

The Noisiest City on Earth? or, What Can the 2012 Manhattan Noise Complaint Maps Really Tell Us?

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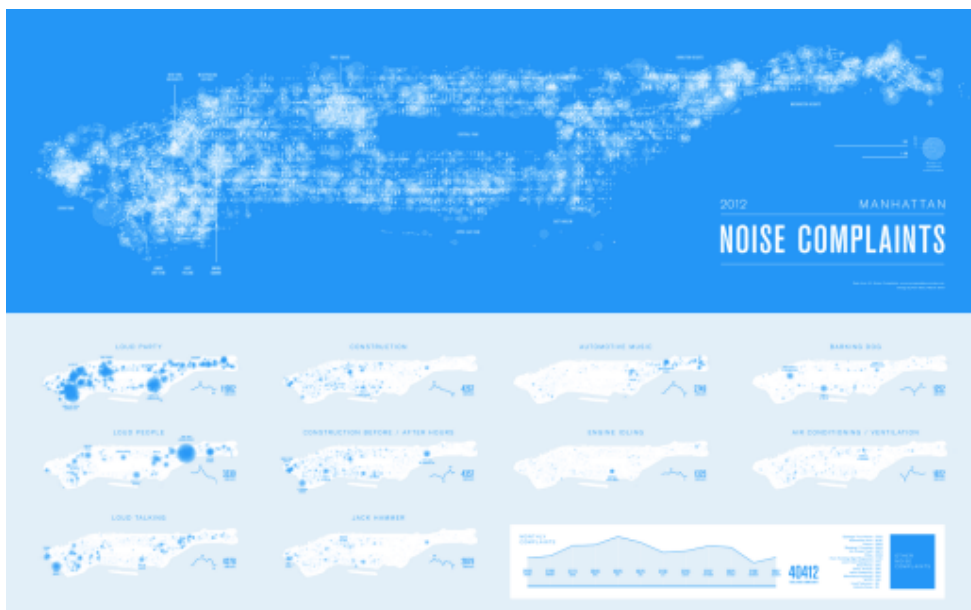
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Abstract

In 1905, a *New York Times* article declared New York City “the noisiest city on Earth.” More than a century later—this summer, to be exact— *The New York Times* ran a series on noise in New York City titled “What? The Long War on Loud” that proved that this city is still trying to figure out its relationship to sound. (One of the gems of that series?

Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Article, Class, Cultural Studies, Digital Humanities



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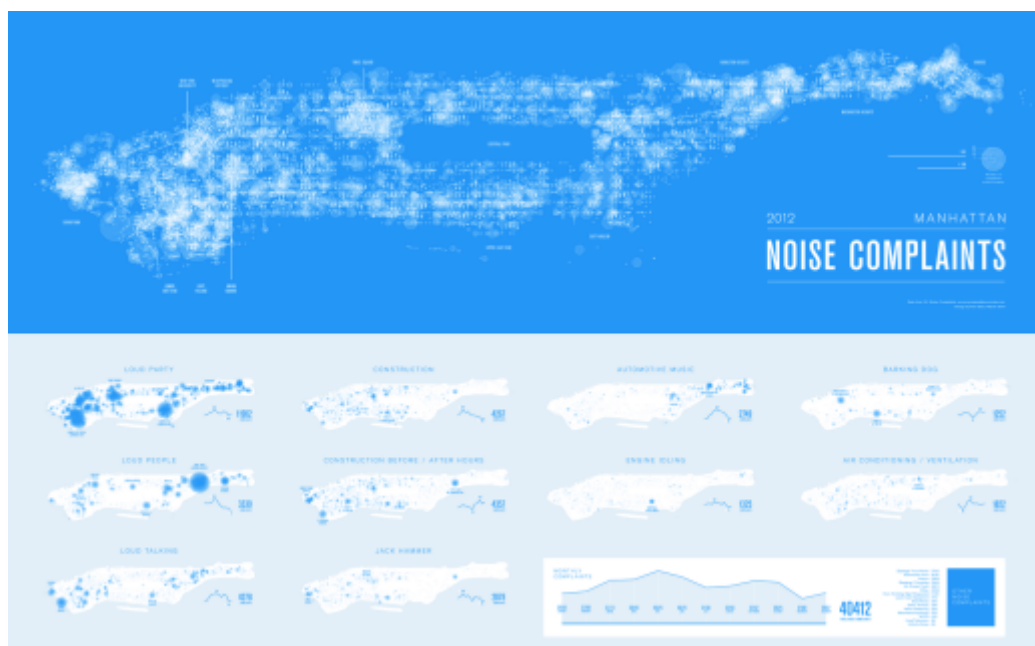
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"It's a city, not a cemetery. You can't tell everybody to go around wearing earplugs."

