Some Historical Bookmarks” (published in PMLA’s “Literacy and Aurality” issue),¹⁴ media scholars Jonathan Sterne and Mara Mills recount the media history of audiobooks and the emergent practice of aural speed-reading. Modern audiobooks were first developed by the American Foundation for the Blind in the 1930s, taking advantage of new recording technologies (like the gramophone) in order to expand the amount of reading material available to blind people, especially those who could not read braille and/or who became blind later in life (especially veterans).¹⁵ Sterne and Mills describe an anecdote shared by a man named Harvey Lauer, who, during his middle school years at the Wisconsin School for the Blind in the 1940s, would re-jigger the school’s record players to increase their playback speed, so he could read faster and get through his homework faster. This amateur hacking process was a precursor to the development of more sophisticated audio tools that allowed engineers to increase the playback rate of a recording without altering its pitch (and getting a “chipmunk effect”). The goal of mechanically separating pitch and playback rate to facilitate aural speed-reading for the blind culminated in a device called the Varispeech in 1972, which was also effectively the first instance of a pitch shifter, preceding Auto-Tune by more than 20 years.¹⁶

12. Cannon and Rubery, 2020, p. 352.

13. An important precursor to Iben and Have’s work is Matthew Rubery’s edited volume *Audiobooks, Literature and Sound Studies*, London, Routledge, 2011, which does crucial work in contextualizing and critiquing literary prejudices against audiobooks and legitimating audiobook *reading* as an object/practice of study in the first place.

14. Mara Mills and Jonathan Sterne, “Aural Speed-Reading: Some Historical Bookmarks,” *PMLA* 135, no. 2, 2020, p. 401–411.

15. Beyond the particular “bookmark” of audiobook history that Sterne and Mills offer in their essay, Matthew Rubery’s *The Untold Story of the Talking Book* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2016) offers a complete cultural history of the audiobook.

16. Mills and Sterne, 2020, p. 407.

The key point here is that young readers like Lauer, and other aural readers with specific academic and professional interests, did not want to be *audiences* for their books. They wanted to control the playback rate and be able to skip, skim, scan, and reread just like any reader of print or digital text. Existing audiobooks imposed a medial constraint through an aesthetic one: the norm of slow, theatrical recitation of (mostly) highbrow literature for entertainment or aesthetic contemplation made only one kind of reading possible for aural readers, which was in effect a form of ableism since blind readers were technically denied access to modes of reading available to sighted readers. Aural *speed*-reading thus “legitimated aural reading *as reading*, granting new tools of control over pace, search, and access.”¹⁷

For Sterne and Mills, reading means having control over what reading is in the first place, including control over the focus of attention, the flow of the content, and the points of access. Bracketing for now the host of contemporary literary-theoretical and philosophical questions around reading (close, distant, hyper, symptomatic, surface, machine, AI, etc.), we could provisionally describe reading as a medial process in which a reader-user controls their access to a flow of information and customizes the attentional and durational scope of that access (including speeding it up or slowing it down). Reading would designate an audio-textual process of searching and scanning that positions the reader as a user or agent controlling a textual environment. This situation, I suggest, bears medial affinities to what Mack Hagood calls “sonic self-control”: the use of audio media to control the self and regulate the acoustic and affective relations between self and environment.¹⁸ One of the crucial, and provocative, premises of Hagood’s book is not to study how we listen, read, or pay attention to media *content* but to study how media activate “the ability to shift attention itself—the abilities to see or not see, feel or not feel, and hear or not hear [...], moving the site of [...] analysis from the phenomena of media representations to the phenomenological and ontological affordances of media technologies and protocols.”¹⁹ Hagood devotes a chapter to the emergence of a sound-generating device in the nineteen-sixties meant to mask intrusive sounds and facilitate sleep (Jim Buckwalter’s Sleep-Mate), essentially a mechanical precursor to white noise apps of today. Such a device is paradigmatic of

17. *Ibid.*, p. 402.

18. Mack Hagood, *Hush: Media and Sonic Self-Control*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2019.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

sound media that do not communicate content so much as they afford “new electric means for altering the sonic shape of lived space.”²⁰ For Hagood, such media speak to the fragile autonomy of a neoliberal subject whose compulsory productivity is always beset by internal and external affective intrusions that must be managed through the use of noise-canceling or noise-masking media, that is, techniques and technologies of sonic self-control.

