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## Sonic Urbanities: Undoing the Soundscape and Aural History in Kingston, NY

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Sonic Urbanities:  
Undoing the Soundscape and Aural History in Kingston, NY

Senior Project submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by

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## Introduction

When I first started this project, I was in a canoe in the North Tivoli Bays on an ecological research project searching for Painted Turtles. Over three months of research, three months of lugging a sixty-pound canoe, paddling through the labyrinth of serpentine waterways until it was no more than routine, after so many times jolting my hand back from the back edge of the canoe, unknowingly transformed into an electric stovetop by the radiation of the sun, through fierce headwinds, hail and rain, my research partner and I saw not even fifteen Painted Turtles.

How could this be possible? I was told stories of previous Painted Turtle research in the Bays where *hundreds* of turtles were caught during a summer. As I tried to understand how this could be possible, how my research partner and I could be so bad at turtle-catching, I found myself drawn to the possibility that as researchers, we were being incredibly *noisy*. The splashing of paddles churning water, clumsily bumping the fiberglass shell must have been a resounding thunder, only amplified by the aqueous medium. These sounds, most obviously alien to the deafening quiet of the Bays must have been a pronounced cue, aiding our reptilian friends in mercilessly eluding our grasp. Of course, there may have been alternate explanations, maybe there was a decrease in population due to increased predation, maybe there was some sort of unknown environmental stress leading to the demise of the Painted Turtle. Yet, I could not stop telling myself, we must have been too noisy.

It is under these premises, conceiving of the way I was noisy, a product of my body, that I first started to think about sound in relation to the ‘natural’ environment. During my canoe-bound research, I started reading *The Great Animal Orchestra*, by Bernie Krause, as well as *The*

*Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* by R. Murray Schafer. These two authors first cued me in to the possibilities of taking on a project focused on sound. As I spent the summer months of 2015 developing this project, I began to drift away from ecology and bioacoustics and more towards a field that tackled human assumptions about sound. I was drawn to the complexity of the concepts of “hearing” and “listening” and was exposed to writing that suggested the wide diversity in human “hearing” and “listening” practices. Since then, my project has transformed into a work mainly concerned with rethinking local history via attending to a chronology of sound in urban space; employing an interrogation of sound to reframe and dislodge commonly accepted historical narratives relating to urban space and place.

In my writing, and especially in my third and fourth chapters, I focus on the city of Kingston. It is important to know that I have lived within a fifteen-minute car ride of Kingston for most of my 21 years. Throughout my life, I have maintained a relationship with Kingston, as it was always the closest city to me. Yet, I am not truly “from” Kingston. I have only lived on its periphery. Although I might be considered an outsider in this regard, my positioning has greatly changed following my coming to Bard. At Bard, where people come from all across the U.S. and the world, I was suddenly transformed into an “expert” on Kingston. I was the only one of my friends who was able to navigate Kingston without a map, and during car rides through Kingston, I would commonly suggest alternative and faster routes. At Bard I have sometimes found myself in situations where I felt the need to speak on behalf of Kingston, defend it from trash-talking outsiders (usually from Los Angeles). Though to others, I’m “from here,” I am not truly from Kingston. In this project, I think that this unique positioning has helped me balance the conflict that comes with academically studying a space. In this way I believe that I have been

able to fairly navigate the institutional premium placed on extracting knowledge from a place (quite possibly a colonizing exercise), in contrast with my own personal identification with being somewhat local to Kingston. I think that endeavors focused on one's own locality may be the best defense against crude objectification.

The first section of my project, containing the first two chapters, is focused on developing a theoretical framework. The second section, also containing two chapters, employs this framework in a case study of the city of Kingston. In my first chapter, I confront the writings of R. Murray Schafer, particularly his book, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*. The first chapter revolves around questioning the assumptions implicit in Schafer's writings and seeks to update his viewpoints. In doing so, I set the tone for the proceeding chapters and continually call into question elite or progressive opinions regarding sound.

In my second chapter, I look to the unique history of noise abatement in New York City. Here, I have chosen New York City as a topic of concern for two reasons. One, of all U.S. cities, it has the richest history of noise abatement. Two, its unique relationship to Kingston, NY, allows us to compare between the two cities and allows for a comparative critique of urbanity. In this second chapter, I delineate a history of noise abatement starting in the 1890s, the late industrial period, through the 1930s. In this chapter I navigate the implicit concerns with formulating history as articulated by Michel-Rolph Trouillot, addressing the inscribed power structures in authoritative telling of history. I address this in two ways; I first recount the typical narrative of noise abatement during these times. Second, I critique the perspective of these narratives and provide numerous counter narratives that afford us knowledge about resistance as well as

silences in history. In doing so, this chapter serves as a model, a frame of reference from which we may better understand the way noise has been heard in Kingston.

My third chapter is focused on using the *Daily Freeman*, Kingston's newspaper since the 1800s, to illuminate a number of narratives in which sound is central. These narratives play out over numerous articles and act to create unique portraits of the ways that attending to sound in recounting history can impart new forms of knowledge. Here, I approach noise as a conflict that inevitably involves class and race. I intend these novel reconstructions of Kingston's history to push up against a local perception of the city. Additionally, included in this chapter is a discussion about a chronology of noise abatement legislation in Kingston.

The fourth chapter of this project involves numerous personal interviews I conducted in hopes of making audible a number of voices that make up the composite that we call Kingston. Here, I again bring up the implicit assumptions that are tied up with noise as an indicator of class and racial conflict. In this chapter, I give particular attention to Kingston residents' imagination of an area called Midtown and consider the ways contested urban space is heard. Additionally, I use noise complaints posted on the online forum, *SeeClickFix*, to construct commentary on neighborhood structure in Kingston. In working with these complaints I call into question the implications of dialing the police to mediate a noise complaint. Also, I comment on the role of "outsiders" in conceiving of a sound as "noisy."

In the following chapters I call to attention something that many times goes unattended, sound. In doing so, I hope to address the normalization of the concepts of "sound" and "noise." I hope to denaturalize the way we think about sound, especially in urban space. I hope to employ



an analysis of sound and noise to refocus our attention on the innumerable levels of meaning that sound produces.

## Chapter I: Revisions to the Soundscape

Currently, we are in a blossoming epoch of ecological research and inquiry in sound. Researchers from all across the globe are exhibiting a newfound passion for investigating sound in relation to the environment and those that inhabit these various environments, be they humans or animals. But how “newfound” are these interests? The field of bioacoustics has origins in 1925 with Slovene researcher Ivan Regen.<sup>1</sup> However, bioacoustics is not synonymous with the study of sound. Bioacoustics is occupied with understanding modes of animal communication; that is, it is less concerned with sound as an object and more interested in the ways animals exchange information through the use of sound. The problem with this statement is that it leads to an even greater question. What is meant by “sound as an object?” How are researchers to objectify sound, an ephemeral, transient wisp of texture? How are we to materialize the immaterial? Is it possible to quantify that which is as untouchable as the substance of fleeting memory? These are the questions that readers will have to grapple with when facing the newest generation of ecologically driven sound research.

The new era of sound researchers are not venturing into work that is completely ungrounded. In fact, a quick survey of the citations of these new works will lead a reader back to three common names; Barry Traux, Hildegard Westerkamp, and most crucially, R. Murray Schafer. These are the innovators of what is colloquially referred to as the “soundscape,” borne from the *World Soundscape Project (WSP)*, dating back to the mid-sixties. The *WSP* was broadly aimed at addressing mechanical noise in the industrial city and preserving favorable

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<sup>1</sup> Matija Gogala. "Sound or Vibration, an Old Question of Insect Communication." *Studying Vibrational Communication*. Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2014. 31

sounds through audio recording. This stance puts man-made and natural sound in conflict. Unlike the field of bioacoustics, the work of the *WSP* addressed sound from more of a human social context. As we jump from the sixties to present day, many of the neologisms laid out in Barry Traux's *Handbook For Acoustic Ecology*, derived from the research of the *World Soundscape Project*, are reappearing in contemporary research.<sup>2</sup> In fact, in the past twenty years, entire academic journals have sprung up, dedicated to the principles of the *WSP*, as demonstrated in *Soundscape: The Journal of Acoustic Ecology*, a publication from the *World Forum For Acoustic Ecology*. Further, entire books are being penned, the detail of which dwarf the content of individual journal articles.<sup>3</sup> This surge in interest in the realm of the soundscape and acoustic ecology is additionally linked to policy decisions abroad as well as in the U.S.. For instance, in 2002 the European Union issued *Directive 2002/49/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council Relating to the Assessment and Management of Environmental Noise*, the main purpose of which was to "avoid, prevent or reduce those harmful effects which derive from the exposure to environmental noise."<sup>4</sup> Or in 2000, the National Park Service of the U.S. issued *Director's Order #47: Soundscape Preservation And Noise Management*, the ultimate purpose of which was "the protection, maintenance, or restoration of the natural soundscape resource in a condition

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<sup>2</sup> Manon Raimbault, Daniele Dubois. "Urban soundscapes: Experiences and knowledge." *Cities* 22.5 (2005); Monika Rychtarikova, Gerrit Vermeir, and Markieta Domecka. "The application of the soundscape approach in the evaluation of the urban public spaces." *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 123.5 (2008); Mats E. Nilsson "Soundscape quality in urban open spaces." (2007): Paper-IN07.; Mags D. Adams, et al. "Soundwalking as a methodology for understanding soundscapes." *Institute of Acoustics Spring Conference* (2008).

<sup>3</sup> Torsten Wissmann. *Geographies of urban sound*. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2014. ; Jian Kang. *Urban sound environment*. CRC Press, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> European Parliament and the Council of the European Union. DIRECTIVE 2002/49/EC [online], accessed April 22, 2016 (<http://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/eur38002.pdf>)

unimpaired by inappropriate or excessive noise sources.”<sup>5</sup> This legislation and research is directly informed by the work of R. Murray Schafer and the *WSP*. However, in confronting modern “noise” these texts fail to question the assumptions that are implicit in Schafer and the *WSP*’s writings. The supposed functionality of these legislative acts is contingent upon the assumption that the work of Schafer and his colleagues is the irrefutable truth, as if Schafer “discovered” the soundscape, something that innately and unquestionably exists. Before proceeding, it is crucial to my work that readers understand that the notion of the soundscape has historically been a contentious term and there have been many authors who have called it into question. These disruptions in the historical notion of the soundscape are necessary as they inform us about the limitations of Schafer’s approach to studying sound and also complicate our own notions of a perceivable sound environment. If we are to make any conclusions about sound, we must first denaturalize our understanding and engage a critical dialogue.

### *Schafer’s Sound World*

The most cited definition of the soundscape from Schafer is “any acoustical field of study.”<sup>6</sup> Although this definition is broad and lacks clarity, Schafer’s agenda in studying sound is revealed to be much more precise and pointed. His writing invokes imagery of human injury when addressing “noise pollution” which is “dangerous” and leads to “universal deafness.”<sup>7</sup> Schafer’s essential argument is that noise is injurious to our health and diminishes quality of life. Further, the solution will not be noise abatement policy, a futile and negative approach. Instead,

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<sup>5</sup> National Park Service. *Director’s Order #47: Soundscape Preservation And Noise Management*. 2000. [online] accessed Feb. 4, 2016. (<http://www.nps.gov/policy/DOrders/DOrder47.html>).

<sup>6</sup> R. Murray. Schafer *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*. Inner Traditions/Bear & Co, 1993. 7.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

Schafer argues for the retraining of the general public to become more aware of their own sonic surroundings and that this newfound attention will breed sonic environmental stewardship.

With these distilled foundational concepts, critiques from contemporary authors act to situate Schafer in history and provide alternate perspectives on his theories. First, Jonathan Sterne aims to contextualize the work of Schafer within the history of media theorists such as Marshall McLuhan and Edmund Carpenter.<sup>8</sup> In doing so, Sterne draws attention to the times in which Schafer's ideas were incubated, the post-WWII era of media critique endemic to new media technology and novel forms of electroacoustic listening and composition. In short, Sterne points to the temporal nature of Schafer's concepts and demystifies Schafer's genesis. Next, anthropologist, Tim Ingold throws the notion of the "soundscape" into question. Ingold's vantage is rooted in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological perspective, that is, asserting that sound is not an object or material but is instead a "phenomenon of experience." Ingold argues that Schafer is wrong in claiming that we hear a soundscape, as sound "is not the object but the medium of our perception. It is what we hear in."<sup>9</sup> This work acts to question Schafer's concept of sound and human hearing, further illustrating the complexity of sensory experience. Last, Ari Y. Kelman tracks the contentious history of the scholarly use of the word "soundscape" and notes that "the term has come to refer to almost any experience of sound in almost any context."<sup>10</sup> While this generalizing definition appears to hold true to Schafer's initial definition of the soundscape, Kelman asserts that Schafer's conception of the soundscape is actually addressing

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<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Sterne. "The Stereophonic Spaces of Soundscape." *Living Stereo: Histories and Cultures of Multichannel Sound* (2015): 65.

<sup>9</sup> Tim Ingold. "Against soundscape." *Autumn Leaves: Sound and the Environment in Artistic Practice* (2007): 11

<sup>10</sup> Ari Y Kelman. "Rethinking the Soundscape: A Critical Genealogy of a Key Term in Sound Studies." *The Senses and Society* 5.2 (2010): 214

something very specific. Kelman writes, “Schafer’s soundscape is not a neutral field of aural investigation at all; rather it is deeply informed by Schafer’s own preferences for certain sounds over others.”<sup>11</sup> Schafer’s conservationist attitude towards sound complicates the claim that his idea of a soundscape is neutral. In fact, Schafer’s soundscape is laden with value judgements on what types of sounds are worth conserving. Here we must consider Schafer’s historical context to better grasp the values that inform his preferences. Although it has been noted that Schafer’s ideas coalesced during a flourishing of media theorists, we should not overlook Schafer’s placement within the inception of the modern environmental and conservation movement. While considering critique from disparate disciplines is useful in rethinking Schafer, understanding Schafer through a conservationist terms reveals layers of assumptions that have yet to be developed in understanding links to contemporary sound studies.

Of those writing on the topic of the soundscape and R. Murray Schafer, as far as I can tell, there is only one academic writing which uses an environmental history perspective in soundscape analysis. *The Strange Stillness of the Past: Towards an Environmental History of Sound and Noise*, penned by Peter A. Coates in 2005, attempts to recover a sounded environmental history. The text is admittedly exploratory and wanders from Transcendentalist authors’ perceptions of sound to environmental legislation to sound in national parks. Here Coates is not actually adding to the dialogue on sound, he is simply noting that environmental historians may be a great resource for understanding sound in new ways. Yet, similar to Schafer, there is something particularly troubling about Coates’s implicit assumptions about sound, noise and nature. Coates bemoans, “Our ears are assaulted by ghetto blasters, Walkman earphone

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<sup>11</sup> Kelman, 214.

seepage, elevator music, cellular phone chatter, automobile alarms, and ‘boom cars.’<sup>12</sup>

Contrastingly he writes, “Natural quiet involves the absence of noise, and noise, following this sensory logic, is synonymous with sounds generated by people and their machines, sounds that are, by definition, alien to the natural world.”<sup>13</sup> This demarcation between natural and man-made sound is riddled with obvious subjective evaluation, and provokes my question, why do both R. Murray Schafer and Peter A. Coates put so-called natural and man-made sounds into conflict? Further, what does it mean that a sound is “natural?” Here is the clear evidence that the assumptions of Schafer’s writing are still not being questioned. These assumptions are crucial to interrogate, and so we shall take up Schafer’s embedded environmentalism from a critical view of the so-called “wilderness.”

### *Wild/Natural Sounds*

Modern critiques of the American fascination with nature are useful in reassessing the roots of R. Murray Schafer’s concealed environmentalist biases. In his critique of the American concept of the “wilderness,” William Cronon writes, “We too easily imagine that what we behold is Nature when in fact we see the reflection of our own unexamined longings and desires.”<sup>14</sup> This concept of polarizing space into human and non-human, natural and unnatural, is the ground on which Schafer is able to categorize some sounds as “natural” and others “man-made.” Coates himself writes that “the modern environmental movement is itself a grandchild of romanticism and post-frontier ideology” and that the concept of wilderness is the foundation for other

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<sup>12</sup> Peter A. Coates "The Strange Stillness of the Past: Toward an Environmental History of Sound and Noise." *Environmental History* 10.4 (2005): 640.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 647.

<sup>14</sup> William Cronon. "The Trouble with Wilderness: or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, New York: W. W. Norton & Co.,(1995): 69.

seemingly unrelated environmental concerns.<sup>15</sup> This is the framework through which we must see Schafer. In accepting that there is such a thing as the “wilderness,” something that is separate from humanity, a hierarchical evaluation of sound is formed. However, the establishment of a subjective hierarchy relies on the idea that the wilderness and nature itself is hallowed and sacrosanct, the apex of purity, a literal Eden. The idealization of a supposed pristine wilderness allows Schafer to unquestionably condemn the sounds of humanity and urbanity as a vile offense. These claims are verified by the way that Schafer’s theoretical chronology mimics William Cronon’s critique of the conception of the wilderness.

Cronon’s first critique is that the American fascination with wilderness is blinded by a romantic fixation with primitivism, a sentiment upheld through the fable of America’s birth story, in short, the idealized frontier. Informed by a nostalgia for a supposedly simpler time, Schafer’s writings embody this sentiment in his claims that the new sounds of the modern times “differ in quality and intensity from those of the past.”<sup>16</sup> The concept of the wild also informs Schafer’s concept of hi-fi and lo-fi sonic environments. Schafer describes a hi-fi soundscape as “one possessing a favorable signal-to-noise ratio. The hi-fi soundscape is one in which discrete sounds can be heard clearly because of the low ambient noise level. The country is generally more hi-fi than the city; night more than day; ancient times more than modern.”<sup>17</sup> Conversely, “in a low-fi soundscape individual acoustic signals are obscured in an overdense population of sounds.” “Perspective is lost.”<sup>18</sup> This fracturing of human sonic experience into hi-fi and lo-fi reveals

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<sup>15</sup> Cronon, 72.

<sup>16</sup> Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 3.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.



Schafer's conservationist attitude, formulating a hierarchy and prioritizing sound as to establish a criteria for analysis of sound in order to decide which sounds deserve to be heard and likewise preserved. Cronon's critique of a romantic fixation on the primitive frontier rings true in Schafer's language. Schafer speaks of the past as an inherently quieter time, writing "Let us speak of silence. We miss it."<sup>19</sup> Further, he reminisces, "In the past there were muted sanctuaries where anyone suffering from sound fatigue could go into retirement for recomposure of psyche. It might be the woods, or out to sea, or on a snowy mountainside in winter. One would look up at the stars or the soundless soaring of birdcraft and be at peace."<sup>20</sup> These words are the epitome of what Cronon means by romantic fixation with primitivism.

Another concept introduced by Cronon is the role of wilderness and the concept of the frontier in upholding an American fantasy of "rugged individualism."<sup>21</sup> He writes, "By fleeing to the outer margins of settled land and society- so the story ran- an individual could escape the confining strictures of civilized life."<sup>22</sup> Schafer's work is rife with individualistic speech that celebrates his values, again, "In the past there were muted sanctuaries where anyone suffering from sound fatigue could go into retirement for recomposure of psyche."<sup>23</sup> Here Schafer is not only acting out of individualistic motivations, but he appears to be making a larger critique of capitalist and consumerist values, which he contrasts with the value in experiencing natural sound, purportedly an act that lies outside the scope of consumerism. Yet, Cronon goes on,

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<sup>19</sup> R. Murray Schafer. *The new soundscape: a handbook for the modern music teacher*. BMI Canada, 1969. 9.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Cronon, 77.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Schafer, *The New Soundscape*, 9.

“frontier nostalgia became an important vehicle for expressing a peculiarly bourgeois form of anti-modernism. The very men who most benefitted from urban-industrial capitalism were among those who believed they must escape its debilitating effects.”<sup>24</sup> Likewise, inherent in Schafer’s environmental critique of modernism through the use of the soundscape is the placement of himself outside the context of modern society. This sentiment allows Schafer to critique the noise of urbanity while simultaneously asserting that he has no role in the noise, he is not a part of the din, his existence is somehow noiseless. This is evident in Schafer’s ludicrous but all-too serious solutions for noise pollution. One solution is what he calls “ear cleaning” in which he pushes the imperative of action onto others. Ear cleaning involves retraining the general public to attend to sound, to make value judgements on these sounds, and, most importantly to be critical listeners as opposed to passive listeners. The alternative of this is a “worldwide energy crisis,” “the largest noises in the world today are technological; thus the crack-up of technology would eliminate them.”<sup>25</sup> First, this illustrates Schafer’s egotistical fatalism, a stubborn unwillingness to compromise his individualistic views. Second, in seriously proposing such a catastrophe’s utility he fails to recognize that a world energy crisis would negatively effect his life in a way that any type of preoccupation with the conservation of sound would be forgotten. This is like proposing the Bubonic plague to solve water shortages and not realizing that the plague killed 30-50 percent of the European population.<sup>26</sup> Here, Schafer system of beliefs mimics a “rugged individualism” and rests firmly upon the conception of wilderness that William Cronon critiques.