Ex-New York City Parks Commissioner [Henry J. Stern](#), quoted in *"Many Pleas for Quiet, but City Still Thunders"*

In 1905, a *New York Times* article declared New York City "the noisiest city on Earth." More than a century later—this summer, to be exact—*The New York Times* ran a series on noise in New York City titled "What? The Long War on Loud" that proved that this city is still trying to figure out its relationship to sound. (One of the gems of that series? ["New York's War on Noise"](#) timeline.) As a displaced New Yorker, [some of my most vivid memories of the city are aural](#). Although New York City isn't the only loud city out there, there are many reasons it's called "The City That Never Sleeps"—and sound has a lot to do with it, depending on which neighborhood you call home.

Now you can see what neighborhoods are allegedly noisiest, and where all that noise comes from. Brooklyn designer [Karl Sluis](#) created the [2012 Manhattan Noise Complaints maps](#) (click for full image), in which Sluis correlated the data on 311 noise complaints made during the year 2012 (40,412 complaints, to be exact) that he obtained from the [NYC Open Source site](#) with Manhattan's geographical coordinates. He used circles of various sizes to a) create an aural tracing of the island of Manhattan, sitting in a sea of turquoise blue b) showcase the number of complaints in an area. The bigger the circle, the larger the number of complaints.



Screen Capture of Karl Sluis's 2012 Manhattan Noise Complaints maps (click for interactive image)

The maps Sluis has created are helpful for visualizing the complaints on a broad scale, but they paint an incomplete picture of what noise means in New York City. The demographics of each neighborhood are absent from each map, a slight that can perhaps be traced to the 311 data available, but in order to better understand how New Yorkers define "noise" those stats must be

included. Both Sluis and John Metcalfe [from *The Atlantic Cities*](#) discuss notable findings, but neither takes into account the fact that some of the areas with a higher concentration of noise complaints are not just densely populated but densely populated with racial and ethnic minorities. Indeed, comparing the maps' noisy hotspots to a map of Manhattan racial demographics reveal how urban racial dynamics intersect with ideas about sound and power: who can make sound, who must be chastised for making noise, who can complain and whose complaints are actually being heard.



