

# City Noises, City Sounds

**Liana M. Silva**

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## **Abstract**

Last week, I spent a few days in New York City to celebrate Thanksgiving. I stayed in the Bronx, at an apartment a few feet away from the Bedford Park Boulevard stop and a subway train yard.

## **Keywords**

Music (Subfield), Noise Effects and Management (Topic), Speech and Hearing (Subfield), Article, Listening, Place And Space, Sound Studies, Soundscapes

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Last week, I spent a few days in New York City to celebrate Thanksgiving. I stayed in the Bronx, at an apartment a few feet away from the Bedford Park Boulevard stop and a subway train yard. Now, even though I have lived for over five years in a sleepy Upstate town, I have developed an uncanny ability to sleep wherever, whenever. The screeches and huffs of the trains were but a distant murmur to me. In fact, they were almost soothing, a reminder of the sounds of my childhood. My hostess was a bit concerned that the sounds hadn't let me sleep. I reassured her, telling her, "I lived surrounded by noise in San Juan. The sounds of the trains weren't really a problem." She told me other guests hadn't had such a good night sleep.

That made me think of soundscapes, my soundscape in particular. As someone who has lived in cities, towns, and countryside, I am very aware of the different sounds that characterize each place. I lived in the Bronx as a child, and traveled to Puerto Rico often. My mom likes to remind me that I had trouble sleeping when we would go out to visit the family on the West Coast because I didn't like the sound of roosters in the morning. Eventually, after we moved to Puerto Rico, I grew accustomed to the sounds of roosters and chickens in the morning, as well as the murmurs of the stillness of the night, and could sleep through either. As an adult, I lived in San Juan. My apartment building stood at one of the busiest corners in Rio Piedras; there was always something to hear. Some nights it was the cackle of drunk college kids headed back to campus. Other nights it was the conversation of cops who had come to the cafe downstairs for breakfast (it opened M-F at 2 am). And sometimes it was the faint tweet of the crossing sign, an alert for the blind. When I moved to Binghamton, I had trouble sleeping: the silence was disconcerting for someone who had spent the last five years falling asleep to the sweet lull of "noise."

All of this came back to me last week, as I stood in the guest bedroom, making the bed. Many distinct sounds make my soundscape. They follow me wherever I go, and will inevitably color the way I interpret other sounds. They color the way I "listen" in other words. For example, some people will find the sounds of the city abrasive, harsh on the ear. I, on the other hand, always find city sound comforting and exciting. They sound like life to me. Of course, they also remind me of the city of my childhood, the city I always look for when I visit other cities. Can I add other sounds to that soundscape? Certainly. The whirr of the refrigerator in my kitchen that starts and stops at random moments of the night is an example of a sound I have added to my soundscape. I've also added the open and shut of the doors in the hallway outside my apartment, a sound I can hear as clear as a bell in my apartment. But I think that the same way that we add sounds to our soundscape we also categorize them according to the sounds we have already stored in our memory bank. The sound of the fridge is the sound of "home" for me, and it sits alongside the sound of roosters and the sound of the city streets. Same could be said for my idea of "noise": there are sounds that mean "noise" to me, and that definition is inevitably rooted in what I define as "sound."

LMS