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<sup>24</sup> Cronon, 78.

<sup>25</sup> Schafer, *The Soundscape*

<sup>26</sup> Sharon N. DeWitte. "Mortality Risk and Survival in the Aftermath of the Medieval Black Death." *PloS one* 9.5 (2014): e96513.

The essence of Cronon's argument is that in socially constructing the concept of the wilderness, we have placed humanity outside the scope of what is considered "natural." This enables humans to uphold wilderness and nature as the paramount of pristine and clean living, a way of life that has no environmental impact. In upholding these ideas, people with this frame of reference as well as the economic means are able to exonerate themselves from the sins of modernized life, of capitalism, of racism, of environmental degradation, of pollution, of sexism, of virtually all transgressions. Further, Cronon writes, "if we set too high a stock on wilderness, too many other corners of the earth become less than natural and too many other people become less than human, thereby giving us permission not to care much about their suffering or their fate."<sup>27</sup> Here, Schafer appears to embody the exact sentiment that Cronon is critiquing. He is an individualistic author who employs the myth of the frontier to support his critique of modernism. Through this lens, Schafer is able to clearly demarcate the difference between natural and man-made, further solidifying human made noise as inherently negative, whilst simultaneously exonerating himself from any wrong doing. This simplistic view of sound should be resisted. Instead I propose that Schafer's ideas may lead one to experience sound in a way that is blind to difference. To come closer to understanding the complex social functionality of sound, we must not be in the business of prioritizing some sounds over others. Another approach is necessary.

In critiquing Schafer it is important to be attuned to the multiple revisions to the notions of a soundscape that have occurred since its coinage in the sixties. Likewise, it is useful to extend William Cronon's critique to these authors. Anthropologist Steven Feld is one author whose work adds new dimensions to Schafer. Feld's most recognizable work revolves around the Kaluli

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<sup>27</sup> Cronon, 85.

people of Bosavi, Papua New Guinea. From this work, Feld develops a term he calls “acoustemology,” which he initially describes as “local conditions of acoustic sensation, knowledge, and imagination embodied in the culturally particular sense of place resounding in Bosavi.”<sup>28</sup> Put more simply, acoustemology refers to ways of knowing or knowledge produced through sound. Feld’s mode of analysis is crucial in the way that it disrupts Schafer’s conservationist hierarchy of sound, moving away from subjective opinion and moving towards understanding difference. In redefining sound as a tool for inquiry as opposed to a mere object for evaluation, Feld opens the door for further studies that shift the focus of studying sound. However, Feld’s methods are also subject to questioning. In Cronon’s words, “wilderness gets us into trouble if we imagine that this experience of wonder and otherness is limited to the remote corners of the planet, or that it somehow depends on pristine landscapes we do not inhabit.”<sup>29</sup> Feld, an American, conducted this work more than 8,000 miles from a place he may call local.

Feld’s study of acoustemology is based on his initial observation that the “Kaluli commonly develop acute hearing for locational orientation.”<sup>30</sup> Feld notes that as a people living in the dense rainforest, hearing and sound is intuitively crucial to the Kaluli in a way that Western audiences may not be aware of. Although Feld’s writing sheds light on a unique environment and lends new understanding to the ways that humans relate to sound, Cronon informs us that there may be a problem in thinking of the Kaluli people as a rare circumstance. In extending this critique to Feld, I am not applying a broad argument against Feld’s representation of the Kaluli, nor am I attempting a critique of “othering,” nor am I devaluing Feld’s work. What

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<sup>28</sup> Steven Feld. "Waterfalls of Song: An Acoustemology of Place Resounding in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea." *Feld and Basso (eds)* (1996). 91.

<sup>29</sup> Cronon, 69-90.

<sup>30</sup> Feld, 98.

I am hoping to highlight is that Feld's concept of acoustemology and his approach of studying sound is not *unique to studying the Kaluli people*. This notion can be extended to any group of people in any part of the world. Here, I need to be clear that I am not critiquing Feld, in fact, I am contesting the perception that Feld's work implies that a social study of sound can only occur somewhere remote in relation to the Western world. I firmly disagree!

Matt Sakakeeny's writing provides an excellent template for doing sound related research in one's own local environment. A professor of ethnomusicology at Tulane, Sakakeeny builds on the works of Schafer and Feld to come to a better understanding of soundscapes and urban space in New Orleans. Synthesizing and updating his predecessors Sakakeeny ultimately acknowledges sound as "a point of negotiation,"<sup>31</sup> as a way to stake claims to public space.<sup>32</sup> Although he credits Schafer with his careful attention to sound, he simultaneously topples Schafer's "hi-fi"- "lo-fi" binary, noting, "...New Orleanians performing and participating in funerals and parades have found ways of being in tune with their environment despite, or perhaps because of, the presence of a tension-filled hum that permeates the interrelations of people and places like the din of speeding cars on a highway cutting through a lo-fi soundscape."<sup>33</sup> Sakakeeny's work provides real-world evidence using localized studies of sound to show that supposed "lo-fi" environments do not always equate an imperceptibility of information or a lack of communicative exchange. Sakakeeny puts forth evidence that humans have the ability to adapt to a more "noisy" sonic environment, enough so that novel forms of meaning and acoustemologies can still exist and be created. Ultimately Sakakeeny dislodges Schafer's conservationist approach

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<sup>31</sup> Matt Sakakeeny. "'Under the Bridge': An Orientation to Soundscapes in New Orleans." *Ethnomusicology* 54.1 (2010): 3.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

to understanding sound in urban space in favor of understanding sound as a colliding space where difference across class, race, age, gender and identity at large are mediated and transformed. Sakakeeny uses the complexity of sound and meaning in urban space to highlight the different orientations humans have towards sound and how studying orientation to sound may serve as a proxy for better understanding social relations in an urban environment.

In tracking the birth of R. Murray Schaffer's soundscape, through its evolution into the contemporary, I have highlighted some arguments and discourses that current researchers doing work in sound must be aware of. Listening and sound are always enmeshed in power relations,<sup>34</sup> and so it is imperative that those working in fields directly related to sound, those with the power to change the sonic environment through legislation, site planning and architecture, understand the social dynamics that are embedded in listening and sound.

R. Murray Schaffer proposed that the way to solve noise pollution was not through noise abatement but through what he called "ear cleaning," that is retraining the general public to attend to sound and be critical listeners as opposed to passive listeners. However, this is only a superficially brilliant concept, as it was unfortunately marked by Schaffer's own biases which led to his subjective "hi-fi," "lo-fi" hierarchy. I would propose we update Schaffer's solution. Instead of understanding noise pollution in Schafer's sense, that is, unwanted sound, a source of personal injury, a sound that does not fit in to one's aesthetic values, let us redefine noise pollution as an area of intersection, a meeting point, from which social conflict may arise. Instead of a one-sided approach to noise pollution, one that upholds uneven American power structures, let us now understand noise pollution as a multi-faceted convergence space of

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<sup>34</sup> Jennifer Stoeve-Ackerman. "Splicing the Sonic Color-Line Tony Schwartz Remixes Postwar Nueva York." *Social Text* 28.1 102 (2010): 59-85.

conflicting social groups or peoples, and more importantly *a point of possible reconciliation*. Let us reject the language of those that wish to silence others, and turn noise pollution into a term that invites us to investigate, rather than obliterate the multiplicity of sound.

## Chapter 2: Histories of Noise in New York City

### *Preamble*

The first step towards a new understanding of sound in urban space starts with surfacing the histories of sound to which we consider ourselves local. Growing up in Ulster County, New York, Kingston has always been the city of closest proximity. Therefore, I turn my investigation to the city of Kingston. Yet, before steeping ourselves in the documents and people that will elicit an aural history of Kingston, it will be useful to track the greater trends in noise abatement history, after all, noise abatement is the most documented example of a historical perspective on sound in urban space. As New York City is both the mecca of noise abatement legislation in the U.S. and as Kingston lies well within its sphere of influence, I first turn to New York City in my investigation. In doing so, I hope to attend to the inception of “noise” as an area of urban concern and track the dialogue that frames noise as a problem in New York City. Focusing on the dawn of the twentieth century onwards to the late 30s, I intend to highlight the different actors and institutions that deemed noise to be something worth abating. After doing so, I aim to step back from a prescriptive tone and reflect on the construction of this recounted noise abatement history, integrating the concept of silencing into my reflection. Additionally, I hope to surface the complex power relations inscribed in the aural landscape of New York City.

According to R. Murray Schafer, “The two great turning points in human history were the change from nomadic to agrarian life... and the transition from rural to urban life.”<sup>35</sup> It is exactly this transition from rural to urban, agrarian to industrial, that Schafer dedicates much of his energy to; his book is mostly broken up into pre- and post-industrial soundscapes. It is these

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<sup>35</sup> Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 53.



changing times that become the critical lens through which we must look if we are to understand initial arguments regarding noise. Schafer's insight is no secret, undoubtedly urbanization and industrialization of the mid to late 1800s led to a dramatic restructuring of social life, employment, and physical space. Yet, considerations of the ways in which everyday sensory experience was shifted by the new ways of life brought by the twentieth century is a topic that until recently has not received much attention.

Since the work of Schafer, there have been numerous scholars who have focused their attention on reconstructing American urban history through a perspective of sound. For such scholars, "sound" is not an abstract, imprecise term. Rather, most of these authors hone in on "noise," a term loaded with countless levels of meaning. Like Schafer, many authors make note of urbanization and industrialization as the turning point in the production of noise. And so, this is where we take up our story.

### *Speed of Industrialization*

A common argument from scholars follows that the link between industrialization and noise annoyance is initially an expression of the anxiety related to a disorienting and novel mechanical soundscape. Raymond Smilor writes "After the Civil War, Americans found themselves living in surroundings that were drastically different from their notions of what constituted an ideal way of life. Cities had always been a part of the American experience. However, the swift and unrelenting process of urbanization produced what amounted to an entirely new environment."<sup>36</sup> Included in this "entirely new environment" were patterns of sounds that were completely new to Americans at large. Explosions of dynamite, percussive

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<sup>36</sup> Raymond W. Smilor. "Personal Boundaries in the Urban Environment: The Legal Attack on Noise 1865–1930." *Environmental History Review* 3, no. 3 (1979): 24-36. 25.

riveting and the motors of automobiles replaced the quainter aural ambience of the countryside. The transition that led to these new sounds was not a slow and welcoming process, but, a rapid and for some, an abrasive shove into modernity. The combination of completely new sounds and the speed at which these sounds were introduced to unseasoned urbanites was the spark of noise debates that continue into the contemporary. Those living in the newly industrialized city heard the new technologies that accompanied urbanization as a threat to their own, outdated “agrarian vision.”<sup>37</sup> In this way, new sounds unnerved early urbanites, and acted as painful reminders that to succeed in the new city, an unprecedented sensory assimilation was necessary. As Karin Bijsterveld writes, “many new machines encountered protests against their sound. Such sounds stood out in people’s perception exactly because of their novelty: their innovation expressed what the general public had not expected to happen.”<sup>38</sup> Corroborating this assertion is Emily Thompson who writes, “Only with industrialization did new types of noises begin to offend,”<sup>39</sup> identifying the steam whistle, railroad and factory as all new sounds that disrupted Americans. During the periods of rapid urbanization and industrialization it was the *newness* of mechanical sounds and the *speed* with which these sounds seized the urban soundscape that made Americans so uncomfortable and provoked the first backlashes against noise.

### *Julia Barnett Rice and Progressive Noise Abatement*

At the close of the Gilded Age and the dawn of the Progressive era (around the late 1900s), there were those who felt the need to speak out about the perceived toxicity of noises and

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<sup>37</sup> Raymond W. Smilor. "American Noise, 1900-1930." *Hearing History*, ed. Smith: 1900-1930. 328.

<sup>38</sup> Karin Bijsterveld. *Mechanical Sound: Technology, Culture, and Public Problems of Noise in the Twentieth Century*. MIT press, 2008. 236.

<sup>39</sup> Emily Ann Thompson. *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1933*. MIT Press, 2004. 190.

the negative effect of noise on the everyday urbanite. Julia Barnett Rice was one of the first New Yorkers to have substantial impact on noise policy. A mother of six, well educated, and married to an influential businessman, Rice mounted the first New York City campaign against the new sounds within the city. In 1907, Rice penned, “Our Most Abused Sense,” a text that outlined the mission of her newly formed, *Society for The Suppression of Unnecessary Noise*. Here, Rice argues for the abatement of what she calls “unnecessary” noise, that is, whistle blowing, clanging of bells, loud advertising, noises of traffic due to a defective mechanism, noises due to badly paved streets, engine noises, and street cries and brawls, just to name a few sources.<sup>40</sup> Julia Barnett Rice’s crusade against noise exemplifies two commonalities of Progressive reform that shaped America’s first interactions between urban space and sound. First, Rice epitomizes the Progressive trend of the social elite ostensibly intervening on behalf of lower classes, and second, Rice reaffirms the Progressive obsession with efficiency.

### *Progressive Intervention*

At the outset of her campaign, Julia Barnett Rice asserted that she spoke for those without a voice, mainly the sick, the poor, and children.<sup>41</sup> She argued that for the sick, noise slowed recovery, for children, city noises shortened attention and prevented learning, and for the poor, tenement ridden masses, she aimed to suppress noise to “render conditions more endurable.”<sup>42</sup> At face value, Barnett’s motivations appear selfless and altruistic, yet further investigations into her additional writings reveal tones of elitism. In her essay, “Our Barbarous Fourth,” a tirade against noisy 4th of July celebrations, Rice makes the comparison between noise and savagery, stating,

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<sup>40</sup> Mrs. Isaac L. Rice. “Our Most Abused Sense,” *Forum*, 38 (April, 1907), 559-72. 561.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 569

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

“Every holiday, in our country, at least, is made the occasion of a strident outburst of hoodlumism.”<sup>43</sup> She goes further to condemn the noise makers as celebrating in an “uncivilized fashion”<sup>44</sup> and in a “barbarous manner.”<sup>45</sup> Here Rice’s intellectual frustration with noise complicates her self-righteous philanthropy. The undertones of her elite perspective notably surface. As Karin Bijsterveld comments, “The higher class, the refined mind, and a cultivated self-control were widely understood by the social elite to be threatened by both the traditional and new sounds of the lower classes, vulgar emotions, and brutal self-diffusion.”<sup>46</sup> According to Bijsterveld, Julia Barnett Rice exemplifies this elitist attitude towards sounds made by lower classes.

### *Noise and Efficiency*

Yet for some, the class distinction made by Bijsterveld, is not visible. For Raymond Smilor, Julia Barnett Rice’s campaign did not manifest imposition of elitist views upon lower classes, instead, it simply was a product of the progressive obsession with efficiency. As Jennifer Karns Alexander proposes, in the age of industry and the modernizing city, efficiency was the ultimate solution to the anxieties surrounding new technology and the machine. In its first iteration, efficiency was employed to compute the wastefulness of the machine. Rates of input to output were used to optimize productivity and minimize waste. One aesthetically offensive byproduct of the inefficient machine was noise.<sup>47</sup> In this line of thought, Smilor writes, “As

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<sup>43</sup> Mrs. Isaac L. Rice. “Our Barbarous Fourth”, *Century*, 76 (June, 1908), 219-23. 221.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 222

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound*, 97.

<sup>47</sup> Jennifer Karns. Alexander. *The Mantra of Efficiency: From Waterwheel to Social Control*. JHU Press, 2008.

people became conscious of factory smoke dirtying the air, industrial waste fouling the water and garbage littering city streets, they recognized for the first time the need to deal with the modern environment. In the drive to end noise pollution, Americans demonstrated their new awareness of the environment and their desire to control their physical surroundings.”<sup>48</sup> Efficiency was the means to limit wasteful machines, and thus, Smilor argues that noise abatement was part of an early American environmentalist movement calling for governmental intervention to protect citizens from pollutants. In fact, he goes on to say that noise abatement reformers developed a “civic consciousness, a view of the community as a whole, that transcended class lines and permitted cross-class cooperation.”<sup>49</sup> Yet, Smilor’s only evidence for this assertion is the concept that noise “affected everyone intimately” and so “The middle class directed the anti-noise movement with women taking on an active role. But because individuals could agree on the dangerous effects of noise, support for the anti-noise crusade came from all levels of society.”<sup>50</sup> It seems that Smilor is commending the New York noise abatement campaign of the early twentieth century for being aware and inclusive of all classes, a model democracy, yet, his evidence, does not necessarily support this assumption. Asserting that sound is symmetrically and equally consumed regardless of one’s socioeconomic standing does not mean that noise abatement campaigns since 1900 are accordingly inclusive across class lines. As Emily Thompson argues, defining efficiency requires a definition of what types of sounds are pollution or “unnecessary.” However, deciding what noises are unnecessary is an entirely subjective act. Thus, definitions of unnecessary noise that Julia Barnett Rice and her *Society for the Suppression*

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<sup>48</sup> Raymond W. Smilor. "American Noise, 1900-1930." *Hearing History*, ed. Smith: 1900-1930. 319.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

of *Unnecessary Noise (SSUN)* came up with were steeped in their own subjective elite vision. As Thompson writes, “While Mrs. Rice and her colleagues believed that they represented those who were not powerful enough to speak out against noise- the sick, the poor, the city’s children- this kind of noise reform, like other progressive efforts would affect different classes of people in different ways.”<sup>51</sup> As Lilian Radovac puts it, Rice’s campaign, “echoed the noise abatement efforts of the Victorian period, which pitted the refined sensibilities of an emerging professional class against the habitus of a burgeoning population of urban industrial workers.”<sup>52</sup> In other words, noise abatement was inherently a class divided issue. Thompson provides some compelling evidence for the class-nature of noise abatement, citing vendors and hawkers in Coney Island as being initial targets, who were “relatively powerless targets, noise makers who impeded, in ways not just acoustical, the middle class vision of a well ordered city.”<sup>53</sup> Under noise abatement laws, street callers were now understood to be makers of “unnecessary” noise, and were muzzled, criminalized and fined. For the street vendors and caller of Coney Island in the 1910s, making sound was intrinsic to their economic viability. However, for those on a higher social rung, their calls were disrupting the city. Although Julia Barnett Rice and her early noise abatement movement was surely a part of the progressive efficiency obsession, her elite perspective certainly biased what noises she considered to be “unnecessary,” and influenced the path that the historical noise narrative took.

This is not to completely discredit Julia Barnett Rice’s work at all. Instead it is simply an attempt to contextualize it. Rice did in fact contribute tremendously to the public’s understanding

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<sup>51</sup> Thompson, 192.

<sup>52</sup> Lilian. Radovac. "The" War on Noise": Sound and Space in La Guardia's New York." *American Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2011): 733-760. 735.

<sup>53</sup> Thompson, 192.

of noise in the city. By her hand, noise pollution was brought to the forefront of urban consciousness, and also Rice's persistence led to a number of laws that undoubtedly altered the soundscape of the city in beneficial ways. For one, with the help of William Stiles Bennet, a lawyer and a member of the *SSUN*, the Bennet Act of 1907 was passed, limiting excessive boat whistling in harbors. This was an issue extremely close to the heart of Rice as she lived on Riverside Drive and was an exemplary victim of intrusive whistling (Students hired by Rice counted 250 to 300 whistle blasts from dusk to dawn, heard from her house).<sup>54</sup> In addition, her pioneering work led to the formation of quiet zones around schools and hospitals, a measure to protect learning children and the resting sick. Understanding Julia Barnett Rice's noise abatement campaigns helps us become aware of the types of reactions to the newness of the urban soundscape. Julia Barnett Rice was trying to advocate for a delineation of a new set of aural etiquettes in the newly crowded industrial city.

*Noise as a Public Health Concern, New Technology*

In creating a popularized understanding of noise, Rice additionally influenced the transition of noise from an individualized issue to a wider public health issue, to be addressed by government institutions. As the noise abatement movement of the 1910s progressed, more attention accumulated on the toll that noise took on human health. Similar to smoke abatement campaigns of the same era, with the expansion and development of the city, noise was increasingly viewed as a pollutant, affecting not only the elites who prompted the discussion, but the general public as well. While the focus of the 1910s was a legal approach to noise, the 1920s reflected advancing technology and research and more concern with an objective measure of

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<sup>54</sup> Hillel. Schwartz. "Beyond Tone and Decibel: The History of Noise." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 9 (1998): B8.

noise. In attaining this quantifiable measure of noise, new legislation was a step towards a public health view, not just an elite, subjective assessment of “unnecessary noise.”