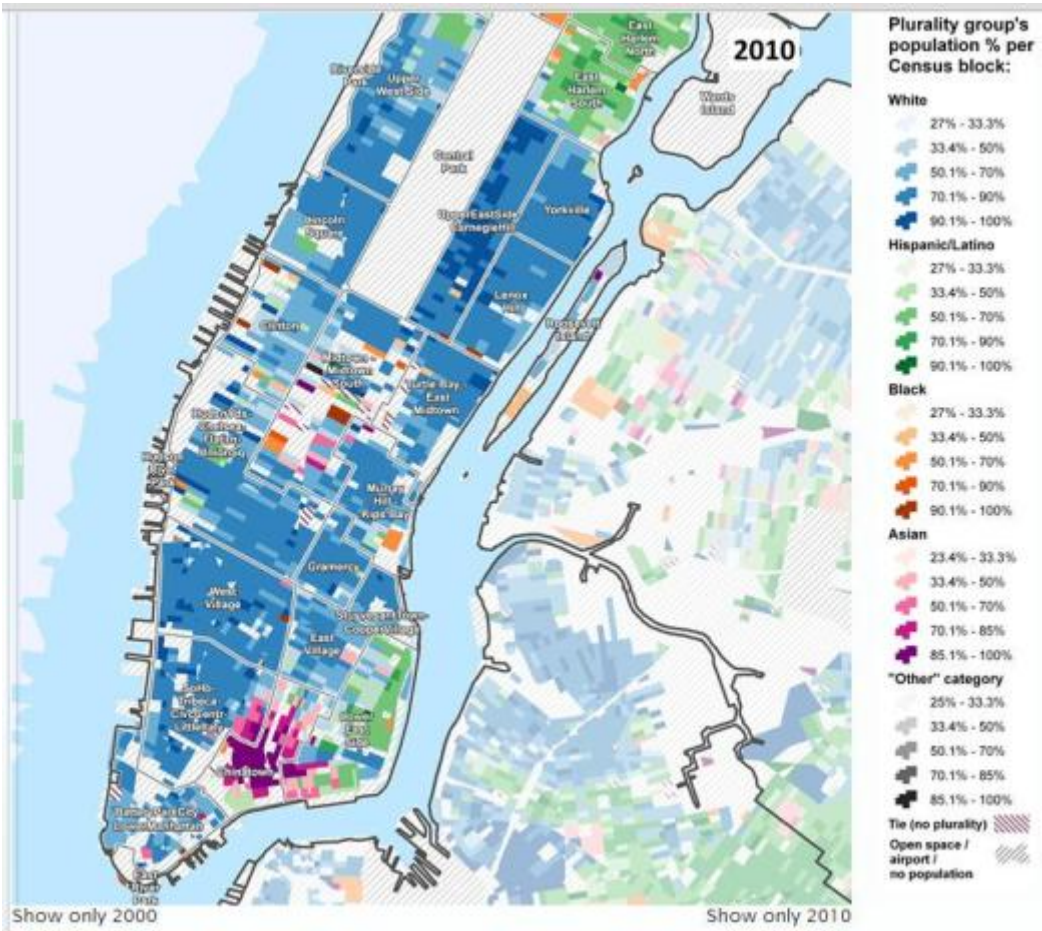
*"Unnecessary noise prohibited" by Flickr user
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Mapping noise complaints gives a spatial dimension to noise, and it renders noise palpable, in a way. Sluis [points out](#), "Noise complaints reveal the concentration of activity in the city as well as many smaller stories, such as the construction of the Second Avenue subway line, idling buses on the Upper East Side, and the homes of the loudest dogs (or the least patient neighbors)." He reminds us that the data comes from complaints and not necessarily decibels; in other words, it represents local ideas of what counts as sound and what counts as noise.