Although Hagood would surely not characterize noise-cancellation as a mode of reading, nor would Mills and Sterne describe aural speed-reading as emptying the medium of content (on the contrary!), what emerges in common in both instances is a structure in which a subjectivity consolidates its agency through sonic media. For Sterne and Mills, control over sound (via the altered playback techniques and devices involved in aural speed-reading) means new modes of access in an ableist mediascape; for Hagood, control over sound (as it fluctuates in intensity and intrusiveness in the lived environment) facilitates the ability to be productive (and indeed, interpellates sleep itself as a mode of productivity, a paradox I discuss in Part 3).

If we are defining reading, then, as a process of controlling a textual (or audio-textual) flow and constructing variable, intersensorial relationships between an embodied user-reader, a set of symbols, and a social, lived environment, is it fair to think of listening to a *podcast* (not just an audiobook) as reading? I want to suggest that listening to podcasts has the same aural reading structure as listening to audiobooks. Not only do listeners-readers access podcasts and audiobooks in the same formats and on the same streaming services, they also use the same (mobile) technologies for playback, and select, search, and customize playback as desired; it is also worth noting that podcasts are, if not exactly texts, certainly scripted (some more than others) and possess a rhetorical shape and a durational scope that solicit the cognitive activity, or engage the cognitive sphere, of reading in the listener. As “scripted things,” audiobooks and podcasts are functionally similar.²¹ Moreover, the radio drama (*Hörspiel* in German) is an important literary precursor to the contemporary podcast, as are corresponding narrative listening practices cultivated through the history of radio broadcasting (such as what Susan Douglas calls “story

20. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

21. Robin Bernstein, “‘You Do It!’: Going-To-Bed Books and the Scripts of Children’s Literature,” *PMLA* 135, no. 5, 2020, p. 881.

listening,”²² which, for her, is distinct from radio listening to news, sports, or music). The aurality of podcasts (and their literary-radio precursors) participates sonically in cultural forms of literacy as not-yet-written textuality, in the same way that literary texts circulate sonically across cultures that are already always aural. Podcasts, like audiobooks, belong to a medial and agential process of control over flow and access in content, embodiment, and environment.²³

2. SLEEP PODCASTS AND SO(M)NIFEROUS READING

The rise of audiobooks and podcasting is by no means the death of reading but a continuation of reading by other (intermedial and intersensorial) means that have been intrinsic to transhistorical conceptions and practices of literacy for centuries. At the same time, the rise of aural reading (and especially the devices and streaming services that deliver sonic reading material to listeners) does create the possibility of new reading practices—and the monetization of those practices—and it is one such practice that I turn to now. I am interested in the rise of podcasts for sleeping and, along with it, the intentional repurposing of podcasts/audiobooks into sonic sleep aids. The “sleep podcast” is an established genre at this point, while other sleepers

22. Susan Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2004, p. 8.

23. To approach podcasting from the angle of audiobooks and aural reading is somewhat unusual in recent scholarly work on podcasting, which proceeds largely from the perspective of radio studies, articulating how podcasting not only remediates but also radically transforms the technical, aesthetic, and cultural forms of radio. Richard Berry, “What is a Podcast? Mapping the Technical, Cultural and Sonic Boundaries Between Radio and Podcasting,” Mia Lindgren and Jason Loviglio (eds.), *Routledge Companion to Radio and Podcast Studies*, New York, Routledge, 2022, p. 399–407; Tiziano Bonini, “Podcasting as Hybrid Cultural Form between Old and New Media,” Mia Lindgren and Jason Loviglio (eds.), 2022, p. 19–29; Dario Llinares, “Podcast Studies’ and Its Techno-Social Discourses,” Lindgren and Loviglio (eds.), 2022, p. 408–417. A fuller reckoning of aural reading with notions of textuality, flow, and attention that derive not just from audiobooks but from broadcast media, radio, and podcast studies is beyond the scope of the present essay. But like many podcast scholars who reject the idea of a reductive genealogy of podcasting from a single earlier medium (be it radio or audiobooks), I am interested in the productive intermedial “généalogie” (genealogy through analogy) that explores any new media or cultural form as a relational network of forms that precede and (at least partially) shape what it will become. Éric Méchoulan, “Intermédialité : ressemblances de famille,” *Intermédialités / Intermediality*, no. 16, 2010, p. 233–259.