The mid 1920s represent a shift in the approach of noise abatement. It is during this era that the subjectivity of the past reform movement was increasingly viewed as outdated. As Emily Thompson puts it, “Without an objective means by which to define noise, any attempt at its elimination would necessarily be subject to selection and bias.”<sup>55</sup> Thus begins the expert’s role in the noise abatement dialogue. Experts mainly started to emerge in the quickly developing telephone business, led by Bell Laboratories. Acoustic engineers developing telephone technology elaborated on the concept of noise in a more scientific and mathematical sense, determining telephone reception clarity in terms of signal to noise. “Interference” or “extraneous sounds” were plague to these engineers; noise was indeed an unwanted sound.<sup>56</sup> This utilitarian, scientific approach to noise is useful in reconstructing historical notions of noise as it approaches noise in terms of a binary, signal and noise. In addition, this distillation of noise problems allowed for the unit of measurement that reformers for so long had wished to employ. As Karin Bijsterveld notes, new telephone technology “made it possible to intensify small energy units”<sup>57</sup> which were previously unmeasurable. Around 1925, the decibel was proposed as the unit with which to measure sound, and came to be an accepted term by 1928. Functioning on a logarithmic scale, the decibel was able to translate the orders of magnitude between the quietest sounds and

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<sup>55</sup> Emily Ann Thompson. “Noise and Noise Abatement in the Modern City.” *Sense of The City: An Alternate Approach to Urbanism.*, ed Zardini, Mirko, and Wolfgang Schivelbusch: Lars Muller Publishers, 2005. 192.

<sup>56</sup> Bijsterveld, 195. ; Robert T. Beyer. *Sounds of Our Times: Two Hundred Years of Acoustics*. Springer Science & Business Media, 1999. 203.

<sup>57</sup>K. T. Bijsterveld, M. Bull, and L. Back. “The Diabolical Symphony of the Mechanical Age. Technology and Symbolism of Sound in European and North American Noise Abatement Campaign, 1900-40.” *The Auditory Culture Reader* (2003): 165-189. 175.



the loudest sounds in quantifiable terms. Along with this breakthrough, Bell Telephone Laboratories invented the audiometer in 1925, the first portable noise measuring device of its kind.<sup>58</sup>

These scientific and technological advancements in sound culminated in a 1926 precedent-setting field study, conducted by Edward Free, a science editor at *Forum* magazine.<sup>59</sup> In the study, Free used the new audiometer to measure sounds around the city. Although the study mainly yielded just one solid conclusion--that density was affecting noise levels more than uniquely noisy individuals--the approach sowed the seeds for latter development of similar methods. In 1929, the city of New York took up Free's surveying technique, improving in technology (employing a mobile audio recording truck-station), as well as improving in sending out many "experts" to survey.

### *Government Intervention*

In October of 1929, the city of New York created the Noise Abatement Commission, a contingent of doctors, public officials, transportation officials and lawyers, whose intent, laid out by Shirley W. Wynne, Commissioner of Health of New York, was to "study the complex noise situation in New York City with a view to finding new ways and means of eliminating unnecessary noise and of determining the effects of noise in general on the inhabitants of a metropolitan center like our own..."<sup>60</sup> In addition, it was the task of the Commission to garner from their findings policy recommendations and other legislative means to curb the urban din of

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<sup>58</sup> Beyer, 203.; Smilor, 326.

<sup>59</sup>Thompson, "Noise and Noise Abatement in the Modern City", 195.

<sup>60</sup> Noise Abatement Commission. *City Noise; the Report of the Commission Appointed by Dr. Shirley W. Wynne, Commissioner of Health, to Study Noise in New York City and to Develop Means of Abating It*, ed. Edward F. Brown et al. (New York: Noise Abatement Commission, Department of Health, 1930). 1.

New York. Dr. Shirley W. Wynne, in his introduction to the volume, identifies what he considers to be the most violent offenders of excessive noise. He writes, “the use of loudspeakers outside shops, and in homes; screeching of brakes; the unreasonable playing of music instruments in homes at unreasonable hours; the abuse of automobile klaxons; the use of muffler cut-outs on automobiles and motor boats; noises from milk cans, ash cans, etc; riveting work after a reasonable hour at night; turnstiles in the subway, etc.”<sup>61</sup> This initial list of unnecessary noise identifies a number of sources, some of which I already mentioned and some of which represent alternative approaches to the issue of noise. The issues laid out here may be simplified into two categories. The first encapsulates my previous thoughts, that noise is a conflict that is a result of anxiety surrounding a newly urbanized and industrialized space, an anxiety surrounding the alienating feeling of the age of the machine, and also, a more concealed elite anxiety surrounding the maintenance of class divisions. However, these ways of understanding noise in urban space are more characteristic of the early 1900s. The novel approach to noise in the mid to late 1920s focused on the role of new scientific technology in defining noise regulation. In concurrence with this obsession with so-called scientific truth, noise issues take up a tone of a “public health” issue, and thus a secondary reading of Dr. Wynne’s aural grievances is an issue of how noise penetrates ostensibly solid boundaries and becomes a conflict of privacy between private and public space. This right to privacy from a potentially harmful pollutant exemplifies the 1930 report from the Noise abatement Commission of New York.

In framing their report, the authors of “City Noise” from the Noise Abatement Commission, a governmental body, assess noise from a public health perspective. To do so, the

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<sup>61</sup> Noise Abatement Commission, 3.

Commission reviews notable scientific studies that measure effects of noise on multiple levels of human function, concluding that the studies prove that “noise is a factor in city life that is undoubtedly disturbing, injurious to physical and mental well-being, and for the greater part dangerous and unnecessary.”<sup>62</sup> In a later subsection titled, “The Doctors Look at Noise,” the commission concludes, “the continual pressure of strident sound to which New Yorkers are subjected tends to produce impaired hearing, to induce harmful strain upon the nervous system leading to neurasthenic and psychasthenic states, to cause loss of efficiency of workers and thinkers, and finally to interfere so gravely with sound, refreshing sleep that rest is difficult and in some cases impossible.”<sup>63</sup> Here noise is asserted to be detrimental to health as well as economic prosperity, the latter a theme to be riffed on in another subchapter entitled, “Noise Destroys Efficiency.” The commission goes into even greater depth to the ways in which noise disturbs health, citing, “disturbances expressed in heightened pulse rates, increased blood pressure, irregularities in heart rhythm, and, most important of all, in the increase of pressure on the brain itself.”<sup>64</sup>

In firmly establishing noise as more than just nuisance, but as a public health issue, a source of public injury, the commission effectively justified the extensive survey conducted in 1930. The survey itself, borrowing the ideas of Edward Free, employed “500 automobiles, observing noise levels at 138 stations.”<sup>65</sup> The main findings of the study show that indeed, as Edward Free had noted in 1926, the sheer volume, especially in terms of traffic, was the main

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<sup>62</sup> Noise Abatement Commission, 14.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 17

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 22

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 31

contributor to the proliferation of noise.<sup>66</sup> Additional findings were not necessarily reflected in explicit statement of conclusion, but instead were manifested in policy recommendations. These include: prohibiting honking except under dangerous circumstances, the ban of loudspeaker usage by merchants, regulation of public announcement on loudspeakers, suggestion of the use of sound absorbent material in buildings, quieter welding in place of riveting, as well as a radio announcement every night at 10:30 to remind listeners to be courteous to neighbors and turn down the volume.<sup>67</sup> These suggestions had direct impact on future policy adaptations. However, before investigating the historical perspectives on enforcement of these policies and further motion in noise abatement, I would first like to focus on two figures presented in the Noise Abatement Commission's report. This deviation is crucial in that I hope to better illuminate a number of subsurface assumptions of the Commission's report, further articulating the undercurrents of thought that transformed the results of this report, which undoubtedly influenced the subsequent course of noise abatement policy.

### *Surveying the Field*

Before the Noise Abatement Commission's surveying could commence, it was necessary for preliminary investigation into New Yorkers' opinions on noise. The method by which the Commission was to come to numerical representation of annoyances was a questionnaire, circulated through an unspecified group of New York newspapers. In doing so, the Commission wanted to "learn the various types of noise that cause annoyance and the degree to which they effect the whole population."<sup>68</sup> This desire to summarize noise annoyances in terms of the entire

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<sup>66</sup> Noise Abatement Commission, 37

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-59

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

New York population was a daunting task, yet to the Commission it was a crucial task as they argued, “the degree of annoyance produced by any noise” to be “a fair measure of its harmfulness.”<sup>69</sup> In short, this data would dictate the way in which the attention of future efforts would be broken up, in a temporal, spatial and source-based context. Although the supposed basis of this technique was to democratize the Commission’s efforts through public participation, there are numerous points of contention in their methods and implicit assumptions that suggest that democracy was by no means the result, and further, I question if it was ever intended to be.

The first and most upfront problem with the Noise Abatement Commission’s surveying technique is that to answer the survey one had to have purchased a physical copy of the newspaper in which the questionnaire was printed. In addition, the Noise Abatement Commission provides no information on which newspapers were sent questionnaires to print. The only comment on this matter states, “Through the courtesy of New York newspapers these questionnaires were given wide publicity and were printed conspicuously for convenience of persons who wished to participate in the survey.”<sup>70</sup> However, according to the New York Public, there were over 40 independent newspapers being printed in New York in 1929,<sup>71</sup> further illuminating how the lack of information provided by the Commission may very well be misleading. In addition, of these 40 plus, newspapers, there are numerous whose print was written in a language other than English, suggesting that some newspapers would not be sent the questionnaire as a result of their non-English audience. So, to respond to this questionnaire, one had to be an English speaker, reading a newspaper that was included in the Commission’s

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<sup>69</sup> Noise Abatement Commission, 24.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>71</sup> New York Public Library. “New York City Newspapers.”[online], Accessed December 5, 2015 ([https://www.nypl.org/sites/default/files/New\\_York\\_City\\_Newspapers.pdf](https://www.nypl.org/sites/default/files/New_York_City_Newspapers.pdf))

category of a "New York newspaper."<sup>72</sup> One would additionally need to mail the survey back, which was up to the individual completing the survey. Although this is all hypothetical it seems

**NOISE ABATEMENT QUESTIONNAIRE**

Use a soft pencil in filling out questionnaire. Under "Location" give the address of the source of the noises most annoying to you, and under "Hour of Day" state the time at which these noises are noticed by you.

SOURCE OF NOISE	LOCATION	HOUR OF DAY
Loud Speakers in Home - - - -		
Automobile Horns - - - - -		
Trucks—Horse-Drawn - - - -		
Trucks—Motor - - - - -		
Buses—Noisy Mechanism or Tires		
Automobile Cut-Outs - - - -		
Noisy Brakes on Automobiles - -		
Riveting - - - - -		
Pneumatic Drills on Streets - -		
Pneumatic Drills on Excavations -		
Loud Speakers Outside of Stores -		
Airplanes - - - - -		
Noisy Parties - - - - -		
Locomotive Whistles and Bells -		
Tug and Steamship Whistles - -		
Elevated Trains - - - - -		
Subway Trains - - - - -		
Subway Turnstiles - - - - -		
Street Cars - - - - -		
Ash and Garbage Collections - -		
Newsboys' Cries - - - - -		
Unmuffled Motorboats - - - -		
Traffic Whistles - - - - -		
Fire Department Sirens and Trucks		
Milkmen - - - - -		
Factories - - - - -		
What ONE noise is MOST annoying?		

If you have suggestions to offer, write a letter and attach it to your questionnaire.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

NOTE: Your name and address will not be used publicly in any way or at any time.

Mail this questionnaire to: NOISE ABATEMENT COMMISSION  
305 Pearl Street, New York City

Fig. 1 Noise Abatement Questionnaire  
Noise Abatement Commission, 24.

that this final step means that only those who were enraged with noise enough to go out of their way to mail a letter were the ones responding! Effectively the survey was self selecting, leading to a potentially biased aggregate of submissions. The Commission report does acknowledge this possibility, however, stating, "From the people whose injuries from noises are thus below the threshold of consciousness few replies to our questionnaire were to be expected. It was probably therefore from the more than usually sensitive that the results of the survey came."<sup>73</sup>

While acknowledging this fact is a step towards transparency, it is doubtful that

these sampling methods led to an adequate representation of New York's full population. In fact,

<sup>72</sup> Noise Abatement Commission, 26.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

the Commission reported that they received 11,068 complaints total.<sup>74</sup> Yet, according to U.S. census data, in 1930, less than a year after this report was published, 6,930,446 people lived in the city of New York,<sup>75</sup> meaning that the Commission's report represented less than one quarter of one percent (.16 %) of the people living in New York at that time. This is an incredible figure as it confirms the much deeper issue with the survey.

If we look at this survey and accept its methods, the lack of response would call into question the validity of noise as an issue that truly annoys New Yorkers. Yet the entire premise of the Noise Abatement Commission and the reason for which it was funded was the idea that noise indeed was a substantial issue affecting a significant portion of New Yorkers in a negative way. If we accept the methods of the study, these conflicting testimonies would suggest that either people truly did not care about noise, or, people were not compelled enough by noise to respond to the questionnaire, or perhaps people were not educated or aware enough to be forwardly conscious of the purported negative effects of noise. As I have suggested above, it appears the sampling methods are largely flawed, leading us to reassess the validity of the democratic approach the Commission purports to embody. The Noise Abatement Commission feigns ideals of attaining scientific truth as a noise solution and in this way veils their true motivations which are consistent with those elitist undercurrents and the rhetoric of which Julia Barnett Rice was fond. Although the latter Progressive era claimed to extract human biases and subjectivity and replace it with an objective, mechanic and scientific eye, reaching a higher level of democracy,

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<sup>74</sup> Noise Abatement Commission, 26.

<sup>75</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census. "Population of the 100 Largest Urban Places". [online], Accessed December 5, 2015 (<https://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/tab16.txt>).

those with the power to employ these new technologies still employed them with an elite perspective.

*Race and New York City Noise*

In addition to the influence of class interests as discussed above, issues surrounding race also factored into the conversation and ultimately shaped the regulation of noise. In an undated (yet presumably from 1929) cartoon taken from *The New Yorker* used in the Commission's report, successful cartoonist, Ralph Barton depicts a noisy ash collector, a common offender according to the Noise Commission's report. This image is striking for a number of reasons. First, the caption reads, "The sort of thing that brings joy to the ashman's black heart," and "A whole, nice, new big, twenty-story, co-operative apartment house to wake up at six in the morning."<sup>76</sup> In addition to the text, the depiction of the ashman invokes the "savage," a highly racialized caricature. The ashman is transformed into a monster of sorts, with fangs protruding from a wide open mouth, tongue hanging, as if mid-bellow. His body is contorted into a twisted, aggressive posture, arms bulging from his rolled up sleeves where he grips an ashcan with his claw-like fingernails. And, on top of all of this, his skin is dark, most notable in his overlay on a white background. It is clear that the intent of this image is to racialize the body of the ashman in order to better evoke and amplify the frustration that comes with noise annoyances. The use of blackness as a way to guide these frustrations towards the stereotyped vision of the idiot, foolishly uneducated, black body, further implies the "otherness" of the ashman as a disruptive force in the otherwise peaceful, white, idealized social betterment of the New York City cooperative. As Gerald Sazama notes in his review of the history of cooperative housing, the first

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<sup>76</sup> Noise Abatement Commission, 84.





THE SORT OF THING THAT BRINGS JOY TO THE ASHMAN'S BLACK HEART  
A WHOLE, NICE, NEW, BIG, TWENTY-STORY, CO-OPERATIVE APARTMENT HOUSE TO WAKE UP  
AT SIX IN THE MORNING

Fig. 2  
Noise Abatement Commission, 84.

New York City cooperative apartments catered to the economic means of the middle class.<sup>77</sup> So regardless of the actual demographics of an ashman as an occupation, this image places the noise made by the ashman as out of place of the white middle class aural lexicon, as a disruption characterized by blackness. This heightened sense of color awareness is only emphasized by the illustration's caption, even characterizing the ashman's heart as "black." Although previous elite noise arguments were formed within a class conscious context, this image aims at

pushing noise out of the realm of class conflict and into the realm of race relations. Although the ashman could arguably be a symbol of a uniquely downtrodden working class, whose wee-morning hour work marginalizes existence and shapes the conception of their work as "noisy,"

<sup>77</sup>Gerald, Sazama. "A Brief History of Affordable Housing Cooperatives in the United States" (1996). *Economics Working Papers*. Paper 199609. [http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/econ\\_wpapers/199609](http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/econ_wpapers/199609) (Accessed December 5, 2015)

this image instead attempts to depict the ashman as a depraved black body, who is easily targeted across class lines. In this way, the elite noise abatement dialogue that permeated the Noise Abatement Commission's report was attempting to redefine noise as an issue of white versus black rather than just upper class versus lower class, as deep seated racism provided more leverage than mere economic based class divisions. Close reading these two images is very illuminating, as they shed light on hidden realities influencing the history of noise abatement efforts.

*Recounting NYC Noise Abatement History: Silences*

In contemplating alternative readings of the dialogue that is commonly recounted in the history of noise abatement in New York, perspectives that are not typically heard can be brought to the forefront. Here, I would like to highlight an alternative set of contemporary interpretations of the history of New York noise abatement. According to Michel-Rolph Trouillot, historical narratives “necessarily distort life whether or not the evidence upon which they are based could be proved correct.”<sup>78</sup> That is, in recounting a history, it is often necessary that one's own unique line of truth is upheld. Further Trouillot writes, “Silences are inherent in history because any single event enters history with some of its constituting parts missing. Something is always left out while something else is recorded.”<sup>79</sup> Here he touches on the act of writing history the upholding of one specific line of truth over countless other lines of truth. Trouillot goes on to say, “the very mechanisms that make any historical recording possible also ensure that historical facts are not created equal. They reflect differential control of the means of historical production at the

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<sup>78</sup>Michel-Rolph. Trouillot. *Silencing the past: Power and the Production of History*. Beacon Press, 1995. 6.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 49

very first engraving that turns an event into a fact.”<sup>80</sup> It is these silent counter-narratives that I wish to explicate to better comprehend the heterogeneous landscape of understandings of sound and noise. Before doing so, it is crucial to understand that although I am indeed depicting conflicting histories, it is not my intent to reduce and polarize history. In fact, I would assert that distilling historical perspectives into mere binary terms is misleading in that it surreptitiously bolsters distinctions between “oppressor” and “oppressed.” Further, the subjective nature of sound strengthens the dispelling of binary thought, as the possibilities of meaning are countless. Although I do portray the narrative which centralizes Julia Barnett Rice and the Noise Abatement Commission as the dominating and distributed narrative, I assert that there are *many* alternate ways of understanding this history, and, there are many ways of understanding alternate storylines, a point which I will touch upon later.

In 1972, the Fordham Urban Law Journal contained an article outlining the history of New York noise codes. The first major ordinance in New York came in 1936, and according to the authors, “While the purpose was commendable, the lack of objective standards of measurement made it virtually unenforcable.”<sup>81</sup> The journal then goes on to summarize the next thirty years simply characterized by the lack of feasible enforcement. In another historical review article, penned by George Rosen, 1936 is mentioned as a pinnacle year, representing the failure of noise policy. Again, the author skips ahead, this time citing “after World War II,” as the next notable moment in noise abatement history.<sup>82</sup> In brushing over the intervening decades, these authors are effectively deleting a history that is rich in noise abatement related events. In

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<sup>80</sup> Trouillot, 6.

<sup>81</sup> *The New York City Noise Control Code: Not with a Bang, But a Whisper*, 1 Fordham Urb. L.J. 446 (1972). 4.

<sup>82</sup> G. Rosen. "A Backward Glance at Noise Pollution." *American Journal of Public Health* 64, no. 5 (1974): 514-517. 516.

ignoring these years, these authors effectively silence alternate accounts of the conflicts that erupted during these years.