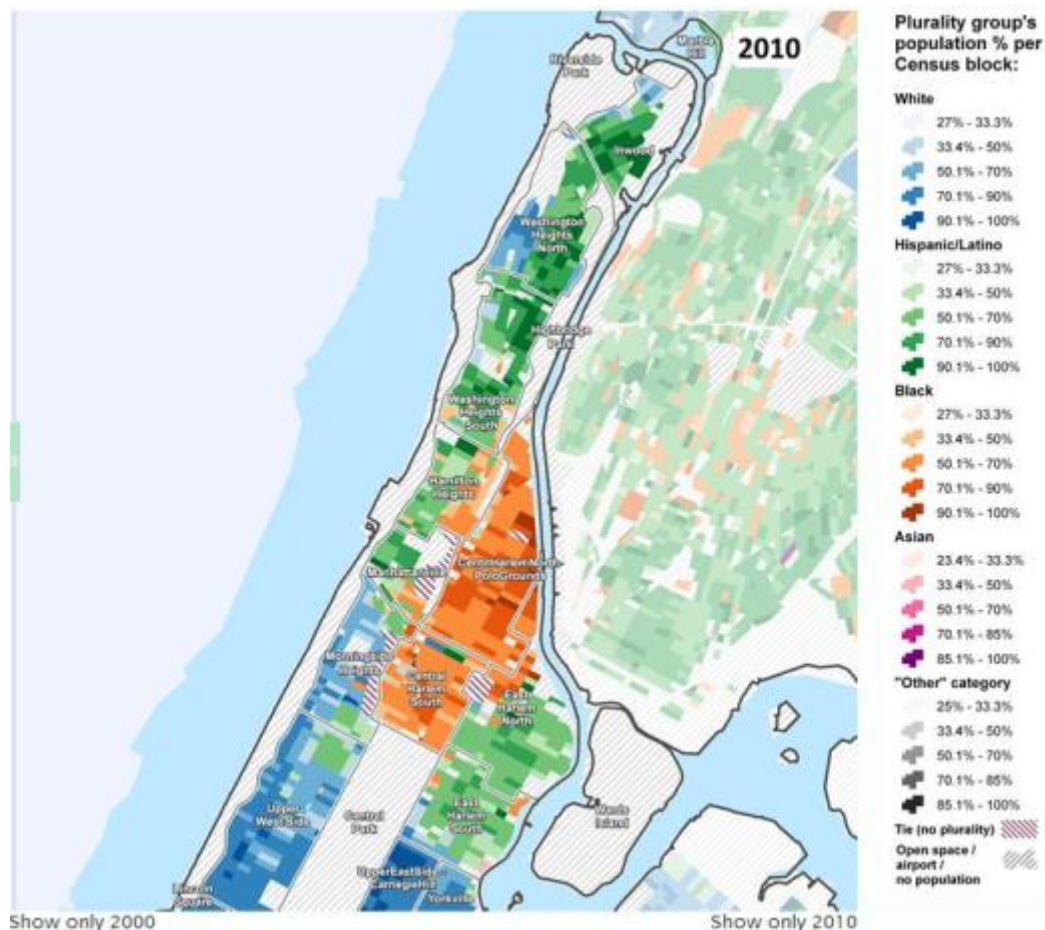
While Metcalfe correctly describes the thousands of 311 complaints about noise from 2012 as "the entire year's expression of mass annoyance," Sluis's map does not go far enough toward figuring out whose annoyance, exactly. We must remember that annoyance oftentimes stems not just from physical reactions to noise but rather one's perceptions about noise, what [Jennifer Stoevers-Ackerman](#) deems "[the listening ear](#)." How we hear others, Stoevers-Ackerman argues, is not as natural as it seems. For example, whom we deem as noisy may stem from our community, our parents, and/or social conditioning. Accounting for race/ethnicity in noise maps will show how the listening ear conditions neighbors to categorize and react to certain sounds.

For the purpose of this analytic exercise, I compared Sluis's maps and the [Center for Urban Research, CUNY Graduate Center's 2010 map of block-by-block demographic changes in New York City](#), in order to illustrate how population density and racial/ethnic demographics play a role in concentrated pockets of noise complaints. Drawn from 2010 census data, the CUNY map clearly delineates neighborhoods and color-codes the groups in each neighborhood per block: blue for whites, green for Latino, orange for black, purple for Asian, and grey for "Other." Although the Center for Urban Research, CUNY Graduate Center's maps cannot be superimposed on Sluis's

maps, they help give a general idea as to where neighborhoods are located in addition to racial demographics.



Manhattan below 110th Street in 2010, courtesy of the Center for Urban Research, CUNY Graduate Center



Manhattan above 110th Street 2010. Courtesy of the Center for Urban Research, CUNY Graduate Center

From the maps illustrating changing race/ethnicity patterns, I gathered what neighborhoods were predominantly white (West Village, Lincoln Square, Yorkville, Upper West Side), predominantly Latino (Washington Heights, East Harlem) predominantly black (Central Harlem, parts of Hamilton Heights), and predominantly Asian (Chinatown, blocks of the Lower East Side). When one compares Sluis's overall noise map of Manhattan to the racial demographic maps of Manhattan, what stands out is that the major circles of noise complaints are also places where there are different racial and ethnic groups mingling (for example, Times Square) or places that are populated by mostly minorities (Hamilton Heights). Whereas Sluis flattens out the noise complaints, demographic stats point to the racial/ethnic contours of each neighborhood. Sluis's maps focus on number of complaints; unfortunately this assumes everyone complaining is the same and that everyone making the noise is the same—a level aural playing field if you will. Bringing demographics into the equation underscores how not all complainers are equal and how not all complaints carry the same heft.