regularly listen to “waking” audiobooks or podcasts only to consume their content in and by the act of falling asleep.²⁴

I call this kind of aural reading practice “so(m)niferous,” indicating the coincidence of sleep and sound and taking place in a shared architecture of reading and sleeping. In so(m)niferous reading, the attention-activating dynamics of the speaking voice and the slow solicitation of a narrative structure gradually phase in and out of a non-semantic vocal texture and the droning cadence of sentence after sentence. The reading ear of the so(m)niferous listener is activated at multiple, contradictory levels at the threshold of cognitive and ambient listening, where narrative content disappears into quasi-musical vocalization that is aesthetically apprehended precisely (and paradoxically) by falling asleep.

Yet this complicates the notion of (aural) reading as textual control which, as I argue above, makes it possible to think of listening to audiobooks and podcasts as reading in the first place. If aural reading ceases to be a process of sonic self-control and becomes instead a merging of (un)consciousness with the durational flow (or ambient diffusion) built into the playback of audio content, then the mode of listening switches away from the cognitive pathways associated with aurality and literacy and becomes “merely” acoustic: not a cognition of language, but an ambient, atmospheric, or musical listening to *sounds*, even if those sounds happen to be human voices speaking.

What is unique to the practice of so(m)niferous reading is not so much the blurring of distinctions between sleeping, reading, and listening as it is the holding-open-to-possibility of each of these distinct activities in a pluralistic experience of mediation. So(m)niferous reading sets up a sonic environment which accommodates listening/reading and *not* listening/reading, falling asleep and *not* falling asleep, without privileging either side of the binary. The set-up is conducive to sleep precisely because it is not coercive: listeners are free to be readers of a story (if/while they are

24. The rise of the “sleep podcast” in popular culture is more or less synonymous with Drew Ackerman’s *Sleep With Me* (discussed in this section), and any quick internet search will attest to the popularity and proliferation (in multiple languages and cultural contexts) of talk-based, narrative podcasts meant to help, guide, or even *bore* listeners to sleep. Yet, to my knowledge, the sleep podcast genre does not seem to have been studied explicitly in the growing field of podcast studies. Alyn Euritt, in her work on podcasting and intimacy, mentions sleep podcasts briefly as related to radio-based modes of seriality and ritualized consumption by listeners (*Podcasting as an Intimate Medium*, New York, Routledge, 2023, p. 91). But it seems that the specific affordances of podcasts as sleep media and the phenomenology of the sleep podcast as bedtime story have not been thematized in the scholarship to date.

unable to fall asleep) *and* listeners to a soothing, lulling vocalization (if/until they give up on the narrative and fall asleep) at one and the same time. So(m)niferous reading practices offer a variation of Brian Eno's famous remark about ambient music (which must be "as ignorable as it is interesting"): they render texts as content-rich and engaging as they are content-empty and soporific.

Let me illustrate the paradox of so(m)niferous reading with a close reading of an episode of what is arguably the genre-defining sleep podcast, Drew Ackerman's *Sleep With Me*. Produced since 2013 (the same year Amazon bought Audible), with over 1,100 episodes and counting, *Sleep With Me* is available for free on its own website and also available for streaming and download along the usual podcast channels. The free-ness of the podcast is made possible by the amount of time the host devotes at the beginning of each episode to promoting the show's many sponsors—mostly retailers of various kinds of sleep gear (bedsheets, special headphones, noise machines, pajamas, etc.)—a segment of blurbs that the host delivers in a charmingly rambling manner. Indeed, the whole point of the rhetorical style of the podcast is to ramble, repeat, digress, regain focus, ramble again, etc. The host (not Ackerman himself, but his alter ego Scooter) thematizes precisely his own speaking style, story-telling approach, and indeed, the very sound of his own speaking voice:

But what I'm gonna do here is, uh, I'm gonna send my voice across the deep, dark night. I'm already in the process of doing that, technically. And I'm gonna use lulling, soothing, creaky, dulcet tones. Oh, so creaky are my dulcet tones! I don't know what that girl with the porridge would say. Was that Goldilocks? She'd say oh, this voice is too creaky, and this voice is not creaky enough. Your voice is just...it's...oh, there's someone that's creaky. I guess that's what you say...can you describe creaky, dulcet in Goldilocks terms, ineffectively? I say, you got...with...as long as you put that last part in, you got it. I think she says stuff...she uses those...what are those, adjectives or adverbs or something. Modify...? I don't know. Those are word modifiers, maybe? I don't know. But she would say well, this bed's too dulcet. It sounds like angels are humming or something, and this one's too creaky. It sounds like I'm...like, you... I don't know, it's just creaking me out, man. But this one, it's creaky and...it's just creaky and it's just dulcet. It's a difference...not traditionally soothing. So creaky, dulcet tones, pointless meanders, and superfluous tangents.²⁵

25. Ackerman, "Nuns in Space," Episode 1100 (season 3, episode 6), *Sleep With Me* (podcast), 21 September 2022, <https://www.sleepwithmepodcast.com/1110-space-elevator-links-nuns-in-space-s3-e6/> (accessed 5 October 2022).

In the midst of his introduction to the episode (where he says “I’m gonna send my voice across the deep, dark night,” recalling an older rhetoric of radio address), Scooter slips into a self-referential mode, reflecting on the particular tonality of his speaking voice (its creaky, dulcet tones), which seems to generate a Goldilocks tangent out of sheer vocal timbre. He eventually returns to his introduction of the week’s episode, which is—and he wants listeners to know this—an “episodically modular story” called “Nuns in Space,” and explains that the episodes can be listened to in any order, requiring no sequential or contextual trappings of any kind. This modularity is crucial: each episode recapitulates the entire premise of the podcast (including autobiographical details about the host’s own troubled sleep as a child), self-references its form and content, and delivers the content, which, we are assured, is a story that otherwise lacks all the structural and rhetorical features of story. We are free to, as Scooter puts it, “listen like I’m out of focus just a little bit.”

The podcast uses a story-like form and presentation to become a *routine*, yet another self-referential aspect. The host regularly discusses his own “wind-down routine” before going to bed, implying that listening to *Sleep With Me* should become part of the so(m)niferous wind-down routine of listeners. The wind-down routine, as Scooter describes it, appears to be a process of self-talk in which the sleeper slows down the pace of their (presumably anxious or unsettled) thoughts, gradually giving themselves permission *not* to worry about things and to fall asleep. The crucial so(m)niferous transfer here is that the sleeper interpellated by *Sleep With Me* outsources their self-talk to the podcast, in effect, listening to an externalized form of self-talk via the self-talk of Ackerman’s narrator. Such listening, just a little out of focus, to someone else’s self-talk makes this podcast an example not so much of “sleep media” as what Devon Bate calls “companion media.”²⁶ On this point, Scooter says: “Also, I’m not here to put you to sleep; I’m here to keep you company while you fall asleep, to be your bore-friend, your bore-bae, your bore-sib, your bore-bud, your neigh-bore, your bore-bor, your bore-bestie, your bore-friend, to be your friend in the deep, dark night, to keep you company.” The podcast here recalls earlier models of radio community, in which audiences are connected across vast tracts of space and time by the shared ethereality of the medium itself, and radio listening facilitated a feeling of security

26. Bate Devon, “Spectacular Rest: How To Sleep in the Attention Economy,” presentation, *Somnambulations: New Directions in Interdisciplinary Approaches to Sleep, Sociability of Sleep*, Montreal/virtual, 28th January 2022.

and connection that exceeded the content of a particular broadcast.²⁷ The rambling of another's self-talk is thus not intrusive but welcome. Whether we engage in moments like this of clever, ad-libbed wordplay or let them drone on in the background out of the orbit of our attention, it is the sheer presence of a hailing voice that guarantees the podcast's status as a mode of sonic companionship.