*Resisting a Silencing*

Contesting the narrative that there were no significant events after 1936 and before the post-WWII era, author Lilian Radovac writes, in 1936, “New York was in the midst of a ‘war’ on noise, which had commenced in 1935 and was waged by Mayor Fiorello La Guardia and his police commissioner Lewis Valentine, for the rest of the decade and half of the next.”<sup>83</sup> This war on noise was influenced by the same undercurrents that Julia Barnett Rice’s strategy was founded on, that is, it “marshaled the considerable resources of the city of New York to intervene in aural conflicts on behalf of the city’s most privileged residents.”<sup>84</sup> The differences in the approach to governmental and legislative intervention in this era as compared to Rice’s are due to fading Progressivism and increasing attempts by governing bodies to control the city space in the name of constructing a more logical city. For La Guardia, noise represented a lack of social control and further equated chaos as well as threat to his own political power.<sup>85</sup> In effect, La Guardia set the precedent of criminalizing noise and enforced this through the lens of spatial segregation. As Radovic puts it, “the war on noise figured prominently, and at times quite directly, in the spatial reconfiguration of New York, and several of its measures were directed against groups associated with the street-based economy, including itinerant musicians, pushcart sellers, and junkmen.”<sup>86</sup> In addition, Radovac notes that La Guardia’s noise abatement attacked and restricted noise

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<sup>83</sup> Radovac, 734.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 735

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 744-745

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 754

making during political protests, silencing the music and sounds of immigrants as well as addressing noise made by children in the streets.<sup>87</sup> In summary, Radovac writes, “By equating the sounds of protests, begging, or even certain kinds of music with the commission of violent crimes, La Guardia’s war on noise foreshadowed the ‘broken windows’ theory of urban policing...”<sup>88</sup> By taking up the perspective of minority populations affected by ostensibly “unenforcable”<sup>89</sup> noise laws, Lilian Radovac dispels the myth that noise abatement dropped off of public consciousness in the decades following 1936. In fact, Radovac’s writings assert that the policing of noise actually took on new forms in these decades, illuminating a critical turn in noise abatement politics.

Yet, Radovac’s critique of La Guardia’s “war on noise” is just one way of understanding a little examined segment of history. Scholar Robert Hawkins approaches this era by analyzing how the noise debate redefined what constituted urban employment. Taking noise abatement into the context of the repercussions of the Great Depression, Hawkins examines the social climate related to the act of street begging. In response to the Great Depression, numerous relief efforts were made, characterized by the New Deal social welfare programs aimed at putting the jobless back to work.<sup>90</sup> At the onset of La Guardia’s mayoral stay, his primary objective mirrored these Great Depression responses in creating “an effective relief system and the remaking of New York into a metropolis that was efficient and aesthetically modern.”<sup>91</sup> As Hawkins notes, determining

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<sup>87</sup> Radovac, 744-45

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 756

<sup>89</sup> *The New York City Noise Control Code: Not with a Bang, But a Whisper*, 1 Fordham Urb. L.J. 446 (1972). 4.

<sup>90</sup> Robert Hawkins. “Industry Cannot Go On Without the Production of Some Noise”: New York City’s Street Music Ban and the Sound of Work in the New Deal Era Winner of the 2011 JSH Student Essay Competition.” *Journal of Social History* 46, no. 1 (2012): 106-123. 110.

<sup>91</sup> Hawkins, 110.

those who had lost their jobs due to no fault of their own as opposed to lazy dependents<sup>92</sup> was a prime concern of La Guardia. In turn, this lead New Yorkers and La Guardia to reassess what work really meant; was a street musician a beggar or a worker? In the same vein of Julia Barnett Rice's distinctions of what constituted "unnecessary" noise, La Guardia was faced with redefining the modern subjective soundscape. The course of action La Guardia took was to privilege those means of employment that he viewed as contributing to the betterment of the city and excluding the "unnecessary" sounds of street musicians as well as other street vocalization. The interpretation of this act comes in two forms, it was at once, redefining the sounds of work and the necessary sounds of the street, while also an attempt at modernizing the city in terms of an updated vision as response to the Great Depression. Here, the dialogue between Hawkins and Radovac provides a means of understanding the complexity of the relationship between noise in urban space. This dialogue legitimizes counter-narratives of experience which resist the canonically upheld history of noise abatement, and further exemplifies the manifold levels of truth and meaning associated with noise.

Clare Corbould is another author whose writings reflect an alternative history of noise abatement and the urban landscape of New York. Writing about Harlem in the late 20s to WWII, Corbould reports on the ways sound fostered the development of black communities which resisted white elite definitions of noise. First, Corbould reviews historical newspaper clippings to extract opinions of white listeners hearing the sounds of Harlem in the late 1920s. At the conclusion of this review she writes, "Harlem- or- 'Little Africa'- was special according to these authors, because its sound reflected a primitive 'rhythm of life,' characteristic of those they

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<sup>92</sup> Hawkins, 108.

deemed racially inferior.”<sup>93</sup> This theme of social elites assigning or projecting meaning and value to noise should be familiar at this point, and, it was still characteristic of the ways that white elites heard Harlem in the 1920s. As I have noted before, as in Ralph Barton’s illustration, it was common for whites to racialize noise, and this is what Corbould is referring to, that the sounds of Harlem, heard by white ears were primitive, savage and uneducated. Yet in the face of this stereotyping of noise, Corbould argues, “If white elites wanted to curb sound..., and heard ‘noise’ as a marker of racial primitiveness, their black uptown neighbors found in their prejudices a space in which to define themselves individually and collectively.”<sup>94</sup> What is alluded to here is the ability of residents of Harlem to counter negative racial definitions by denying the putative tenets on which they were based, reclaiming and asserting identity while building communities of resistance. As Corbould notes, “The sound and noise that white New Yorkers heard as cacophonous and atavistic were to Harlem’s black residents a way to claim that space as their own.”<sup>95</sup> In the political economy of New York in the late 1920s, Harlemites were racially excluded from political power as well as wealth. To make a living, many residents had to find work elsewhere as the majority of Harlem businesses were owned by non-blacks.<sup>96</sup> Despite this, Corbould is arguing that noise was a way to lay claim to Harlem, a space that was not economically and politically possessed by its own residents.

By making noise and disobeying the white elite legal definitions of noise, by aurally disrupting the notion of quietude as signifier of white sophistication, civility and social balance,

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<sup>93</sup> Clare Corbould. "Streets, Sounds and Identity in Interwar Harlem." *Journal of Social History* 40, no. 4 (2007): 859-894. 861.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 881

black residents of Harlem reclaimed urban space. Additionally, Corbould writes, “Through sound, Harlem’s residents created a counter-public sphere that was a spatialization of black self-expression commonly understood to be an inherently political act. The assertion of oneself, through sound, resisted the “social death” required of nonwhites in American society.”<sup>97</sup> This type of resistance implies formation of community, which the urban space of Harlem exemplifies.

Yet, Corbould does not identify noise as the sole aural means of resistance in Harlem. Here, silence, the very icon of white elite reform, becomes a means of resisting. When we think of silence as a form of resistance, we may think of the Civil Rights movement, sit-ins and non-violence of the 1960s. Yet, Corbould writes that these strategies were present in the U.S. as early as 1917, with the organization of the Silent Protest Parade, a direct response to Southern lynchings. Here the organizers “hoped that the wordless marching would effectively convey their sentiments to a recalcitrant white public.”<sup>98</sup> In Corbould’s assessment of the 1917 use of silence as resistance, she notes the stereotype of the noisy, savage Harlemit, something that white audiences came to expect. This type of silence is a direct response to the condemnation of ‘noisy blacks.’ In knowingly breaking this stereotype, black resisters threatened white expectations and instilled fear in the white onlookers. Here Corbould shows that sound, as well as its absence, was used as a means of resistance, further enhancing commonly shared community values for residents of Harlem. This text builds on my argument, showing that the pre-WWII era of noise is robust in history and further crucial to understanding alternative perspectives, furthering that the authors have overlooked the post-WWII period of urban noise are participating in a silencing of history.

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<sup>97</sup> Corbould, 862

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 865



A final author to contribute to the contemporary dialogue on the history of New York noise abatement is Jennifer Stoever, who also examines sound in Harlem. Writing after Corbould, Stoever immediately calls for “a more nuanced understanding grounded in black and brown communities targeted by the aural liberalism of urban noise campaigns.”<sup>99</sup> Notwithstanding Corbould’s critical reexamination of noise campaigns in Harlem, Stoever emphasizes the urgency for new historical critiques. Although Corbould unravels an otherwise untold history of resistance and community in Harlem, Stoever’s argument has to do with the ubiquitous centralization of white perspectives that authors, and even Corbould, have taken up by default. At the onset of Stoever’s argument, she unequivocally supports and aligns herself with scholars like Lillian Radovac and Clare Corbould, whose work is focused on understanding noise abatement as mainly a punitive attack on minority populations, at its core representing a white preoccupation with remaining in control of urban space.<sup>100</sup> Nonetheless, Stoever writes, “such intensive critiques of the dominant culture’s archival traces have also inadvertently allowed white-authored conceptions of “noise” to remain in the debate’s center, privileging white sensory orientations and leaving undisturbed the core dichotomy between whites as “noise abaters and people of color as ‘noise-makers.’”<sup>101</sup> That is, in reconstructing histories of noise abatement, even in ways that bring to light the concealed intentions of the laws and whose definition of noise they hinge upon, these arguments still unknowingly prioritize white, elite noise conversation and continue to reinforce the hierarchical structure of political power.

Because these texts still operate within the framework of white elites playing the noise abater

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<sup>99</sup> Jennifer Stoever. “Just Be Quiet Pu-leeze” *The New York Amsterdam News* Fights the Postwar “Campaign against Noise.” *Radical History Review* 2015, no. 121 (2015): 147.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 148

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

role and black or brown bodies being the noise makers, white perspective is centralized. Yet, Stoevers argues that this dichotomy is itself a myth. Evidence of this comes mainly from a newspaper printed in Harlem, the *Amsterdam News*, a source whose reoccurring editorials on noise, written by Harlem residents, recentralizes the perspective of black and brown residents of Harlem and challenges history by showing that urban minorities in Harlem suffered from noise and mobilized their own anti-noise drives just as white elites did. As Stoevers puts it, “the *Amsterdam News* editorial shows the African American working classes advocating for themselves, highlighting noise’s impact on their work ethic and wartime citizenship efforts even as the newspaper’s diction suggests the weariness that accompanied both.”<sup>102</sup> This type of retelling of the history of noise abatement is crucial as it directly challenges the assumptions associated with the framing of historical events.

Stoevers further approaches the articles of the *Amsterdam News* as a means of what Franz Fanon would call “decolonization.”<sup>103</sup> In centralizing the perspective of black and brown residents of Harlem, the articles move towards “releasing the colonized from both the power and the perspective of the colonizer.”<sup>104</sup> In writing about sound and noise it is crucial to recognize the arguments that have dominated historical understanding, and further, if one is to write about sound in the social context, it is crucial to realize the baseline of historical understanding that one is writing from. Stoevers recognizes that the typical dialogue involving sound polarizes white and black into a colonial power structure, however, by asserting previously silenced black and brown voices who were equally affected by noise in the same way white elites were, Stoevers takes a

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<sup>102</sup> Stoevers, 152.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 164

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

proverbial sledge hammer to the framework through which we understand urban noise. While Corbould's work may argue that black and brown residents of Harlem used noise and silence to take back urban space that was not economically, politically, or physically theirs, Stoevers work completely destroys the notion that Harlem ever needed to be "taken back" and instead asserts that regardless of ownership, Harlem was always firmly in the possession of its black and brown residents.

### What To Listen for Next

In recounting the noise abatement history of New York, I have attempted to elicit reoccurring themes, illuminate alternate narratives, and come to a broader understanding of how humans interact with sound in urban space. First, I examined sound in the city in the dawn of industrialization and urbanization, mainly focusing on the ways that human responses to new mechanized sounds represented anxiety related to the mechanical city, leading to a reordering of sensory function. Next I summarized Progressive obsessions with abating sound, especially in the context of an efficiency craze, illustrating Julia Barnett Rice's early iterations of the movement, onward to noise as an object of scientific study. Next, I recounted the conception of noise as a public health concern, eliciting arguments between public and private space and how sound defied the boundaries between. Here I took a closer look into the methods of surveying sound in urban space and the associated difficulties in representing sound in objective terms. Last, I focused in on alternate histories of sound, especially those which revealed a deeper politics of urban noise and illuminated underlying power structures of noise legislation. Concluding in this way, I hope to bring to the surface previously silenced voices in the history of

noise abatement as well as challenge a rethinking of the accepted history of urban noise abatement.

One guiding principle of understanding human relationship with sound is the premise that sound is essentially a subjective experience. Although this may seem to hinder at any type of “truthful” understanding of what sound really is, it is sound’s very subjectivity that makes studying it most valuable. Because sound may be experienced differently by people depending on an individual’s past experiences, socio-economic and cultural placement, relationship with music, etc., we would expect every individual to experience sound in a unique way. However, as I have shown in recounting the history, large groups of people were mobilized in order to abate sound, based on common definitions of noise. Analyzing noise abatement campaigns is a useful way to reveal broader implications of social conflict. Here, sound becomes a tool in revealing deeper societal concerns in class conflict, racial stratification and the concept of “otherness.” Perhaps we should not be studying urban sound only in the utilitarian, objective terms of the Progressive era, but instead, we should be studying sound for its value as social barometer, in coming to a better understanding of past as well as current events.

### Chapter 3: Hearing Kingston Through the Press

With the rich noise abatement history of New York City in mind, we turn to Kingston. Situated 100 miles north of New York City, Kingston's relationship with New York City is crucial in conceiving of the ways sound has been framed in Kingston. It seems that in understanding Kingston as a city, there is always the hovering shadow of New York City, ready to remind us what a *real* city is like. New York City is the ubiquitous disclaimer recited before any statement about Kingston's urbanity is mentioned, the frame of reference to which all aspects of Kingston's legitimacy are compared. Yet this referential mode of thought is valuable as it highlights the differences in noise abatement histories of New York and Kingston.

To what can we attribute the discrepancies that exist between the sonic character of each respective city? Is it a matter of population? According to census data, in 1900, the dawn of the 20th century and the height of the industrialized city, Kingston's population was 24,535 while New York's was 3,437,202. Additionally, in 1930, at the height of U.S. 20th century noise abatement focus, Kingston's population was less than 1% of New York's. Although population undoubtedly accounts for many differences in abatement policy between the two cities, it is useful to conceive of alternative explanations. This way of thinking allows us to conceptualize the ways that each city's unique path in urban noise abatement is telling of the ways that social relationships change, from dense, hyper-urban to rurally surrounded, urban fledgling. For instance, what if the variance in noise histories is additionally a matter of differences in urban elite temperaments? That is to say, that the elites that lived in Kingston might not have been the same elites that lived in New York. Perhaps Kingston's rural placement drew a more rugged, less

sensitive urban elite, more tolerant of sound. For some, perhaps the noise of industry framed in the context of Kingston was a reminder that humankind was the conquerer of the wilderness, while in New York City, it was distracting from silence. Alternatively, could it be that Kingston's quiet history of noise abatement is indicative of the lack of social strife in the city, that class battles were not at the forefront of consciousness as it was at that time in New York? With these questions in mind, it is necessary to delve deeper into the history of noise abatement in Kingston.

Before coming to terms with the comparative discrepancies between Kingston and New York, we must situate ourselves within the context of the shared memory of what 20th century Kingston was. In doing so, there are three themes that will be helpful in our review of Kingston's historical documents regarding sound. First, we must understand Kingston as a city whose economic potential was never able to be thoroughly sustained, thus preventing the expansion of Kingston into a metropolitan hub. Numerous cycles of economic prosperity followed by collapse of industry recurred in Kingston in the 20th century. The first instance of such occurrence came in the early decades of the 20th century when Kingston's numerous extraction industries experienced their demise. Until the late 1920s bluestone, limestone and cement extraction were the main drivers of the riverfront economy of Kingston.<sup>105</sup> The Great Depression only added to the economic woes of Kingston during this time. A second example of the unsustainable economic aspirations is the legacy of IBM in Kingston. Starting in 1955, IBM had a headquarters in Kingston and by 1959, provided over 5,000 jobs to Kingston, peaking at 7,100 workers in 1985.<sup>106</sup> Although IBM in Kingston had a successful 40 years, in the name of reducing costs, IBM headquarters closed and relocated downriver in 1995, taking more than 7,000 from

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<sup>105</sup> Alf Evers. *Kingston: City on the Hudson*. Overlook Press, 2005. 394.

<sup>106</sup> "Kingston-The IBM Years." *Kingston: The IBM Years*. Friends of Historic Kingston, n.d. Web. 04 Mar. 2016.

Kingston's population. The last marker that may be seen as an ongoing symbol of Kingston's inability to expand beyond a certain threshold has been the fixed nature of the city's population. As stated before, in 1900 Kingston's population was 24,535, a number that peaked in 1960 with 29,260 and as of 2014 was estimated to be 23,557. The 2014 population is the lowest count since 1900, meaning that since 1900, Kingston's population has had some minor fluctuations, but has mainly stayed constant. This context evokes a sense that Kingston's economy has mostly stagnated over the past 115 years. When we consider the meaning of writings on noise in Kingston as well as Kingston's noise abatement policy, then, we must consider this backdrop.

Another theme that is useful in contextualizing Kingston's history with noise involves thinking about Kingston as the intermediary location between New York and the country or wilderness. That is, we may consider Kingston as a "gateway to the Catskills" as local historian Alf Evers calls it. In doing so, we must recognize the ways that Kingston is conceptualized in the minds of those who remember it, as a bastion (or midway point) of civilization on the boundary of the Catskills. Additionally, associated with this concept of the "gateway to the Catskills" is the pushing of the radius of the frontier whose nucleus is New York City. The frontier mode of thinking also involves strains of imperialist or colonial ideology in that New York City is the motherland who profits from the extraction of natural resources from the expanding frontier. This perspective is crucial to consider, as this model can be conceived in environmental history as an instance of the classic dialectic between pollution and economic development. This mindset of extracting wealth from the natural resources of Kingston (initially limestone, bluestone, concrete, and then, ultimately, drinking water) has implications for the ways that people conceptualized urban pollution at the dawn of the 20th century and beyond. Additionally important here are the

ways that the upstate City of Kingston acted as a way to escape the tightening of constraint on industry in terms of labor laws, land use planning, and fledgling environmental laws. This mindset of being outside the jurisdiction of the stipulations of New York City is useful in gaining insight into the types of noise abatement laws that were introduced in Kingston.

The last theme pertaining to Kingston is that which influences the city's conception even today, Kingston as a historical colonial city. First settled in 1652 by the Dutch, Kingston (then Wiltwyck) was lost to the British in 1664. Kingston also played a role in the American Revolutionary war, as it served as a meeting ground for the first New York governing body after the Declaration of Independence. Additionally, the city was site of British retaliation as the Stockade (currently uptown) was burned almost entirely to the ground.<sup>107</sup> When investigating the ways that sound have been written about in Kingston, realizing the ways that the city itself is remembered and conceived as a historical and American space, may clue us in to nuances of experiences of sound.

As I have searched for information regarding the history of noise ordinances in Kingston, I have found only one source whose records allow a recounting of noise history of Kingston, the newspaper, the *Kingston Daily Freeman*.<sup>108</sup> Newspaper clippings spanning from 1895 to 1969 aid in articulating a history of noise abatement in Kingston that parallels the noise abatement time frame of New York City, whose reference points I have already laid out. In my analysis, I intend to read *The Daily Freeman* as a medium reflecting local class politics. Additionally, contextualizing the *Freeman* in terms of its own conceived politics is important in establishing

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<sup>107</sup> United States. National Park Service. "Dutch Colonization." *National Parks Service*. U.S. Department of the Interior, n.d. Web. 06 Mar. 2016.

<sup>108</sup> After exhaustively phoning both Ulster County and Kingston government offices, no record of any noise ordinances besides the current was found. I was told the police office scoured through an old locker full of documents and the Common Council searched their attic!



its relationship to a larger public readership. *The Daily Freeman* was first established in 1845 and after a period of shifting ownership, was purchased by Jay E. Klock in 1891. Klock, only 25 at the time,<sup>109</sup> had enough wealth and journalistic experience to modernize and establish *The Freeman* as a permanent institution of Kingston, in his lifetime pushing circulation numbers from 3,000 to over 20,000 copies.<sup>110</sup> As Jay E. Klock explained himself in a 1907 book, *The History of Ulster County, New York*, [the *Freeman's*] “politics are and have been consistently Republican.”<sup>111</sup> However, the platform of the 1907 Republican party was radically different than its contemporary viewpoint. Characteristic of the early 20th century Republican political party was the early concept of Progressive ideology, embodied by Theodore Roosevelt, whose presidency was waning in 1907.<sup>112</sup> Here, the political leanings of Jay E. Klock and his *Daily Freeman* seem to be somewhat similar to those of Julia Barnett Rice and her *Society for the Suppression of Unnecessary Noise*, in that they were both elites who identified as Republican and Progressive. In embarking on a noise history through newspaper, in part, I hope to extract the differences between New York City and Kingston, a task that will help articulate the ways that Kingston’s sense of urbanity functions in a different manner than New York’s. Additionally, I intend to report on specific narratives of noise, chronicled by the *Daily Freeman*, in hopes of unearthing an alternative approach to reimagining Kingston’s history, through sound.

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<sup>109</sup> Alphonso T. Clearwater. *The History of Ulster County, New York*. Vol. 1. Heritage Books, 2001. 504.

<sup>110</sup> "The Kingston Daily Freeman — Browse by Title — HRVH Historical Newspapers." *The Kingston Daily Freeman — Browse by Title — HRVH Historical Newspapers*. N.p., n.d. Web. 06 Mar. 2016.; Fusfeld, Ira. "The Kingston Daily Freeman Blogs: Ira Fusfeld's Blog." *Ira Fusfeld's Blog*. N.p., 25 Sept. 2013. Web. 06 Mar. 2016.

<sup>111</sup> Clearwater, 508.

<sup>112</sup> "Theodore Roosevelt." *The White House*. The White House, 30 Dec. 2014. Web. 07 Mar. 2016. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/1600/presidents/theodoreroosevelt>; Republican Party Platforms: "Republican Party Platform of 1900," June 19, 1900. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29630>

Before beginning a tour of the *Daily Freeman* I must make note of some comments concerning my own research and sampling methods. I have drawn from two main sources in researching articles about noise in the *Freeman*. First, there is <http://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>, run by an independent, non-governmental affiliated individual by the name of Tom Tryniski. Although the web site boasts 34,000,000 newspapers, there is a general lack of organization which leads me to refrain from a more quantitative analysis of the newspaper articles. Due to the way the website and uploads of the newspapers function, I am unable to say for certain if I am working with a complete set of the *Daily Freeman*, I am unsure about what years I am searching through and I cannot authoritatively report on possible gaps in the archives. As a result, I may not have the fullest picture of Kingston's *Daily Freeman*, yet for my purposes, in following specific lines of dialogue, I find this possible lack of continuity to be permissible. For the years of 1903 to 1912, I use HRHV Historical Newspapers (<http://news.hrvh.org>). This source has compiled a complete, gapless set of newspapers, which may account for the more robust narratives I provide in these years. I hope that in making note of my exploratory research methods, in clearly stating that my research of the *Daily Freeman* is not an even-handed and complete survey, readers are not left wondering about gaps in the narrative, as these are purposeful and not necessarily representative of actual *Daily Freeman* reporting.

#### 1895-1912 Preamble to Kingston's Noise Ordinance

In the years 1895 to 1912, there are numerous ways that the *Daily Freeman* reported on sound. First, there is record of the paper writing about noise in the context of disturbance, a topic whose foundational argument stands on suppositions about health concerns. Second, the *Freeman* chronicles a 1912 argument over the role of church bells in public space. This argument

originates with an editorial from the *Freeman* and turns into a public forum via “Letters to the Editor.” Here, the underpinning argument is one of health concern. However, the dialogue brings us into concerns over religion’s role in the right to public sonic space of Kingston.

### *Disturbing the Peace*

The first recorded instance of noise in the *Daily Freeman* comes on September 13, 1895, a time in which Kingston apparently had a dog issue. The article, titled “Made Ill By Noise” reads,

Since the noise made by shooting the dogs at the city hall last Friday night, Miss Mary Rooney, daughter of the janitress, has been seriously ill with nervous prostration. It is hardly thought that she can recover from the shock caused by the barking of the dogs and the shooting of guns. Chief Hood did a sensible thing when he substituted chloroform for revolvers in disposing of the dogs.<sup>113</sup>

This account evokes quite a bizarre scene: Police Chief Hood, acting on a dog licensing ordinance from September 3 of 1895,<sup>114</sup> apparently decided to shoot the unlicensed dogs, an act that caused Miss Mary Rooney to experience acute illness. This article sets the tone for succeeding articles in firmly attesting that noise can pose a serious threat to the health and wellbeing of the residents of Kingston. Yet, the tone of this article also informs us as to the way that the reaction to sound has historically been gendered. There is a certain level of implicit sexism in the language of this article that belongs to a broader American attribute of associating

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<sup>113</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, “Made Ill By Noise.” September 13, 1895. From HRVH Historical Newspapers. <http://news.hrvh.org/veridian/cgi-bin/senylrc?a=d&d=kingstondaily18950913.2.42&srpos=1&e=-----en-20-kingstondaily-1--txt-txIN-shooting+the+dogs-----#> (accessed March 10, 2016)

<sup>114</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, “The Dog Ordinance.” September 3, 1895. From HRVH Historical Newspapers. <http://news.hrvh.org/veridian/cgi-bin/senylrc?a=d&d=kingstondaily18950903.2.43&srpos=3&e=-----189-en-20-kingstondaily-1--txt-txIN-dog+ordinance-----#> (accessed March 10, 2016)

women with frailty and hysteria. Lastly, it is worthwhile to note that here, it is the enforcer of law, Chief Hood, that creates the trauma-inducing sounds in public space, leading to illness. Writing about this pathway of noise nuisance, stemming from law enforcement and affecting the public, is extremely unique for the *Daily Freeman*, as it is the only recorded account of its kind.

*The Daily Freeman* additionally chronicles numerous instances of “disturbance.” One example comes in 1911, with a short blurb titled, “Negroes Turned Loose.” The article reads, “The four negroes taken into custody for creating a disturbance on Ann and Union streets Monday were allowed to go by the police.”<sup>115</sup> This text calls upon the idea of someone creating a “disturbance,” a generally broad term for actions outside social constraints. Yet, a disturbance is inherently an aural phenomena. In the public space of the city, there is no silent disturbance, as silence implies a lack of action. Another article dealing with disturbance reads, “A couple of drunken negroes from the brickyards made a disturbance in Van Bramer’s restaurant on the Strand on Saturday night and were kicked into the street by the proprietor for their trouble. They insisted on insulting pedestrians, when a crowd gathered and nearly kicked the head off of one of them. No arrests were made.”<sup>116</sup> In this example of disturbance, the aurality of the circumstance becomes more apparent with the mention of “insulting pedestrians,” affording audible vocalization to the scene. This description of disturbance helps readers silently imagine a loud, raucous, belligerent caricature of black brickyard workers, leading us to understand varying assessments of sound as truly a conflict of social class and race. The *Daily Freeman*’s coverage

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<sup>115</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, “Negroes Turned Loose.” November 28, 1911. From HRVH Historical Newspapers. <http://news.hrvh.org/veridian/cgi-bin/senylrc?a=d&d=kingstondaily19111128.2.77&srpos=2&e=-----191-en-20-kingstondaily-1-byDA-txt-txIN-negroes+turned+loose----1911--> (accessed March 10, 2016)

<sup>116</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, “Kicked Into the Street.” November 19, 1904. From HRVH Historical Newspapers.

of the brickyards, where mostly Italians and African-Americans worked, chronicles fights<sup>117</sup>, stabbings<sup>118</sup>, shootings<sup>119</sup>, gun toting strikes<sup>120</sup>, and deadly accidents<sup>121</sup>, all which point to the marginalized existence typical of a brickyard worker. Thus, when *The Freeman* records instance of a disturbance made by a brickyard worker, this is representative of the sonic intrusion of a lower class in an exclusionary public space. Here, public space has silently been inscribed with sonic rules, limiting the sounds heard through constraints of class and race, while also transforming public aural space into an arena of contention.

While still on the topic of class and the Kingston brickyards, a 1907 article titled, “Noisy Whistles - They Disturb The Dutchess County Nabobs,” presents itself as an article packed with information. The blurb reads,

Writing to the *Poughkeepsie Star*, Douglass Merritt makes the following comment on the brickyard whistles at East Kingston: It seems a wise decision of the Poughkeepsie board of health to prohibit the blowing of the button factory whistle at unseasonable hours, even if such a noisy signal is requisite at other times. If Poughkeepsie forbids this annoyance, what shall be thought of East Kingston, where a dozen brickyards are

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<sup>117</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, “Negroes In A Fight.” May 17, 1905. From HRVH Historical Newspapers.

<sup>118</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, “Negro Stabbed Without Warning.” June 20, 1912. From HRVH Historical Newspapers.

<sup>119</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, “Negroes Shot and Will Probably Die.” September 18, 1906. From HRVH Historical Newspapers.

<sup>120</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, “Marching Strikers Armed With Guns.” May 5, 1909. From HRVH Historical Newspapers.

<sup>121</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, “Italian Killed Negro Injured.” August 17, 1907. From HRVH Historical Newspapers.

still permitted to sound their whistles before daylight, in summer before 4 o'clock  
a.m.<sup>122</sup>

Here, *The Daily Freeman* takes a pointed jab at the estate wealth associated with Dutchess County and in doing so reveals much about class-based sensitivities towards the sounds of work. As the title suggests, *The Daily Freeman* positions two adjacent counties partitioned by the Hudson River as to spaces in conflict, one as working class and the other as elite. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, the word “nabob” typically referred to a “deputy ruler, or viceroy under the Mughal rule of India”<sup>123</sup> and “In England the name was applied to men who made fortunes working for the British East India Company and returned home to purchase seats in Parliament. Thus the word nabob came to mean someone of great wealth or unusual prominence.”<sup>124</sup> The use of this word in reference to Dutchess county elites is a sharp jab at the refined sensibilities of the Dutchess County elite. Further inquiry into the particular elite mentioned, a Douglass Merritt, reveals him to be, in the words of *The Freeman*, “one of Dutchess county’s millionaires, whose estate adjoins that of John Jacob Astor.”<sup>125</sup> Likewise, a 1908 book dedicated to the history of Rhinebeck describes Merritt as “a wealthy public-spirited citizen, ever striving for the betterment of local conditions and making more attractive home surroundings. He frequently appeals through the home newspaper to his townspeople to remedy

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<sup>122</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, “Noisy Whistles.” November 23, 1907. From HRVH Historical Newspapers. <http://news.hrvh.org/veridian/cgi-bin/senylrc?a=d&d=kingstondaily19071123.2.69&srpos=1&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-noisy+whistles-----> (accessed March 10, 2016)

<sup>123</sup> "Nawab." *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. Encyclopedia Britannica, <http://www.britannica.com/topic/nawab> (accessed 11 Mar. 2016)

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, “About The Folks.” September 17, 1906. From HRVH Historical Newspapers. <http://news.hrvh.org/veridian/cgi-bin/senylrc?a=d&d=kingstondaily19060917.2.54&srpos=7&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-douglass+merritt-----#> (accessed March 10, 2016)

evils.”<sup>126</sup> Although here Merritt’s character is portrayed as altruistic, *The Daily Freeman*’s ironic portrayal of Merritt’s genteel preoccupation suggests that his bourgeois sensibilities are perhaps more self-centered (similar to Julia Barnett Rice). With this in mind, it is useful to imagine how aristocratic ears would have heard the whistles from Kingston’s brickyards. Primary, Merritt’s innately positioned listening brands Kingston as of a lower, working class, something Merritt is adverse towards. What is crucial to this instance of sonic class conflict is the ways that the attenuation of sound disregards boundaries of county jurisdictions, how the earshot of the whistle transgresses and disrupts the tranquility of Merritt’s estate. Perhaps it is for this reason that *The Daily Freeman* took up such a mocking attitude towards Merritt; he might have been able to use his power to sway opinion in his own county, yet, Ulster county payed him no respect!

A last instance of disturbance recorded by *The Daily Freeman* comes in the year 1912, with a blurb titled, “Brutal Hoodlums- Their Noise Disturbs Patients in the City Hospital.”<sup>127</sup> The article states,

Thursday night about 12 o’clock a large gang of hoodlums returning home from the Odd Fellows’ carnival raised considerable disturbance in front of the Kingston City Hospital. Unfortunately before the police could reach the scene they had made their escape. There are several patients in the hospital at the present time who are in a very serious condition and the racket created by the hoodlums did not improve their condition any.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Howard Holdridge Morse. *Historic Old Rhinebeck: Echoes of Two Centuries*. 1908. 403.

<sup>127</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, “Brutal Hoodlums.” July 19, 1912. From HRVH Historical Newspapers. <http://news.hrvh.org/veridian/cgi-bin/senylrc?a=d&d=kingstondaily19120719.2.59&srpos=174&e=-----191-en-20-kingstondaily-161-byDA-txt-txIN-odd+fellows----1912--> (accessed March 10, 2016)

<sup>128</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, “Brutal Hoodlums.” July 19, 1912.

Here, once again, the theme of noise as an injury to personal health takes hold. Notable in this instance is that the “gang of hoodlums”<sup>129</sup> here are participants in the Odd Fellows’ carnival. The Odd Fellows was a lodge-like club whose religiously influenced mission was aimed at “giving aid to those in need and of pursuing projects for the benefit of all mankind.”<sup>130</sup> Again, we see seemingly altruistic ideology at play, this time as the culprit, as the noise-makers. In 1912, hospitals were not being built with sound in mind, nor was the soundproofing technology in existence.

These instances of disturbance, exemplify the multifaceted ways that sound disruptions negotiate conflict between class. Additionally, these textual accounts provided by *The Daily Freeman* identify the concept of a disturbance as an inherently audible act, a transgression. These numerous cases of disturbance illuminate exclusionary class distinctions inscribed in the public space of Kingston as well as the common held understanding of noise as injurious to one’s health. Here treating sound as a location of deeper inquiry and social critique has helped to garner themes which will guide us through additional related conflict.

### *Resounding Peals in Public Space*

As far as the indexical role that *The Daily Freeman* plays in putting forth a history of city noise, the late summer months of the year 1912 are of great importance. Here we see a short but extremely rich dialogue playing out in the editorial section of the paper, the main focus of which

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<sup>129</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, “Brutal Hoodlums.” July 19, 1912.

<sup>130</sup> The Sovereign Grand Lodge Independent Order of Odd Fellows. “About Us.” ioof.org. [http://www.ioof.org/IOOF/About\\_Us/About\\_US/IOOF/About.aspx?hkey=98dab621-cf44-4b0d-b4f1-5a1b5e8326d6](http://www.ioof.org/IOOF/About_Us/About_US/IOOF/About.aspx?hkey=98dab621-cf44-4b0d-b4f1-5a1b5e8326d6) (accessed March 11, 2016)



is the ringing of church bells. This dialogue begins in a piece simply titled, “Bell Ringing.”<sup>131</sup>

The article starts,

On a recent Sunday one of the most prominent and best-loved citizens of Kingston lay dying and his physicians feared that the customary ringing of the church bells would hasten his end. For this reason the ringing was omitted. No damage was thereby done to the cause of religion. The usual number of people went to church.<sup>132</sup>

These opening remarks are characteristic of the early 20th century association between noise and its apparent ability to injure one’s health. Further, this record documents an instance where a professional physician actually went out of the way to quell church bells in order to prevent damage to a patient’s health, illustrating the legitimacy of this association. The *Freeman* goes on to bolster this viewpoint, arguing, “Only those who have experienced a violent sickness can understand how dreadful is the sound of a bell to these sufferers. It sometimes shortens their lives and possibly in some cases prevents recoveries which would be otherwise effected.”<sup>133</sup> Up to this point, the article is not overtly controversial. But then, the *Freeman* boldly goes on, “There is nothing sacred about church bells. They are no part of religion. Neither Christ nor his apostles nor any of his followers for centuries afterward ever saw or heard a bell, for the simple reason that the article had not been invented.”<sup>134</sup> Here the *Freeman* is completely abstracting religion from the sound of bells, bluntly arguing against the religious use of bells. While it may

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<sup>131</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, “Bell Ringing.” July 19, 1912. From HRVH Historical Newspapers. <http://news.hrvh.org/veridian/cgi-bin/senylrc?a=d&d=kingstondaily19120729.2.33&srpos=10&e=-----191-en-20-kingstondaily-1-byDA.rev-txt-txIN-bell+ringing----1912--> (accessed March 14, 2016)

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

seem like a bold statement, writer, Isaac Weiner notes the frequency of this phenomenon, “complaints about bell ringing grew increasingly prevalent during the second half of the 19th century, especially in urban settings.”<sup>135</sup> Weiner attributes heightened sensitivity to church bells to changing character of cities in the turn of the 20th century, specifically changes in attitudes towards sound but also, changing attitudes towards the role of religion in urban space.<sup>136</sup> These changes are recorded by the text of the *Freeman*, as it bemoans the “blowing of brick yard and factory whistles, the silly curfew bell and the tooting at night of railroad engines.”<sup>137</sup> It appears that the *Freeman*, is mainly attacking sounds that enter the earshot of public space whose function is to demarcate time. The *Freeman*’s evidence for the obsolescence of these apparently archaic signals is in the fact that even with the silencing of the church bell, “the usual number of people went to church,”<sup>138</sup> thus proving that the time keeping aspect of sound is outdated. Weiner adds to this claim, writing, “High class socialites claimed a new right to sleep in on Sunday mornings after having spent Saturday evenings immersed in partying instead of prayer. A bell ringing schedule inspired by the temporal and liturgical cadences of rural monasteries, in other words, proved increasingly ill suited for the destandardized and individualized rhythms of modern urban life.”<sup>139</sup> Likewise, in semi-urban-industrial Kingston, we may extend Weiner’s

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<sup>135</sup> Weiner, Isaac. *Religion out Loud: Religious Sound, Public Space, and American Pluralism*. NYU Press, 2013. 36.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

<sup>137</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, “Bell Ringing.” July 19, 1912. From HRVH Historical Newspapers. <http://news.hrvh.org/veridian/cgi-bin/senylrc?a=d&d=kingstondaily19120729.2.33&srpos=10&e=-----191-en-20-kingstondaily-1-byDA.rev-txt-txIN-bell+ringing----1912--> (accessed March 14, 2016)

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>139</sup> Weiner, 38.

notions about urban individualism, class and temporally-linked sound beyond religion and to work, industry and social life.

The very next day, a letter to the editor in response to the bells article surfaces in the *Freeman*. In the article, titled, “Oh! Those Bells- Besides the Noise They’re Usually Out of Tune,”<sup>140</sup> the author takes the side of the *Freeman*, and extends their critique, bemoaning the a-musicality of the frequently out-of-tune peals.<sup>141</sup> At one point, the author takes up a somewhat satirical tone, urging fellow Rondout residents to,

rise up now, before it is too late and protest. There never yet was a set of chimes in perfect tune unless they cost fabulous sums. I can hear them now while some ambitious and willing member of the church leaps madly from lever to lever trying to execute “Abide With Me” with the G slightly flatted and the C just a shade sharp and all the other Rondout bells sound a changing accompaniment in every known key.<sup>142</sup>

Notably, here the author is not critiquing religion, instead, the text focuses on the actual object, the bells themselves. Further, the author seems to hold an elite perspective on sound as well as music, addressing the bell-ringer, perhaps an earnest figure, as not having the musical capacity to recognize the egregiousness of the out of tune bells. The author ends his rant in noting his perception of the people of Kingston’s waterfront, the Rondout, as submissive people that do not speak up for themselves.<sup>143</sup> The author counters this submissiveness with an imaginary dialogue

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<sup>140</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, “Oh! Those Bells” July 30, 1912. From HRVH Historical Newspapers. <http://news.hrvh.org/veridian/cgi-bin/senylrc?a=d&d=kingstondaily19120730.2.69&srpos=2&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-oh+those+bells----->

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

in which he asks, “Do the up town people stand that too?”<sup>144</sup> In juxtaposing these two neighborhoods, the author is undoubtedly associating a higher class (uptown) with a lower tolerance for “noise,” regardless of its partially religious nature.

The very next day, again letters to the editors appear on the continuing dialogue of Kingston’s church bells. First comes a letter that is highly critical of the previous day’s letter. The author is demeaning to his opponent and likens his ideas to “a person with the reasoning power of a child,”<sup>145</sup> “one who exhibits so many calf-like tendencies.”<sup>146</sup> He goes on, “His writing also implies that when he suddenly bumped upon an idea, it caused his head to ring almost continuously.”<sup>147</sup> All of these textual attacks against the previous article seem to be intended to position the writer of this article at higher intellectual ground. Yet, this author, a Frederick M. Snyder, is asserting his superior reasoning not necessarily through his own intellectual ability, but through the prestige of religion. Snyder writes, “While there is considerable to be said in the negative regarding church bells, they are evidently every bit as essential as the factory whistle. The church bell has a greater mission than the indication of time, it is an entreaty for Sunday observation.”<sup>148</sup> Here, Snyder is vocalizing an opinion that directly confronts Isaac Weiner’s notion that church bells were not heard to be a religious sound. Snyder is directly identifying church bells as a sound that is crucial to religion and he is implicitly asserting that religion has

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<sup>144</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, “Oh! Those Bells” July 30, 1912. From HRVH Historical Newspapers. <http://news.hrvh.org/veridian/cgi-bin/senylrc?a=d&d=kingstondaily19120730.2.69&srpos=2&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-oh+those+bells----->

<sup>145</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, “For And Against Bells.” July 31, 1912. From HRVH Historical Newspapers. <http://news.hrvh.org/veridian/cgi-bin/senylrc?a=d&d=kingstondaily19120731.2.37&srpos=9&e=-----en-20-kingstondaily-1--txt-txIN-for+and+against+bells-----#>

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

the right to intrude into public and private space, regardless of a 20th century city's diverse schedules of life. Additionally, this position is notable because Frederick M. Snyder was a prominent medical doctor in 1912.<sup>149</sup> This further complicates the dialogue on bells, as the *Freeman* in its first article made the argument that bells were injurious to hospital patients. Here is evidence that perhaps not all medical professionals agreed with the idea that sound was injurious to health; or alternatively, here we have evidence that the role of religion in urban space was becoming contentious in early 20th century Kingston.