In this scenario of so(m)niferous reading, self-talk becomes a mode of listening to the self-talk of another. Yet this self-talk participates in an aural/literary media culture. When I downloaded this episode of *Sleep With Me* for the purpose of this *close reading* analysis, I discovered that the podcast's website already provides a complete transcript of each available episode (complete with the dozens and dozens of ellipses needed to convey the trailings-off and false starts of Ackerman's delivery!). *Sleep With Me* is a sound recording and a text simultaneously, whether we read it with our ears or eyes. Such so(m)niferous reading recalls the aural speed-reading of Mills and Sterne, only here it is matter of slowing-down our cognitive playback of the text, activating and engaging the aurality and literacy of attention, but not demanding too much of them. Yet this kind of podcast also reintroduces the audience dimension of aural reading that aural speed readers wanted to avoid, namely, the ability to move freely back and forth from an attentive, scanning, processing reading posture to a more contemplative or distracted listening style. We can listen to the story or "merely" to the sounds of the voice, and indeed, with a podcast like *Sleep With Me*, we are literally invited to listen to both at the same time. Form doesn't quite become content; rather, each cancels the other out, like a story-telling equivalent of noise-cancelling headphones. Noise-cancelling headphones present us with a set-up of listening but, at the same time, give us precisely nothing to listen to. Likewise, the sleep podcast interpellates the audience as listeners to a story but, at the same time, evacuates the audience role of the imperative to pay attention by evacuating the story of the attentional solicitation that should otherwise be intrinsic to its form. Moreover, this kind of so(m)niferous reading is not necessarily restricted to sleep podcasts but could be paradigmatic for any kind of aural reading (of podcasts or audiobooks) consumed via the phasing of attention in and out of semantic content on the one side and vocal, rhythmic texture on the other. Just as the notion of background music retroactively makes any kind "foreground music"

27. Douglas, 2004, p. 8.

potentially suitable for the background, so does the (re-purposing) practice of so(m)niferous reading transform any podcast or audiobook into a bedtime story.

3. BEDTIME IN THE SLEEPSCAPE

The issue of control over the media environment of so(m)niferous reading becomes ambivalent. In terms of the “mechanics” of the event itself of falling asleep, the so(m)niferous reader’s agency might be best described in what, in grammatical terms, is called the middle voice, referring to verb forms that are neither active nor passive but indicate an intermediary nexus of environmental and causal factors around an event. In a middle-voiced sentence like, “Bill got his car fixed last week,” it is clear that Bill has precipitated the work that led to the fixing of the car, but that he did not fix it personally. Bill presents himself in the sentence as the agent of the repair, but the grammar of the sentence necessarily implies that someone else actually carried out the repair (about which Bill may have little or no technical understanding), and Bill just facilitated the act by creating circumstances in which the repair could be completed. The middle voice preserves Bill’s ambiguous agency as both crucial to *and* totally uninvolved in the fixing of the car, rendering conspicuously absent the people who actually did the work. “Getting to sleep” is a similarly middle-voiced structure. A person “gets to sleep” at night, but that signifies a combination of agency and mystery: would-be sleepers facilitate a set of circumstances in which they suspend their agency, let forces or processes beyond the scope of their knowledge and their consciousness intervene, and, hopefully, “get to sleep.”

As a *middle*-voiced phenomenon, sleep circumvents subject-object distinctions as an *intermediary* or *medial* phenomenon. Sleep connects a subject to an object and to an environment and simultaneously blurs the distinctions between subject, object, and environment into a mediated, situated, processual set of relations, or *sleepscape*. I propose the term “sleepscape” as a portmanteau that riffs on Murray Schafer’s well-known concept of the *soundscape*.²⁸ The *soundscape*, for Schafer, is the sound of a particular natural environment insofar as it is audible to human ears (or insofar as humans have learned how to perceive it carefully by listening) and insofar as it is marked by a conflict between properly “natural” sounds and the mechanized noises