After two more letters to the editor, one arguing against bells for their disruption of sleep and one in favor of bells, advocating for the ringers to be trained in proper ringing technique,<sup>150</sup> the *Freeman* finally closes the discussion. Again, the *Freeman* invokes the health concerns that noise poses, "The plight of the sick person is terrifying. Trolley cars bang by with wheels just a trifle flatter than is necessary. Motormen stamp upon their alarm bells with needless energy. Chauffeurs delight in practicing with the "cut out." The discordant church bells ring. The nerve-gnawing factory whistles toot."<sup>151</sup> This diatribe against noise is extremely familiar and is highly reminiscent of the writings of Julia Barnett Rice and her Society For The Suppression of Unnecessary Noise. In fact, the *Freeman* goes on to advocate for the "organization of a local society in Kingston,"<sup>152</sup> furthering the same progressive agenda happening in New York City.

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<sup>149</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, "Appendicitis Operation." December 19, 1911. From HRVH Historical Newspapers.; *The Daily Freeman*, "New Physician Here." October 3, 1910. From HRVH Historical Newspapers.

<sup>150</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, "For And Against Bells." July 31, 1912. From HRVH Historical Newspapers.; *The Daily Freeman*, "More Anent Bell Ringing." August 1, 1912.

<sup>151</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, "Supporting the Neighbors." August 5, 1912. From HRVH Historical Newspapers.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

Although noise abatement sentiments may have been present in Kingston, there is no evidence that a society was ever founded.

### *1930-1936 Kingston's First Noise Ordinance*

The first noise ordinance in the city of Kingston was legislated in December of the year 1935, one year before New York City's, and was proposed by an Alderman, to be unanimously adopted by the Common Council.<sup>153</sup> Although this was the first legal document whose sole intent was directed at noise, it was not Kingston's first legal document mentioning noise. Earlier that year, in August, Kingston's health board had developed a committee intended to eliminate unnecessary noise.<sup>154</sup> This committee was formed primarily in response to a petition signed by 37 residents in earshot of the Dairyman's League plant.<sup>155</sup> Interestingly, the head of the committee and Commissioner of Health, Louis G. Bruhn is reported to have said, "Additional legislation is not needed to eliminate unnecessary noises that are detrimental to health."<sup>156</sup> In support of this statement, Bruhn argued that the stipulations of Section Nine of the then current sanitary code already covered the topic of noise and thus, no new legislation would be needed.<sup>157</sup> Bruhn is right, Section Nine of the code, reproduced in full in the article, does cover noise extensively. However, it seems that this instance of noise complaints from residents of Kingston implies that there were problems in the enforcement of this sanitary code. Against Bruhn's

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<sup>153</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, "Anti-Noise Law Now In Effect In City." December 17, 1935. Fulton History.

<sup>154</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, "Noise Committee Says New Legislation is Not Needed Now in Kingston." August 21, 1935. Fulton History.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

recommendation as the Commissioner of the Kingston Board of Health and just four months later on December 3, 1935, Kingston's first noise ordinance is passed.<sup>158</sup> The most important difference between this noise ordinance and the noise regulations mentioned in the sanitary law is the move towards criminalizing noise violations, actually articulating the penalties. In an article on December 17, 1935, it was made clear that violators of the new ordinance would be "deemed guilty of a misdemeanor and shall be liable to and be punished by a fine not exceeding \$50 or by imprisonment- not exceeding six months, or by both."<sup>159</sup> Although the language characterizing the penalties is relatively clear, the description of prohibited sounds is somewhat vague,

The ordinance prohibits all ringing of gongs and bells and all blowing of horns and whistles, and all noises that are detrimental to public health, or that disturb the public peace and quiet, or that annoys, endangers or injures the comfort, repose or health of any considerable number of persons, or unnecessary noises, except the giving of any signals required by law.<sup>160</sup>

After listing very specific sounds like gongs and bells, the legislation criminalizes any type of noise that disturbs the "public peace and quiet," endangers "any considerable number of persons." This language appears to assume and bolster a set of audible social norms while simultaneously criminalizing those that do not conform. Author Brandon LaBelle writes that this line of noise legislation "comes to mirror particular moral regimes that locate deviant behavior as inherently *out of place*; the designing of quieter neighborhoods, as a civic project, party positions

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<sup>158</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, "Council Adopts Anti-Noise Ordinance." December 4, 1935. Fulton History.

<sup>159</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, "Anti-Noise Law Now In Effect In City." December 17, 1935. Fulton History.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

noise on the side of violation, linking outspokenness, objection, and social difference to forms of audible excess and annoyance.”<sup>161</sup> Here, the legislation’s vague reference to the “public” as a socially understood set of values may have acted to further push those on the fringe of society off the edges into criminal behavior. Additionally, the vague language makes no attempt to identify if work whistles or church bells are now prohibited.

In the months following Kingston’s first noise ordinance, there are few articles reporting on the outcomes of the new legislation. One article reports on one of the first arrests on the ordinance’s grounds, a man who held down the horn of his car for many blocks.<sup>162</sup> Although this appears to be the only publicized arrest in the months following the newly adopted noise ordinance, the *Freeman* does reflect on the effectiveness of its implementation. Less than a year later, the *Freeman* writes, “It was stated that since the adoption of the anti-noise ordinance there had been a decrease in the amount of noises in the city, but that there was still room for improvement in the situation. It was suggested that if the police made a few arrests for violation of the ordinance it might have a salutary effect.”<sup>163</sup> Another article, appearing about 10 days later, issues the same advocacy, yet lists the caveats to enforcement, “As there are approximately 200 or more ordinances on the city books it is manifestly impossible for the police department to enforce all of them as there are not enough men to assign to the job.”<sup>164</sup> According to the *Freeman*, the noise legislation does appear to have had an effect on the sounds of

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<sup>161</sup> Brandon LaBelle. *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life*. A&C Black, 2010. 64.

<sup>162</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, “Wiands Explained Why Horn on Auto was Kept Blowing.” June 26, 1936. Fulton History.

<sup>163</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, “Anti-Noise Ordinance Effective in Part, But There’s Still Room for Improvement; Arrests Suggested.” September 9, 1936. Fulton History.

<sup>164</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, “Noise Ordinance Is To Be Enforced Here.” September 30, 1936. Fulton History.



Kingston, yet, the ordinance's enforcement seems to have been logistically difficult for the police force to carry out.

### *1939-1941 Sound Trucks and Freedom of Speech*

Of the numerous instances where the *Daily Freeman* advocates for increased noise ordinance enforcement, an article in May of 1939 indicates the temporal nuances of noise dialogue in engaging with “sound trucks,” now a somewhat archaic technology. The article rails against “canned noise wagons” and a specific “ballyhoo blaster,” that was “emitting loud and raucously” and was “permitted to disturb and distress citizens of the city and holiday visitors in our midst.”<sup>165</sup> Much to the *Freeman's* dismay, “Police authorities declared that they could do nothing to stop the nuisance until a complaint was filed by a resident. It would seem to us after perusal of the local law that the anti-noise ordinance is sufficiently clear and lucid to warrant action by the police without the necessity of a citizen filing complaint.”<sup>166</sup> This inaction from the police characterizes the difficulty in enforcing the 1935 noise ordinance. It also points to the ways that new sound technology complicate the notion of noise and free speech. An article by Ronda Sewald addresses the use of loudspeakers and sound trucks in urban space, noting the transformative power these new technologies had in shifting the “urban soundscape.”<sup>167</sup> Sewald notes that sound trucks were most popular with politicians, religious speakers and commercial advertisers. Further they represent a form of total control of public sonic space, an act that was

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<sup>165</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, “Anti-Noise Ordinance.” May 31, 1939. Fulton History

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>167</sup> Sewald, Ronda L. “Forced Listening: The Contested Use of Loudspeakers for Commercial and Political Messages in the Public Soundscape.” *American Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2011): 761-780.

considered by some to be intrusive of privacy, draining of efficiency and disruptive of communication.<sup>168</sup> Most notably Sewald writes, “The use of loudspeakers to deliver spoken messages in particular often complicated the application of existing noise ordinances by placing the content under constitutional protection of free speech and religious expression.”<sup>169</sup> This complication of a noise ordinance is present in Kingston’s case, as the *Freeman* criticizes the police in not taking action against the noisy sound trucks. Evidence of this discrepancy also surfaces in an article from March of 1941 in which the Mayor of Kingston speaks on the topic of sound trucks.<sup>170</sup> Responding to “many complaints against the noise coming from sound trucks,”<sup>171</sup> the Mayor “recommended that the council adopt an ordinance regulating sound trucks here.”<sup>172</sup> Again, it appears that even the Mayor perceived that the noise ordinance of Kingston could not be applied to sound trucks. What makes this even more puzzling is that in the very same article, the Mayor is reported to have enclosed a letter of a citizen’s complaint to better illustrate the frustration of his townspeople. In this letter, “the writer called attention to the anti-noise ordinance and urged that its provisions be enforced.”<sup>173</sup> These two contrasting messages, to enforce the current ordinance, as well as the imposition of a sound truck ordinance highlights the difficulty in enforcement of Kingston’s 1935 noise ordinance in its vague language, a phenomena that Karin Bijsterveld would call, a “paradox of control,” in that supposedly all-encompassing

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<sup>168</sup> Sewald, 769.

<sup>169</sup> Sewald, 766.

<sup>170</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, “Heiselman Would Curb Sound Truck As Much Too Noisy.” March 5, 1941. Fulton History.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

noise legislation actually created novel noise issues.<sup>174</sup> In response to the Mayor's recommendation, in June of 1941 Kingston's Common Council adopted a sound truck law.<sup>175</sup> This ordinance limited a sound truck's operating hours to 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and provisioned that a sound truck must obtain a year-long license costing \$50.<sup>176</sup>

*1941-1968 Continual Reverberations,*

*Kingston's Second Ordinance*

There are 28 noise-related articles from the years of 1941 to 1968 that I have collected. In lieu of recounting each and every one, I would like to summarize the most salient features of the writing. First, an advertisement placed in a 1942 issue of the *Freeman*, an image of a police officer holding up a white gloved hand in a commanding "halt!" fashion, the overlaid text reading, "Stop Needless Noise" and "Help America Keep Calm."<sup>177</sup> This advertisement certainly evokes undercurrents of mass authoritarian control. Notably, this advertisement comes right in the middle of American involvement in WWII. Here, the emphasis on "calm" is telling of America's wartime need for reassurance. Ironically, this advertisement is promoting a brand of typewriters,

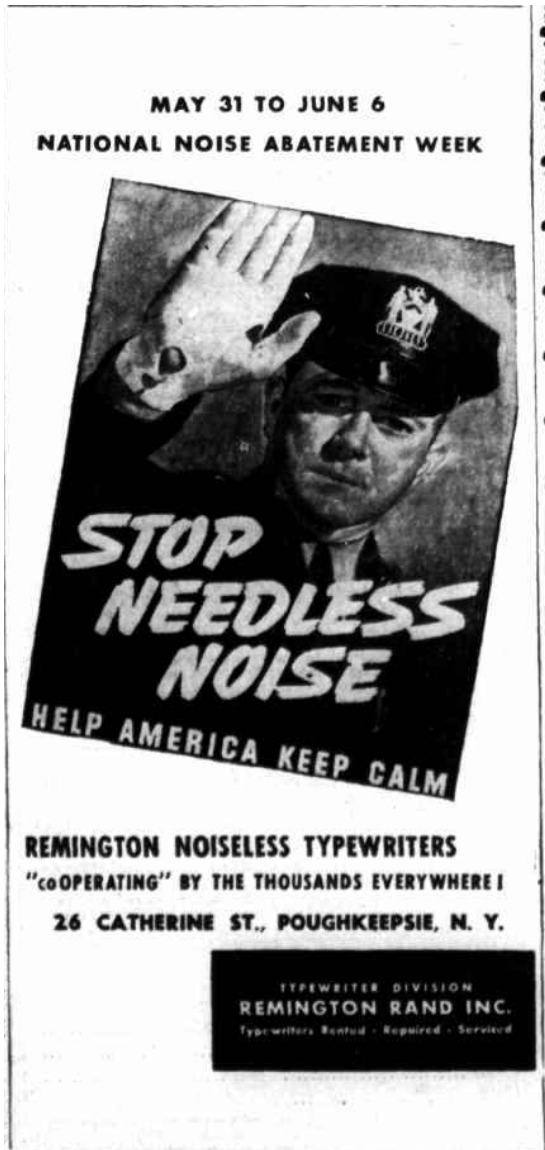


Fig. 3

*The Daily Freeman*, "National Noise Abatement Week."

<sup>174</sup> Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound*

<sup>175</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, "Sound Truck Law Is Adopted By Council." June 4, 1941. Fulton History.

<sup>176</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, "Sound Truck Law Is Adopted By Council." June 4, 1941. Fulton History.

<sup>177</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, "National Noise Abatement Week." May 29, 1942. Fulton History.

implicating the office space, which in the age of the typewriter, was a cacophonous pitter-patter of typing. This advertisement seems to be at the same time ambiguous and pointed: a typewriter company using a national noise abatement week to advertise a noiseless typewriter, all in the midst of WWII anxieties. Remington's typewriters seem to be piggybacking the reassuring authority of silence, evident in the use of the word "cooperating," simultaneously implying their own contribution to wartime efforts while also evoking an obedience to the authorities which demand silence. A similar war-related attitude towards sound comes in a 1944 article advocating for a quieter neighborhood in respect for the "welfare of returning soldier sons."<sup>178</sup>

In the mid-fifties, a new noise ordinance is drafted in Kingston. This ordinance, proposed by Alderman Roth, was aimed at "automobile horns, loud speakers, motor vehicle exhausts, yelling and shouting, noises caused by defects in vehicles or their loads, noises by peddlers, and noises near schools, courts, churches and hospitals."<sup>179</sup> According to Roth, this ordinance "is aimed at giving "more teeth" to regulation of offending noises in the city than those adopted many years ago."<sup>180</sup> A reader of this history will ask, why, in 1956, did Alderman Roth feel it necessary to pass a new noise ordinance? From the language of the ordinance, it appears that advances in technology partially fuel this new legislation. Additionally, there seems to be an attempt from Roth to cleanse the streets of noise, to refashion the streets as a space devoid of the human voice. Perhaps here, Roth is informed more by shifting sensibilities about what types of noises are acceptable in public city space, what types of people should be heard, and what type of labor is permissible on the streets. As the fifties develop into the sixties and we move to put

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<sup>178</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, "Home Noises." May 20, 1944. Fulton History.

<sup>179</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, "School Rate..." July 5, 1956. Fulton History.

<sup>180</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, "Roth Against Noises." September 5, 1956. Fulton History.

down the *Daily Freeman*, a more familiar critique of jet and airplane noises arises.<sup>181</sup> Yet, they are still framed within the a familiar context “...disturbing church services,”<sup>182</sup> implying that the same urban social institutions that have held power in the past, still hold power in our lives today.

In thinking of Kingston’s past, my investigations in sound have extricated unexamined lines of history and critically contextualized them. Through the use of the *Daily Freeman*’s reporting on sound, a unique insight into nuanced dialogues and arguments concerning sound has been evoked. In many cases, these points of sonic conflict actually reflect larger societal issues, usually concerned with class and often tied up with race. One greater societal concern evoked from the discussion of noise in Kingston’s public, urban space involved the concept of “disturbance.” These “disturbances” referred to sounds that were out of place, and further illuminate the ways that urban space in Kingston has been historically coded and inscribed in terms of class and race. Further, the sounds of labor were examined in a broader critique of class conflict, as Kingston’s brickyards were heard across the Hudson by the all-too refined ears of Dutchess County’s wealthy. Additionally, the concept of disturbance aided in examining the ways that Kingston’s populace addressed sound as a health concern. Next, sentiments regarding health and sound collided with sounds of religion. Here rich arguments played out through the public forum of the *Freeman*, as some Kingstonites found church bells to be religious symbols that ought to be allowed to express control over public sounds, while others found church bells to be auxiliary and unnecessary to religion and further, potentially injurious to public health. In essence, seemingly mundane arguments over sound are actually not concerned with the technical

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<sup>181</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, “Chief Says Helicopter Violates Noise Law.” May 9, 1960. Fulton History.

<sup>182</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, “Chief Says Helicopter Violates Noise Law.” May 9, 1960. Fulton History.

aspects that encompass sound such as, frequency, volume, timbre, etc.. Instead, these arguments give us insight into ideological arguments that were playing out in Kingston. For instance, the argument against church bells documents the shifting role of religion in the life of an urban Kingstonite, the ways that industrialization, and urbanity were shifting the concept of the ‘American lifestyle.’ This is indexical evidence of a shifting paradigm. Or when we think of a brickyard worker disturbing a restaurant, this is a social barometer, an indexical record of class conflict, perhaps the everlasting legacy of America.

There is plenty of additional documentation of social analysis on the noise history of Kingston. For instance, a reoccurring syndicated health column by Dr. James W. Barton, entitled, “That Body of Yours” which appears in the *Freeman* 13 times from 1932 to 1954. The tone of each and every of these articles is in consolation of the tiredness of the working class, and the topic is always noise. One article from 1933 reads, “Thus the tiredness of your hearing nerve due to hearing this steady noise really means tiredness of the entire nervous system, lessening your working ability on account of the energy you have to use to overcome the noise.”<sup>183</sup> Barton goes on to console, “This alertness or readiness, because it keeps you tensed, is what tires you.”<sup>184</sup> Barton’s column represents an ostensible voice of authority dictating the reasons for which the working class is “tired.” Here, Barton is redirecting the attention of a working class away from the true source of their tiredness, to the technical artifice of work. Barton is reducing the experience of the working class to a symptom of their sensory experience, claiming noise is the problem, rather than the tedium of the work. In a sense, I am trying to undo what Barton is articulating, in redirecting our attention to the underlying context in which “noise” or

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<sup>183</sup> *The Daily Freeman*, “That Body of Yours- All Noise Is Harmful.” June 26, 1933. Fulton History.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

“disturbance” is heard. I have purposefully left out numerous articles of this discussion, as our conversation about the past is truly meant to inform the present and the future.

The city of Kingston, New York has continuously been a contested space. This is manifested contemporarily in the issue of gentrification. In the last few years, there has been much talk about Kingston’s role as the face of a new generation of young gentrifiers, as numerous articles on the topic claim.<sup>185</sup> In Midtown Kingston, recently former police Chief Gerald Keller actually suggested gentrification as a solution to crime in the neighborhood.<sup>186</sup> Keller suggested that Midtown, Kingston’s most ethnically diverse neighborhood,<sup>187</sup> as well as the area with highest concentrations of poverty,<sup>188</sup> should be target of a 21st century Robert Moses style urban renewal, advocating for bringing in middle income families, destruction of blighted buildings and the forcible banishment of the neighborhood’s poorest to housing developments. This suggestion by police Chief Keller highlights Kingston as contested space. And now, we must open our ears to Kingston, we must listen to its sound, noise and disturbance. In the context of ongoing American class and race-based conflict, with the backdrop of incipient gentrification, we must be aware of sound. Yet awareness, is not enough, we must critique it,

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<sup>185</sup> Sari Botton. "Welcome to Kingston. Now Leave - The Billfold." N.p., 11 Nov. 2014. Web. 25 Mar. 2016. <https://thebillfold.com/welcome-to-kingston-now-leave-20376deada8a#.6dgqh58pg>; Rebecca Rothbaum. "Kingston, N.Y., a Rest Stop on the Hudson." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 08 Oct. 2011. Web. 25 Mar. 2016. [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/09/travel/kingston-ny-a-rest-stop-in-the-hudson-valley.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/09/travel/kingston-ny-a-rest-stop-in-the-hudson-valley.html?_r=0); Carrie Jones Ross. "The Brooklyn Vibe: New Uptown Enterprises All Linked to NYC's Most Hip Borough." *Kingston Times*. Kingston Times, 10 July 2014. Web. 25 Mar. 2016. <http://www.kingstonx.com/2014/07/10/the-brooklyn-vibe-new-uptown-enterprises-all-linked-to-nycs-most-hip-borough/>

<sup>186</sup> Susan Barnett. "Gentrification: The Answer to Kingston's Crime Problems?" *Gentrification: The Answer to Kingston's Crime Problems?* WAMC, n.d. Web. 25 Mar. 2016.

<sup>187</sup> Zoe Fine Kasperzyk, "Revitalization for Whom? A Discussion About Inequality in Midtown, Kingston, NY" (2015). Senior Projects Spring 2015. Paper 300. [http://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj\\_s2015/300](http://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2015/300). 19-20.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*

analyze it, trace sonic disturbance back to its sources, contextualize and realize the otherwise silent conflict that is occurring today in Kingston.



## Chapter 4: Contemporary Voices of Kingston

In approaching the voices and opinions of residents of Kingston, I must first review my own research methods, as they are relevant in evaluating the extent to which I may lay claims. Over the course of roughly one month, I conducted nine interviews, each taking around thirty minutes. I was able to find the interviewees mostly through personal connections and recommendations from the Bard College community. Further, I employed sampling via snowballing. For the purposes of my study, it was never my intent to interview more than ten people, as my project is not necessarily concerned with attaining a perfect sampling of the entirety of the inhabitants of Kingston. While I recognize that the generalizations that I make across my interviews do not necessarily validate claims that they are representative of Kingston as a whole, I analyze these conversations in relation to the numerous themes I have suggested to provide a microcosmic sampling of some sentiments surrounding noise in Kingston.

Additionally, I supplemented my interviews with public posts and comments to the City of Kingston's *SeeClickFix* account. *SeeClickFix* is an online forum that allows users to report neighborhood issues that they feel need to be addressed by city or town government. The website is advertised as an intermediary between citizens and government, employing the internet as a way to expedite pathways of communication in an otherwise cluttered bureaucratic system. These postings are all publicly available at <http://en.seeclickfix.com/kingston/>.

### *Noise Complaints and Policing, Thoughts on Subjectivity*

To revisit the subjectivity of hearing sound as noise, Hillel Schwartz writes, "By its very definition, noise is an issue less of tone or decibel than of social temperament, class background,

and cultural desire, all historically conditioned.”<sup>189</sup> It is under these presumptions that I first asked a representative from Kingston’s city police department about the enforcement of the city noise ordinance.<sup>190</sup> Responding to my question asking about the process by which a police officer identifies a sound or noise as a violation of the noise ordinance, the representative acknowledged the subjectivity of sound and answered,

You know what’s reasonable and what’s not reasonable as a human being so you know if something is offending you. Let’s say you’re riding along and something grabs you or offends you, you know that-- well maybe there’s some kind of a violation going on here because it’s offending me and I’m a reasonable person. So then you would take the time to address it, but you also take the time to look into the ordinances and the laws to see what law or ordinance it violates.

This concept of what is “reasonable” undoubtedly is slippery territory. However, this explanation is in reference to a situation in which a police officer *on patrol* encounters a possible noise violation. According to the representative, this is a rare occurrence. The most common way that the Kingston police interact with noise is through “complaints from the public.” These mostly take form via telephone calls to the Kingston police. In this way, the grey area that is “reasonable” may be somewhat mitigated as the caller acts as intermediary which could theoretically allow for a police officer to reference Kingston’s noise code, a document that stipulates sound restrictions on a time-of-day basis. Here, the representative seemed to be trying

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<sup>189</sup> Hillel Schwartz . "Beyond Tone and Decibel: The History of Noise." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 9 (1998): B8.

<sup>190</sup> City of Kingston, NY, Code ch. 300. Retrieved From <http://ecode360.com/12699939>

to assure me that police officers are not on the beat, actively listening for offenses, but that their noise related actions are generally tied to a complaint.

Nonetheless, subjectivity in regards to the policing of noise is still a concern. When I asked further as to how a police officer on patrol or sent to investigate a noise complaint navigates the city noise ordinance, the representative answered,

The noise ordinance itself is not taught in the police academy. But neither is every section of the traffic law or every section of the penal law. It's as you spend more time in your career, you become more familiar with laws and ordinances, either through using them or by researching them in your down time so you know what tools you have in your bag. You know, a new guy first coming on— you know a person's first five years of patrol might not necessarily know all the ordinances of the noise, all the sections of the noise ordinance. So they might rely on a senior officer or a supervisor to fill them in when they encounter noise offenses.

Undoubtedly, this is the nature of police work. We cannot expect each and every officer to know each and every detailed section of a city's code. That would be unreasonable. Nonetheless, this fact does point to the way in which professional police experience may shift the way a city is being policed. Not only might an individual officer's personal experiences shape the way she or he is attuned towards noise, but also, the varying degree of tenure one has and one's familiarity with enforcing city code may shape one's approach to the actual enforcement. In this way, a noise ordinance may actually change the way a police officer hears a city. This points to the varying ways that urban noise may become normalized. In this instance, there is also an apparent social dimension that induces the normalization of sound and noise in urban space, that social

dimension being the shared social conception of the roles and duties of the Kingston police. In conceiving of themselves as an urban policing body, a new tier of understanding may be constructed, existing simultaneously with a normalized perception of noise that has nothing to do with policing. In other words, the concept of a normalization of sound may seem universalizing, yet, this example of the Kingston police points to the possibility of many different normalized modes of hearing, all coexisting in the urban sphere. These notes on policing in Kingston are useful to keep in mind as I progress into an analysis of complaints surrounding noise.

*“You Know How People Say There Are Three Areas of Kingston?”*

Before entertaining thoughts about noise complaints in Kingston, we must understand how Kingston is conceptualized by its own residents. One interview participant told me “there’s at least three identifiable neighborhoods, so, they identify Uptown, Midtown and Downtown,” a conceptualization of Kingston I myself have come to accept, living just 15 minutes away from Kingston from the age of 4 to 21. Of Uptown, I was told by another participant from Downtown Kingston, “Uptown is getting revived, starting with the sort of gentrification style stuff like coffee houses, art stores, bars. There’s a butcher that does local stuff. That’s somewhere between old fashioned and hipster, you know? And the farmer’s market uptown.” Similarly, the participant noted bluntly, “Uptown is very much like young hip white people.” Although this is undoubtedly a sweeping generalization, it does inform us as to one way Uptown is conceived by inhabitants of other parts of the city. Zoe Kasperzyk, another Bard colleague who has studied Kingston, writes that both Uptown (also known as the Stockade) and Downtown (also known as the Rondout or the Strand) were settled and developed long before Midtown.<sup>191</sup> Kasperzyk

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<sup>191</sup> Kasperzyk, 11.

frames Uptown as a “thriving”<sup>192</sup> and characterizes Downtown as having “a walkable waterfront park, restaurants, boutiques, museums, art galleries, and antique shops,”<sup>193</sup> implying a settled neighborhood. Likewise, she notes that Midtown is continually “overshadowed” by the two more developed areas.<sup>194</sup>

The participants I spoke to seem to corroborate Kasperzyk’s framing of the sections of Kingston. One noted,

Midtown Kingston especially suffered and has just never recovered and so there is a sense—even living there, there is a sense of bifurcation— that there’s Downtown by the river which has a kind of touristy feel about it and then there’s Uptown which has over the last five or 6 years, has really started to revitalize and get more economic activity and so forth. But Midtown just can’t seem to kind of— get back up on its feet. And lots of efforts are going into that, but it’s hard, it’s very hard because of poverty. It’s so entrenched and there’s so much. And there’s a really serious drug problem in Midtown Kingston. So I assume attracting businesses into the area is difficult.

Additionally, a participant from Downtown noted, “Midtown is still sort of feeling the rough times, and it seems like there are good things in motion that have the classic dilemma; is it gentrification, and is that good or bad? It’s probably a little bit of both.” Further, this participant elaborated, “The truth is that most of the minorities in Kingston live in Midtown and that’s Black and Latino. So there’s a lot of Latino stores up and down Midtown and sort of like Black barber

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<sup>192</sup> Kasperzyk, 11.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*

shops in Midtown and unfortunately a lot of crime happens in Midtown too. It's that terrible correlation, it's very frustrating." Demonstrated here is an example of public sentiment directed towards the district of Midtown, imagined as a focal point for poverty, and crime, along with a characterization of it being a community of minorities. According to the participants I interviewed as well as Kasperzyk, many seem to focus on Midtown's problems and characterize it as being of a lower class. Understanding this sentiment directed towards Midtown, truthful or not, is vital in contextualizing the links between noise, race and class in the urban neighborhood.

### *Complaints, Class, Race, Midtown*

During each interview, I decided to ask a participant if they imagined the sound of Kingston spatially. I wanted to know if they had experienced or imagined some spaces as noisier or some spaces as quieter. One participant responded to this, "Well I would say Broadway is noisier because that's where the most of the traffic is passing through." Another participant replied, "Sure. I think along Broadway it's noisier. There's a lot of car traffic. The- and there's more people using that access road so I think a lot of the noise is just car traffic." These participants associate noise with automobile and traffic sounds on Broadway, a major thoroughfare of Kingston. Yet, pointing to Broadway does not necessarily imply Midtown, as Broadway runs for about two miles, starting in upper Midtown yet also acting as the major avenue of the Downtown area. A different participant, when asked about noisier parts of Kingston, replied,

Anywhere that the houses are closer together you're going to have more noise complaints and where they have a little bit- if there's houses that have bigger yards the noise complaints are not as frequent as from the neighborhoods

where the houses are side by side with just alleyways. Or multiple dwelling houses, you know, houses where there is more than one family living in the structure, apartment as opposed to single family residences. And the inner city for lack of a better term. The people who are renting, you know, people who rent or are not necessarily responsible for a mortgage or a payment, they're not as responsible for the maintenance of their home and are more likely to offend because they're not as sensitive to being reasonable. They're not as responsible. If I'm putting my money and my heart into something I'm going to take better care of it than someone who just lives wherever they want on the government's dime or somehow else.

This participant overtly associates noise levels of a neighborhood with class, as all of the descriptions of the housing and the neighborhoods provided imply the association of poverty with noise. Further, this participant couples noise and poverty with a lack of responsibility or respect for others. In addition, the use of the term "inner city" seems to be synonymous with Midtown, a euphemism for a city section. This euphemism allows the respondent to substitute an ostensibly geographically neutral term for one that he/she has negatively "classed."

When I asked a different participant about noisy areas and followed up with a question about perceived variances in what we called a "noise etiquette," the participant replied, "I do also think it comes with income level. I think that there's a difference in if you live in a middle or upper class part of Kingston and there's a- the etiquette is stronger for there to be quiet in residential areas than it is in lower income areas." Although it most likely was a slippage, the contrast between "residential areas" and "lower income areas" indicates an understanding of

“lower income areas” that may be better encapsulated by the term “mixed-use.” It would appear that the participant was associating the “low income” area with a use pattern that is *not exclusively residential*. The mixed-use nature of a neighborhood could conceivably add to volume level, as other participants pointed out in the case of Broadway, both a residential and commercial area. Slippage or not, it appears the resident associates mixed-use with low income. Another way we might go about understanding this participant’s remarks may be in noting the ways that the participant is attributing the quiet of well-off neighborhoods with a sort of cultivated and refined sensibility. Whereas the previous participant identified a lack of responsibility with noise and complaints, this participant accounts for disparities in noise levels by neighborhood through the lack of upper class sensibilities.

Thus far we have thought about how some residents of Kingston associate class and noise. However, one resident clues us in to the grey areas that exist when we talk about class and race, how language has stood in or codified the other. When asked about the possibility of noisier parts of Kingston, this participant answered,

It’s interesting right? Because having lived in the city there’s a very racialized aspect to who is loud and who is not and a class thing too, which you see playing out in Brooklyn in many different ways. But in Kingston, there’s- when we first moved to Kingston there was a whole- we had a hard time getting our realtor to show us this house in particular that we live in because there was a real- I think they call it redlining, I don’t know what they call it really, about- there was just this whole approach around where white people were and where people of color were in the city. And I think some of it was a little bit around- it’s just louder. I



heard sound being used as kind of a kind of indicator- they were sending me a message that I should get as a white person. Which I absolutely got and was totally- like that is not actually- I mean, that is not something that I'm going to act on or feel like I want to be a part of. But as a white person that was kind of- I think it was understood that I would know what they were saying when they talked about sound.

This participant's experience illustrates how the word "noisy" appears to be a way to imply a space that is not white, or a space that is predominately made up of persons of color. Further, this participant is speaking of a house that is located in Midtown, the house in which the participant currently resides. This application of the word "noisy" to describe a Midtown neighborhood, as a way negatively connote people of color, forces us to reconsider the way Midtown is spoken about in terms of noise. For instance one participant talks about a street on Midtown, "I know that that's a louder street- people playing their music loud or coming outside and yelling. I can- anecdotally- I know- day to day, that I know that Midtown is louder in the low income areas. I don't know why it is though. More people hanging outside, more people communicating, I don't know, maybe it's an educational thing." Knowing that noise is often code, signifying race, we must stop and reconsider the way we address so-called urban noise. Is it fair to categorize lower income areas as "noisy?" As an outsider, looking in to a neighborhood, is this an appropriate evaluation of what is going on? Further, are class and race inextricable when we deem something as "noisy?"

What of this notion of a cause of noise, described as “More people hanging outside?”

One participant breaks this concept down a bit further,

I mean look, one of the reasons, I think, why the people in the Midtown neighborhoods- in especially nicer weather, come out of their houses and on the porch is that they’re in crowded spaces. They’re in very crowded houses with no air conditioning and it’s hot so you go outside. And you go outside and you’re talking and you’re doing stuff. So there’s a reason based on economics that that a place may be noisier, but that noise may be the noise of people being in community with each other in a different way from over here.

This is a brilliant insight as it dispels the stereotype that so-called “hanging out” is a negative practice, in fact, noting the ways in which being outside, on a porch, on the sidewalk, on the street, may be a positive and community-strengthening practice. This is a very Jane Jacobs kind of sentiment, as more people outside leads to more eyes *and ears* on the street. To push this further, to be present outside, visible and audible on the street, can be understood as a form of resistance. Being heard on the street is a way to claim ownership of the public space that is the street. Instead of making “noise” through a lack of responsibility or lack of etiquette, perhaps making noise is a way to push back against outside ears trying to silence the streets of Kingston.

### *Noise Complaints and Neighborhood Structure*

In a *SeeClickFix* posting from March 26, 2010, titled, “Kill the Noise,” an anonymous Kingston resident brings up the topic of neighborhood noise. The anonymous author denounces noise, writing, “I can’t tolerate another summer with excessively loud car sound system noise

blaring all hours of the day & night. Dis ain't da ghetto yo!"<sup>195</sup> As has been touched upon, at the forefront of this comment is the association of noise with class and race. Yet here, the author is trying to assert that the sound of "excessively loud car sound system noise," the supposed sound of the "ghetto," is out of place in his or her neighborhood. One comment in response to this posting brings up the idea of "cultural clashes" and goes on, "You're seeing one: loud music. It's not reserved to the black or hispanic or the young in general, but it is there and it's a pain."<sup>196</sup> Although I have already mentioned the ways that noise is understood as tied to class and race, the ways that people suggest that the original poster address this problem is intriguing for novel reasons. One anonymous poster writes, "We've had this problem- not just when they drive by- but also when they park on the street waiting for whatever. And my husband goes right up to the car and asks them to turn it down. Yes he is fearless - but let me tell you - it works! Most of the time there [sic] kids either don't realize that others object to the noise or they are so shocked that someone approached them with such a request."<sup>197</sup> Another commenter concurs, "Yes! That is absolutely true. It is scary, but if you walk up and ask, 'would you please...' the people almost always do and most kindly. Indeed, they are often happy to do so! In that small way, they are asked to contribute to the neighborhood and are delighted to be able to..."<sup>198</sup> Here we see how complaints regarding noise indicate a discrepancy between accepted social behavior within a neighborhood. Also at play here are varying sensitivities and values related to age. Additionally,

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<sup>195</sup> "Kill the Noise!" *SeeClickFix*. 26 Mar. 2010. Web. 06 Apr. 2016. <http://en.seeclickfix.com/issues/28262-kill-the-noise>

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*

we see how people suggest others deal with this type of scenario, which generally appears to be amicably.

A similar scenario takes place once again on *SeeClickFix* on June 24, 2011 in a posting titled, “Mowing Before 7 AM.”<sup>199</sup> The post reads, “Since spring, someone had been mowing for more than an hour starting before 7 AM on or near Hasbrouck Avenue between East Chester and Foxhall. This happened most recently on June 2. Isn’t there a city ordinance against noise like this so early in the morning?”<sup>200</sup> A commenter replies,

If it isn't it should be. Our society has lost all common sense when it comes to basic curtesy [sic] toward your neighbors. This was a problem on Ten Broeck one Sunday morning at 7am. I called my neighbor and politely confronted him with how rude it is, he apologized and it has never been an issue again. Good luck. I suggest not 'confronting' the individual in an aggravated [sic] way but to ask politely not to mow so early in the morning. Sometimes it's the only way to solve things that are just common sense.

Once again, the original poster is concerned with someone else breaking accepted social behavior in a neighborhood. Yet, this post is slightly different from the “Kill the Noise” post. First, the language of the post indicates that the perception of difference is smaller between the hearer and the noise maker. In this post, the noise makers are characterized as “rude,” as lacking “courtesy,” while the previous noise makers were perceived to be so socially unacceptable that their noise was determined to be a “cultural clash” even “scary.” There may be a number of

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<sup>199</sup> "Mowing before 7 AM" *SeeClickFix*. 24 July 2011. Web. 08 Apr. 2016. <http://en.seeclickfix.com/issues/108957-mowing-before-7-am>

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*

explanations to this discrepancy. One explanation may have to do with the noise-makers' relationship to the neighborhood they were "disrupting." In other words, the "Kill the Noise" complaint was made against loud car speakers, an explicitly transient actor in a neighborhood, a mere passer by, a "stranger."<sup>201</sup> Contrastingly, the disruption of a lawn mower is more likely to be grounded within the neighborhood, an "insider,"<sup>202</sup> being an actual neighborhood dweller, caring for their lawn. Perhaps this is more permissible as it is an issue that stems from a socially accepted actor and leaves open the opportunity for reconciliation and dialogue.

Another explanation of the contrasting language used to describe the two complaints has to do with the normalization of the sound of these two contrasting activities, driving with loud speakers and mowing one's lawn. Notable in the lawn mowing post is the idea that there actually is a time of day when the sound of mowing one's lawn *is permissible*. Contrastingly, in the car speaker post, there seems to be no socially accepted time that loud car speakers is permissible. Perhaps this has to do with an American conception of what encapsulates participation in middle class life, as the mowing of one's lawn has been classically associated with a suburban middle class existence. In this way, can we understand a loud car speaker's disruption as resistance to middle class sonic sensibilities?

An additionally striking component of the lawn mowing complaint is the length of time that the mower was making noise. As the poster reports, the mowing occurs for "more than an hour." Thinking in terms of urban space, for a lawn mower to be sounding for more than an hour implies a sizable piece of land, especially in a semi-urban area. If this complaint is indeed from a

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<sup>201</sup> Julie Meyer. 1951. "The Stranger and the City". *American Journal of Sociology* 56 (5). University of Chicago Press: 476–83. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2772808>.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*

residential area, perhaps we should also be considering how varying land ownership sizes in a neighborhood translates into dynamics of the neighborhood as a whole.

Moving forward to additional comments made on the lawn mowing post, commenters also advocate that the original poster confront the noise maker in a neighborly manner. Another commenter writes, “if you can talk to your neighbor politely (sometimes it's easier when you don't know him/her), that would be great. But if you're not comfortable, call the police. They'll talk to your neighbor or issue an appearance ticket. BTW - the noise ordinance is from 8 a.m. - 10 p.m. I sure wish they'd change it to 9 a.m. on weekends!”<sup>203</sup> While this commenter also suggests a friendly confrontation, it is the option of calling the police that becomes a particularly interesting social action. This action maintains the anonymity of the individual complaining and removes interpersonal neighborhood action, denying a possibility of compromise in favor of a more authoritative action. This prompts the question, what does it mean if a neighborhood experiences many noise complaints? What information can this tell us about the structure of the neighborhood, the role of “outsiders,” the terms and conditions of the interpersonal relationships that make a particular neighborhood distinct?