28. R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, Rochester, Destiny Books, 1977.

and electrical signals of modern life. Though Schafer has been critiqued for romantic and anthropocentric conceptions of “nature” and natural sounds versus “noise,” what is crucial in his concept is the notion of a sonic environment as (1) essentially heterogeneous and (2) as an experiential and epistemological *foreground*, even if it is precisely as background where the soundscape happens. The term *sleepscape* mobilizes those qualities of the soundscape for the study of sleep. To say sleep is “natural” would preserve the romanticism of Schafer’s soundscape. But to say that sleep is an embodied, experiential horizon in which individuals are entangled with the complex, often contradictory, biological, social, cultural, and technological determinants of their daily lives is to say that sleep is always shaped in particular ways for/by individual sleepers, as a *sleepscape*. Like a soundscape, a *sleepscape* is both an environment and a process of mediation and marks a limit where the sleeper’s techniques of negotiating that environment are absorbed into or repositioned according to immense scales (biological, social, cultural) that hail “back” at and reposition the sleeper.²⁹

Moving toward a conclusion, I want to ask how so(m)niferous reading fits into the middle-voiced logic of the *sleepscape* and what happens to biopolitical imperatives to “get to sleep” as they are subjected to the intermediary logic of the *sleepscape*. As exemplified by *Sleep With Me*, the selection and playback of so(m)niferous material would comprise part of a “wind-down routine” or a more generalized sphere of what is sometimes referred to, in popular and scientific literature, as “sleep hygiene,” the normative litany of dos and don’ts around bedtime that involve everything from diet and exercise to light exposure and bedroom furnishing, and which a (hyper-productive neoliberal) subject should follow to ensure healthy, high-quality sleep. The increased use of sleep-trackers to quantify sleep puts further pressure on the imperative to organize one’s life around getting to sleep and has even given rise to a newly coined sleep disorder, *orthosomnia*, which refers to an unhealthy obsession with getting enough sleep.³⁰ From this perspective, sleep podcasts are a perfect neoliberal solution to the demands of sleep hygiene because they offer the wind-down qualities of reading

29. This shift in thinking about sleep as a *process*, rather than an object, is a key methodological move in Matthew Wolf-Meyer’s anthropological study of normative sleep (*The Slumbering Masses: Sleep, Medicine, and Modern American Life*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2012). From a literary perspective, Ben Reiss has traced a cultural history of the on-going (mis)adventures of sleep as a processual struggle to accommodate biological, social, racial, technological, and environmental demands (*Wild Nights: How Taming Sleep Created Our Restless World*, New York, Basic Books, 2017).

30. <https://www.sleepfoundation.org/orthosomnia> (accessed 5 November 2022).

without the light exposure and put readers (or rather, readers-workers-consumers) in a position to consume digital content up until—and even beyond—the last waking moment of the day.

Yet the so(m)niferous reading of podcasts and audiobooks appears as a non-coercive option for sleepers since the imperative to get to sleep is acoustically “masked” by the narrative content of the material. Reading the story distracts the readers’ attention from the anxiety or pressure (not to mention agential ambiguity) of getting to sleep, and they are “free” to fall asleep because reading the audiobook acts as an alibi for the more fraught task of getting to sleep. Even a sleep podcast like *Sleep With Me* is effective because it explicitly stages itself *not* as a command to sleep but rather as a gauzy environment of companionship crafted out of the timbre of a speaking voice and a modular, digressive story structure. It equally accommodates paying attention or not, sleeping or not, and the control afforded the listener-reader is not over the flow and access of content but would seem to be over their own attention itself. In so(m)niferous reading, the subjective activity of paying attention—and the anxiety about getting to sleep—are offloaded onto the logic of the so(m)niferous material, which performs the agency of getting to sleep for us, technically mediating a process which is itself, qua *middle*-voice, already a mediation of ambiguous and concealed subject-actors. Although there is no denying that we *have to* get to sleep and may be desperately anxious about it, we by-pass the imperative via the free and easy “both/and” of so(m)niferous reading.

This curious logic recalls a recent critical argument about a specific subgenre of bedtime stories that Robin Bernstein calls “going-to-bed books.”³¹ Going-to-bed books are not just short, child-friendly stories that parents can share with their kids at bedtime. They actively thematize, indeed *script*, the act of going to bed and getting to sleep and reinforce their content performatively with lulling, rhythming, and repetitive language and a generalized mood of comfort and care. Although the books are illustrated and contain short simple texts which many young readers might be able to read on their own, going-to-bed books are explicitly composed to be read aloud by parents to their kids to get them to sleep, and as such are a part of a practice of so(m)niferous reading. The books often feature children or young animals as protagonists whose resistance to going to bed is gently and humorously negotiated by parents or

31. Bernstein, 2020.

parent-like characters, and the inevitable, and inevitably happy, ending of the story is a sleeping protagonist in the book and a sleeping child in the bed.

Bernstein opens with an obligatory discussion of Margaret Wise Brown's *Goodnight Moon* (1947) as one of the most enduring and popular examples of the genre. Other classic titles mentioned include Russel Hoban's *Bedtime for Frances* (1960)³² and Sandra Boynton's *The Going To Bed Book* (1982),³³ the latter being the source of Bernstein's name for the genre. Yet her discussion takes an unexpected twist when she turns to Adam Mansbach's parody of the going-to-bed genre, *Go The Fuck To Sleep* (2011). Bernstein initially attributes the wild success of this best-selling book to its laying-bare of the ideological imperative to get to sleep that *parents* suffer under while simultaneously displacing it onto their children. The book allows parents to make light of the otherwise overwhelming fact that bedtime is an interface between domestic life and the relentless machinery of 24/7 capitalism, with its compulsory synchronization of wake/sleep cycles dictated by work, school, commuting, and indeed, the biopolitical norms of hyper-productive subjectivity that shape even the sleepscape of young children. *Go The Fuck To Sleep* is surely not an actual going-to-bed book for kids but a humorous disavowal of the more alarming facts that most going-to-bed books are manipulative "tools of power" to coerce children to go sleep, and that parents themselves are coerced into reading such books.

Yet Bernstein shows, via reader reviews online and professional reviews, that many adults actually *do* read *Go The Fuck To Sleep* to their children (presumably omitting the profanity of the refrain), who enjoy the book immensely. Mansbach wrote a profanity-free sequel titled *Seriously, Just Go To Sleep* (2012),³⁴ which Bernstein interprets not as the kid-version of the adult original but "an accommodation—indeed an artifact—of parents' self-documented practice of reading *GTFTS* to their children."³⁵ She goes on to suggest that reading *Go The Fuck To Sleep* to children rewrites the top-down structure of going-to-bed books because it does not rely on a pre-existing hierarchy of age and authority but rather invites "playful engagement

32. Russel Hoban, *Bedtime for Frances* [1960], illustrated by Garth Williams, New York, Harper Collins, 1995.

33. Sandra Boynton, *The Going To Bed Book*, New York, Little Simon, 1982.

34. Adam Mansbach, *Seriously, Just Go To Sleep*, illustrated by Ricardo Cortés, New York, Akashic Books, 2012.

35. Bernstein, 2020, p. 887.

with them.”³⁶ She continues: “Mansbach and [illustrator Ricardo] Cortés’s books do not interpellate children, as per the top-down model, into the category of child; rather, they include them by bringing them into the joke—and thus involve them in the construction of the categories of child and adult.”³⁷ Mansbach’s achievement is not just to expose the hidden adult voice of all going-to-bed books that says “time for bed” but means “go the fuck to sleep,”³⁸ it is to make that parental frustration an available perspective for the child to consider and respond to explicitly, rather than indulge the conceit of a veiled top-down imperative. Like *Sleep With Me, Go The Fuck To Sleep* shows how so(m)niferous reading helps listeners and sleepers imagine their intermediate agency in the contemporary sleepscape.