According to one the Kingston Police representative, there seems to be a correlation between the relationship one has with neighbors and the likelihood that one will file a noise complaint against that neighbor with the police. When prompted on the subject, the representative stated, “I think that the closer and the more personable people are with their neighbors, the less likely they are to offend, because they're being more considerate, and if they happen to violate, make some type of a noise violation, I think the neighbor would be more

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<sup>203</sup> "Mowing before 7 AM" *SeeClickFix*. 24 July 2011. Web. 08 Apr. 2016. <http://en.seeclickfix.com/issues/108957-mowing-before-7-am>

likely to turn it down as opposed to calling the police. Friendly neighbors are less likely to generate noise complaints than stranger neighbors.” So in some cases, a neighborhood or street with many noise complaints may be made up of those who live in close proximity to one another, yet still remain somewhat estranged from one another. Does this mean that a neighborhood or street without noise complaints is a street where everyone is familiar with one another, or does a lack of noise complaint refer to a universally accepted sound sensibility? What about those neighborhoods with only a few noise complaints? Does this imply a homogenous social expectation of sound with the exception of the few “noisy” outsiders? How do the police fit in to this equation? One participant responded, “One thing that’s true. If there’s a party in the neighborhood that gets too loud, what I’ve noticed is that people in Kingston- at least in my neighborhood, they don’t go and ask people at the party to quiet down. They call the police. Then the police come by and ask people to quiet down. So rather than confronting a neighbor about having a noisy party there’s an intermediary that’s brought.” When I asked why this was, the participant cited the urge to avoid unnecessary confrontation, “Especially with people they don’t know or only marginally know.” This seemed to imply that, unlike the *SeeClickFix* commenters, this participant did not see a street or neighborhood as made up of friendly ties. I asked the participant about neighborhood structure, to which the participant responded,

I think there’s a loose network. For example for me, I know most of my neighbors at least by- I recognize who they are. I interact with a portion of them. There’s some neighbors who I’ve had for 10 years that I recognize but I’ve never really talked with them. Some I- we nod or wave and that’s been about it in term of our interaction for a decade. Others we visit each other, have dinner together,

are more connected. So I think it varies. I think it would be difficult to maintain meaningful relationship with so many people in an urban situation.

This participant seems to think of a noise complaint as an easy and effective way to halt an “offensive” noise, in a manner that does not require confrontation. Further, the language of the participant seems to imply that through the use of the noise complaint, neighbors can remain somewhat anonymous and estranged from their neighbors. It is almost as if the noise complaint is used here as a tool to move towards the reification of an imagined sound etiquette.

### *Outsiders and CSX Noise*

Thus far we have reconsidered noise complaints within context of the geographically bound neighborhood. Yet, what of a more transient sound, a sonic disruption that is a ungraspable outsider? Here, I am referring to the CSX freight train that bisects Kingston, that is legally required to blow its horn four times at each of the four road crossings located within the city. According to one participant, thirty trains pass through Kingston each day (do some simple math and you have 480 horn blasts per day). Some residents of Kingston are quite angry with these persistent sonic intrusions. Evidence of this is a *SeeClickFix* posting from July 27, 2011, titled, “Too Much Noise From CSX Trains.”<sup>204</sup> This post is one of the most viewed for Kingston’s *SeeClickFix* account, at 2,803 views and 58 comments spanning from July of 2011 to October of 2014. Additionally, other *SeeClickFix* postings on the topic of the CSX trains have gained attention. For example, a post from May of 2012 titled, “CSX Train Conductors Leaning On the Horn at 2 A.M.”<sup>205</sup> or one from September of 2014 titled, “Excessive Horn Noise

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<sup>204</sup> “Too Much Noise From CSX Trains” *SeeClickFix*. 27 July 2011. Web. 08 Apr. 2016. <http://en.seeclixfix.com/issues/115663-too-much-noise-from-csx-trains>

<sup>205</sup> “CSX Conductors Leaning on the Horn at 2 A.M.” *SeeClickFix*. 5 May 2012. Web. 08 Apr. 2016. <http://en.seeclixfix.com/issues/180698-csx-train-conductors-leaning-on-the-horn-at-2-a-m>



[sic].”<sup>206</sup> In these posts, numerous Kingston residents bemoan the sound of the train and the lack of political support for the residents’ complaints. One commenter posts, “I have not gotten anywhere with CSX , I have since moved far from the train tracks to another county entirely. I feel for anyone that has to endure those @#\$\$% trains. I never realized how badly it affected my sleep until we moved away. my daughter also used to suffer what we thought were night terrors they too have gone away....cant help but think that it was also the trains causing it.”<sup>207</sup>

Another commenter posts, “The increase of noise (in general) over the years is becoming a strong factor in causing me to want to move out of the area. 20+ years ago, Kingston was relatively quiet. Not any more though and I don't think noise is a necessary evil resulting from growth. It's a matter of our elected official's priorities.”<sup>208</sup>

Yet some commenters rebuke these concerns, “move near a train track..deal with it...without trains the price of basic goods would skyrocket.... find something to do with your time...ear plugs.....i highly doubt it...”<sup>209</sup> Another writes, “IF THE HORN BLASTS UPSET YOU MOVE THE TRAINS WERE THERE FIRST.”<sup>210</sup> This suggestion is echoed in other postings, specifically in a comment from a guest who has chosen the name “Shayne Gallo” the former mayor of Kingston. The author, Shayne Gallo or not, writes “Maybe you shouldn't have moved into a house next to a train crossing.”<sup>211</sup> Yet, one poster clues us in to the deeper seated issue at

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<sup>206</sup> "Excessive Horn Noice." *SeeClickFix*. 26 September 2014. Web. 08 Apr. 2016. <http://en.seeclickfix.com/issues/1299653-excessive-horn-noice>

<sup>207</sup> "Too Much Noise From CSX Trains" *SeeClickFix*. 27 July 2011. Web. 08 Apr. 2016. <http://en.seeclickfix.com/issues/115663-too-much-noise-from-csx-trains>

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>211</sup> "Too Much Noise From CSX Trains" *SeeClickFix*. 27 July 2011. Web. 08 Apr. 2016. <http://en.seeclickfix.com/issues/115663-too-much-noise-from-csx-trains>

hand, "Annie, my guess is that you don't live near the tracks. I unfortunately have to. believe me if it were as simple as that i would leave ..... hey here's an idea , how about you give me the cash to relocate then i would stop complaining about the train that lays on its horn when it sees the residences that are twenty ft. from the tracks."<sup>212</sup> This comment suggests that the alternative issue to consider here is the way economics prevents those living by the train tracks from moving away.

There is still another way we may come to understand noise in relation to CSX freight trains in Kingston. With the oil boom in the North Dakota Bakken fields and the proliferation of hydraulic fracturing, crude oil is finding new ways of traversing the infrastructure of the U.S. With the veto of Keystone Pipeline,<sup>213</sup> millions of gallons of crude oil have found alternative pathways, CSX freight trains. According to one source, each CSX car has the ability to hold 30,000 gallons of crude oil, a substance that is considered highly volatile.<sup>214</sup> According to numerous environmental organizations, there is a risk of these trains exploding,<sup>215</sup> especially in the event of a derailment, such as one that occurred in Quebec, killing 47,<sup>216</sup> and another in West Virginia.<sup>217</sup> In Kingston, these trains, nicknamed "bomb trains," have been protested, mainly

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<sup>212</sup> "Too Much Noise From CSX Trains" *SeeClickFix*. 27 July 2011. Web. 08 Apr. 2016. <http://en.seeclickfix.com/issues/115663-too-much-noise-from-csx-trains>

<sup>213</sup> Coral Davenport. "Senate Fails to Override Obama's Keystone Pipeline Veto." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 04 Mar. 2015. Web. 14 Apr. 2016. [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/05/us/senate-fails-to-override-obamas-keystone-pipeline-veto.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/05/us/senate-fails-to-override-obamas-keystone-pipeline-veto.html?_r=0)

<sup>214</sup> Chris Fry. "The Albany, N.Y., Oil Train: A Ticking Time Bomb." *Workers World*., 11 Mar. 2014. Web. 14 Apr. 2016. <http://www.workers.org/articles/2014/03/11/albany-n-y-oil-train-ticking-time-bomb/>

<sup>215</sup> William Jones Kembel. "Marchers on Broadway in Kingston Warn of 'devastation' from Oil Trains, Pipelines." *The Daily Freeman*, 9 July 2015. Web. 14 Apr. 2016. <http://www.dailyfreeman.com/article/DF/20150709/NEWS/150709687>

<sup>216</sup> Fry, "The Albany, N.Y., Oil Train: A Ticking Time Bomb."

<sup>217</sup> Kevin Conlon, and Dana Ford. "Train Derails in West Virginia; Triggers Explosion." *CNN*. Cable News Network, 16 Feb. 2015. Web. 14 Apr. 2016. <http://www.cnn.com/2015/02/16/us/west-virginia-train-derailment/>

headed by local environmental groups. Regardless of the politics behind the crude oil carrying CSX trains, this information adds new layers to the ways we understand the sounds of the horns of the freight trains. Although on *SeeClickFix*, some cite the necessity of the horns for safety measures, these respondents are mainly concerned with someone getting run over by a train. However, what is considerably more dangerous is the possibility of a CSX train colliding with a vehicle on the tracks, an event that could lead to a deadly explosion in the center of Kingston. In this way the noise of the train horn is symbolic of the associated danger in transporting highly volatile crude oil across the U.S. Here, noise is a proxy for environmental concern. Additionally, this danger associated with the CSX trains adds new layers to the way noise can be heard as a health concern. While some residents complain about the negative health impacts of the train horn, the same horn is simultaneously symbolic of very different health concerns, those tied up with the danger of disaster, explosion, hydraulic-fracturing and America's dependence on oil.

The issue of CSX trains blowing their horns is a very complex issue which raises questions about the sounds of economic progress, sounds of environmental threat, the sounds of the outsider and onward. Yet, in the context of understanding community and neighborhood structure on a larger scale, the CSX trains represent a unique phenomenon, an unaccountable noise-maker and a context where a noise complaint is futile. In terms of permissibility, some regard the sound of the train as necessary to economic growth while others argue the noise as a serious health hazard. Nonetheless, nothing has been done about the sound, implying that, although contested, the sound of the train is permissible in the aural experience of Kingston, that the minority voices are centrally located, yet constitute an outsider perspective.

For a moment, I want to revisit the idea of Kingston as a space whose urbanity is consistently positioned and conceived of in reference to New York City. In my interviews, I commonly asked the participants, “Is Kingston noisy ?” A typical answer I got was, “No. No. I think it is too small to be really noisy.” Yet, numerous respondents referred to New York City in their response. One answered, “I wouldn’t say particularly, No. No. Compared to New York. Now that’s a noisy city!” Another replied, “Not compared to New York, because it’s still jarring when someone blows his horn. Whereas it’s just like a constant occurrence in New York City. And that’s a big difference- I still- I mean I go to the city a fair amount but it’s vastly different. I mean, my experience of it as a soundscape, Kingston is a little sleepy place in comparison.” These comparisons are clues to how an individual in Kingston orients one’s self, and further, how this reference to New York may play into the normalization of noises, say the CSX train blasts for instance. In other words, perhaps Kingston’s relationship with New York City, in the sense that that it partially delegitimizes Kingston’s claim to be “a city,” plays into the social acceptability of sound in Kingston.

Through cataloging the complaints and social implications of noise in Kingston, I have attempted to draw attention to the complex and imaginative process by which individuals contextualize their own sonic and urban experience. These lived experiences, documented through my interviews and the numerous *SeeClickFix* postings, give life to a contemporary dialogue surrounding noise and urbanity, a discussion that began with Julia Barnett Rice and the early industrial city. At this point, one may want to arrive at the conclusion that the contemporary climate of noise in urban space reflects many of the same concerns and sensibilities that were exhibited during Rice’s time. Although this analytical lens may hold some legitimacy, this is not

the end goal of my own writing. Instead, I want to put forth the value intrinsic to investigating urban noise as a practice. The bounty of knowledge at both a local and global level is largely undiscovered which is why my route has largely been experimental. In lieu of concluding this contemporary case study with policy recommendations, I would like to highlight the poetry of investigating noise, as well as the wealth of knowledge that may be produced as a result.

In a number of my interviews, participants referred to “the sinkhole.” According to the *Daily Freeman*, the sinkhole, which is reported to have opened in April of 2011 and was caused by a leaky underground water tunnel, has cost the city of Kingston “approximately \$7 million [...], with \$1.1 million of that being reimbursed by a grant from the U.S. Economic Development Administration.”<sup>218</sup> One interviewee said, “So the sinkhole it- I don’t know how many years it’s been around, it’s been a long time and it basically just keeps taking out a whole chunk of Washington (Avenue), which is the main thoroughfare for Kingston. And so, when that happens, they have to block off the road and that’s their main thoroughfare, so busses and all sorts of things are redirected to areas that are usually very quiet.” In the face of the havoc that the sinkhole is causing Kingston, one particular anecdote stands out in its novelty. While others told me of the noise of construction the sinkhole was causing, one participant riffed,

Here’s an odd thing, it’s actually related to the sinkhole. On our street, between our neighbor’s house and an apartment building there is a storm sewer. It’s called Tannery Brook. For years it was totally dry and when we lived there- when we first moved, there was never any water in it. Well, once they started working on the sinkhole, they rerouted many of the storm sewers or something, I don’t know

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<sup>218</sup> Kirby, Paul. "Work Progressing on Underground Archway to Fix Kingston's Washington Avenue Sinkhole." *Daily Freeman*, 31 Oct. 2015. Web. 10 Apr. 2016. <http://www.dailyfreeman.com/article/DF/20151031/NEWS/151039930>

the full story here, but now it's constantly flowing with water. And so it sounds like a brook. We suddenly have- within the last year, a brook, the sounds of like a babbling brook near our house because they're constantly flushing water down. It's either water that's being redirected from the regular storm sewers from rain and everything, that in combination with I think they somehow use water or pump water to correct something in the sinkhole. I don't know what it is exactly. And so that gets flushed. Anyway, so now we have a babbling brook of a kind. That's new.

This unassuming anecdote tells an alternate history of the headache that has been the Kingston sinkhole. For this participant, sonic dissonance created by the unexpected sound of running water in the middle of a semi-urban landscape inspires awe. There is a great beauty in the sonic symbolism of a babbling brook cutting through the urban form. From an structural mishap, an aesthetic event is borne, reframing the mundanity of the neighborhood street to a mystical event, as a babbling brook belongs outside our human concept of the urban. Here the accidental has been transmuted to the ornamental. The deterioration of infrastructure, the veins, arteries of the city, has opened up new sonic pathways, leading to a spontaneous, haiku-like revelation. This anecdote is essential to my work, as it challenges my own assumptions and expectations about how many experience sound. The paradoxical beauty that has resulted from the sinkhole reasserts the subjective experience of each individual and works to highlight the overlapping layers of knowledge and meaning sound affords each individual.

## **Conclusion**

### **Memorializing the Ephemeral**

This project has been fashioned around numerous goals. First, I have attempted to question human assumptions about sound and in doing so, I have tried to denaturalize the notion of a soundscape and urban noise. I have commented on the ways we might understand noise to be a point of conflict and negotiation, attending to noise as commonly a conflict involving class and race. I have delineated historical silences in the telling of noise abatement history, analyzed the implications of these silences in terms of the power relations inscribed into urban space, and reframed these silences with counter-narratives that challenge hegemonic class presumptions that often underlie noise abatement. I have questioned the bourgeois concept of “silence.” I have considered the ways that current Kingston residents may be resisting political negligence in making themselves audible in urban space.

In addressing these goals, attending to tacit power structures, especially from an academic standpoint, it is easy to critique. But what is the value of critique? Is historical critique simply an act of determining or attempting to revalue what is “right” and “wrong” according to one’s own ethics or values? Is there utility to critique besides that of self-gratification? In this project, I have done my fair share of critiquing, yet, it is my intent that this critique has been constructive. My critique has not been aimed at pointing the finger. Instead, I hope that this historical critique serves to highlight ground for additional historical sound research. Additionally, my critique does not intend to create opposition. In fact, my critique has been conducted in the hopes that an increased awareness of sound and the complexities of hearing and

listening may lead to reconciliations. In heightening awareness of how sound may manipulate our sensibilities (and vice versa), I hope to intervene in emotional, gut responses to noise in hopes of coming closer to an understanding of the complexity of sound and hearing. In this way, I have suggested the value of self-reflexivity in listening and hearing.

In trying to be critical of this project I have often thought, why sound? Why not conduct local historical research with a keen eye to power structures and how previous historians may have brushed over these concepts? Yet, in these pages, I think that I have illustrated the point that there is something intrinsic to the human understanding and perception of sound that in picking it apart, implicit power relations surface. As I have noted, noise is a construct which is both social and political, and so, studying noise implies studying power. In critiquing urbanity in this way, sound as a tool of study is incredibly valuable. Further, I want to urge urban sociologists and other researchers of urbanity to integrate urban noise complaint data into their work. From my research, I think that a critical assessment of the noise complaint, perhaps quantitatively derived, will uncover new ways of understanding community and neighborhood structure.

One topic involving sound and history that I have not touched upon is the intimate relationship that sound has with memory. On February 18th of this year (2016) I joined a public Facebook group titled, “I’m From Kingston, NY.” Here, I made a public post, visible to all of the 8,329 members. In my post I briefly explained my project and asked a number of questions, “I’m interested in what YOU hear in Kingston and how you hear it. Are there specific sounds that you associate with Kingston, that remind you of Kingston? Are there certain sounds in Kingston that annoy you? How have the sounds that make up Kingston changed over the years?” I asked for Facebook users to message me privately. Instead I got 110 comments on the post. A number of



these comments were highly nostalgic and simultaneously provided illuminative insight into the sounds that were common to Kingston's past as well as the way sound is intertwined with a memory of place. In closing, I would like to provide some of the most salient comments that deal with the sound of Kingston in the past. These personal testimonies act to assert the value of local sound knowledge. The most striking aspect of these posts is the ways that the sounds described push up against the notion of "noise." How has the time between their original audition and the present shaped the way they have been remembered? How does memory obscure our conceptions of "noise?" What can these nostalgic sounds tell us about the hearer and the environment, Kingston? Why are some of these sounds no longer heard? In sharing these anecdotes, I hope they serve as a stepping stone, as a point of entry for inquiry into historical sound knowledge.

"Two sounds put me to sleep as a child; the train across the river, and the ferry leaving or returning on its final crossing for the night. That boat, built in Germany, had a unique engine sound that I'd recognize today if I were to hear it again."

"Trains for me. Also, when I was young, hearing parents call there [sic] kids home for dinner. You don't hear that anymore. My mother used to call all of us in one shot. Jack..Pat..Bobby..Kathy.. Peggy. Even if you were in the house already!"

"The sound of the can bouncing on the pavement when we played kick the can ( a hide and seek mutation)."

“Some distant sounds from the past: the clatter of metal roller skates on the sidewalk; the thwack of a rubber ball hitting the shingles of our house while we played “clapsie”; the neighbor next door shaking her bathroom rug out on the second floor window; the screech of the metal pulley on my mother’s clothesline--sounded just like a blue jay; the “harvest flies” on hot August nights.”

“I haven't lived in Kingston for 30 years, but I remember 3 sounds from growing up there in the '60's - '80's. The first, and probably most distinct, is the sound of the Rapid Hose volunteer fire station on Hone St, when there was a fire. I think I've heard from this FB board that it doesn't do this anymore, but I remember It would honk out, very loud, a three or four digit number-code to tell the volunteers what section of the district the fire was in. Then it would repeat it a few times. The code 241, for example, would be honk honk (pause) honk honk honk honk (pause) honk. (Pause and repeat.) I saw a picture on one of these Kingston-related FB pages once, of the wall chart that tells what area each code signifies. We lived right around the corner from the station, and were used to the honks in the middle of the night and would sleep right through them, but our overnight house guests were always taken by surprise. The second sound is probably still around, but I live down south now, and don't hear it anymore and so associate it with growing up in Kingston. It was the snowplows honking (with whirling flashing lights) at 2am making you wake up, throw on some clothes, and go move your car off the street until the snowplow went through, then go put it back. That's a sound I DON'T miss. The third

sound is also snow related, and not distinctive to Kingston, really, but I don't hear it anymore, and have never lived anywhere else where I heard it, so for me, it's a memory of Kingston. I miss the absolute hush I used to "hear" when there was fresh fallen snow on top of old snow, and new snow was also falling. It acts like an acoustic sound buffer or something, and the silence is unlike any silence you can duplicate. Except you might hear a little tink tink tink as the new snow fell. But other than that, total, complete silence. People down here think they know what silence sounds like. No, they don't."

"...I also remember the rag man going down the streets and announcing "rags, rags for sale." I'm sure the man with the pastry truck announced as well, but I don't remember.. [sic] ..."

"Going way back, the sound of "flip cards" clothes pinned to bicycle spokes."

"...When those trains went by our whole house vibrated. We only noticed it at night when sleeping. My father said it was because our house and the train tracks were in the same bedrock."

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