Throughout this discussion I have kept at bay a certain critical perspective that would dismiss sleep podcasts (and, more generally, the proliferating market of sleep media and sleep technologies) as yet another commodification of sleep and yet another biopolitical carving-up of our lived experience. Such a perspective, encountered eloquently in Jonathan Crary’s *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2013),³⁹ reminds us that the platforms of digital capitalism (where audiobooks and podcasts circulate) relentlessly interpellate subjects into a 24/7 temporality that does not allow sleep, and which at the same time reinvents sleep as the compulsory, efficiency-boosting imperative of productive, up-to-date worker-consumers. This 24/7 temporality is synonymous with the white supremacist “grind culture” that Tricia Hersey describes in *Rest is Resistance*,⁴⁰ referring to the historical origins of 24/7 capitalism in plantation and chattel slavery, that is, in the systematic denial to Black people of the time and space to rest, sleep, dream, and imagine (2022). So for Crary, the sleep podcast might well represent another instance of media corporations depriving subjects of their capacity to pay attention and of the possibility of a single aspect of life that might be offline and off the clock. And Tricia Hersey might well see a further capitulation to grind culture in the use of sleep podcasts (which surely would not count as the resistant work of resting that she outlines in her manifesto). Such a perspective is not to be dismissed. As subjects of 24/7 capitalism and a racist grind

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*, p. 885.

39. Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, London, Verso, 2013.

40. Tricia Hersey, *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto*, New York, Little, Brown Spark, 2022.

culture (which still disproportionately deprives women and Black people of sleep), time is not on our side, and it is not realistic to imagine that the products of distraction and control (including sleep podcasts) that reinforce such a culture could also be used to generate alternatives to it.

Yet 24/7 culture can also be seen to imply some ideal mode of sleep, or some ideally rested subject, that *could* be realized, if not for the technologically intrusive, unjust socioeconomic system we live under. Even if such an ideally rested subject is merely an ideological foil in an argument like Crary's or Hersey's, it risks implying a binary between the fugitive sleep of 24/7 grind culture and (the dream of) a fully socially integrated sleep. A media studies approach cuts a path somewhere in the middle of these critical extremes. Rather than critiquing how sleep media interfere with sleep, it is more productive to explore how sleep media participate in an everyday sleepscape, that is, in the individual's on-going crafting of a place and time to get to sleep, which is too often experienced as a struggle to accommodate too many variables. There remains something to learn about attention and agency in those moments when they are suspended in the act of getting to sleep, especially in the crafty or hacker-like strategies (like so[m]niferous reading) by which sleepers manipulate the media environments that are designed to manipulate them.

Bedtime Stories: Audiobooks, Podcasts, and Reading as Listening (and Sleeping)

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ABSTRACT:

This essay approaches sleep podcasts as bedtime stories, exploring the contradictory phenomenology of reading and listening while falling asleep. The first part categorizes audiobook and podcast listening as aural reading through an expanded definition of aurality and a logic of mediated self-control. The essay then proposes a concept of *so(m)niferous reading* to describe the paradoxical audio-textual inattentiveness that mediates the experience of going to sleep in a typical sleep podcast like Drew Ackerman's *Sleep With Me* (2013). Finally, the essay contextualizes the *so(m)niferous* reading of audiobooks/podcasts in the discourse of children's bedtime stories, raising critical questions about the subjectivity and agency of *so(m)niferous* readers in the contemporary *sleepscape*.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article se concentre sur le genre du « podcast pour s'endormir » en examinant la phénoménologie contradictoire qui nous mène à lire, écouter et s'endormir tout en même temps. La première partie catégorise l'écoute des livres audio et des podcasts comme une lecture aurale à travers une définition élargie de l'auralité et d'une logique du contrôle médiale. L'article propose ensuite le concept de *la lecture so(m)nifère* pour décrire le paradoxe de l'inattention audio-textuelle qui médiate l'expérience de s'endormir. À cet effet, le podcast *Sleep With Me* (2013) par Drew Ackerman sert d'exemple central. Enfin, l'article contextualise la lecture *so(m)nifère* des livres audio et des podcasts dans le discours de la littérature pour les enfants (en particulier les

histoires au coucher), se posant des questions critiques sur la subjectivité des lecteurs so(m)nifères dans le *sleepscape* contemporain.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

Josh Dittrich, PhD, is a Lecturer in the Institute of Communication, Culture, Information & Technology at the University of Toronto, Mississauga. He teaches courses in creative non-fiction and media and cultural studies. His book manuscript *Geosonics: Listening through Earth's Soundscapes* (under contract with Bloomsbury Academic) examines the real and imaginary geology of human listening in twentieth- and twenty-first-century music, sound art, and media theory. Josh's current research interests involve the aesthetics and media of nonconscious experiences, with a focus on listening, sleeping, and environment.