The city may be noisy, but “noisy” is relative. Sluis's map shows some predictably noisy areas for those of us familiar with Manhattan's soundscape (Union Square, Times Square) but it also draws attention to other areas not as predictable in the mainstream imagination (East Harlem South, Hamilton Heights). However, the maps by the Center for Urban Research, CUNY Graduate Center

help us better understand the context for the high or low number of complaints in certain areas. For example, one of the biggest circles on Sluis's general map of Manhattan is located in the Hamilton Heights/Washington Heights area; the Center for Urban Research, CUNY Graduate Center's map of Manhattan above 110th Street show that these areas are densely populated by blacks and Latinos/as. This is key information because it reminds viewers that this neighborhood is a lot more ethnically diverse than other neighborhoods with a smaller number of complaints. It brings to mind: what role does race play in these complaints, in terms of those who complain and those who are the focus of the complaints? Although more people might mean more complaints, the prevalence of complaints like "loud talk" in East Harlem (Spanish Harlem) are nevertheless connected racialized ideas about people of color being "loud." This doesn't assume that the people complaining are white, but that they are complaining about groups that are characterized as loud, noisy, rowdy.



"Classic New York: noise, smoke" by Flickr user Will, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

These noise maps, when put into conversation with demographic data, also indicate what areas are priorities in urban planning—the sounds of gentrification. The [visualizations of the complaints by section](#) (under the main map), combined with CUNY's maps, are even more telling because they break down the number of complaints by category. The aforementioned northern tip of Manhattan, for example, is also where many of the complaints are concentrated. At a glance, loud parties, loud people, and loud car stereos seem to be the major complaints in those areas, according to Sluis's visualizations. Meanwhile, noises of "urban growth," such as construction and

jackhammers, are less prevalent in these areas, whereas they are more prevalent below Central Park North, in now mostly-white neighborhoods.

Sluis's maps of the 311 noise complaints data allow readers to see differences in terms of neighborhoods: who complains the most? what do they complain about? However, one thing to keep in mind is that first question: *who* makes the complaints. This is where the data falls short. Can it be assumed that those who are calling about the noise are mostly people who live in the neighborhood? Are Upper Manhattan neighbors less or more tolerant of noise? The answers to these questions, although they're not found in Sluis's map, point to how ideas of who is noisy or who can make noise are at play here.

I do not mean to downplay the usefulness of Sluis's map. I instead call for the necessary addition of key missing factors to future noise maps in order to give us a more complex picture of noise complaints in Manhattan and elsewhere. Although it may not be possible to gather who the 311 callers are, including factors such as race and class may lead to very different noise maps. For example, what would a noise map of Manhattan look like if researchers brought income into the equation? Income inequality, especially in Manhattan where that imbalance is starkly on display, matters for the purpose of sound mapping. The more affluent neighborhoods are also the ones with less complaints and are the ones that are mostly inhabited by whites. Wealthier communities are more spread out and have more ability to couch themselves from noise, not to mention that it probably takes fewer complaints to get a response.



"Marcus Garvey Park Drum Circle, Harlem, NYC"
by Flickr user j-No, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Gentrification is another factor: what kind of analysis could we do if we considered what neighborhoods have been gentrified in the past ten years? It is possible that as whites move into neighborhoods where people of color have historically lived, suddenly they find them noisy—hence, complaints. It is fitting to consider, for example, the tension between an established group of drummers in Marcus Garvey Park in Harlem and the inhabitants of a new highrise (characterized as “young white professionals”) who wanted the 30-years and running drum circle shut down, [as reported in *The New York Times* in 2008](#). Moreover, if we accounted for the history of zoning in the neighborhoods that have the most or the least complaints it would add another

layer of analysis to the data. Are some of these neighborhoods used as entertainment zones, for example? Is it easier to open up bars there than elsewhere in the city?

With these questions in mind, the maps go from beautiful renditions of data, to opening up a bigger conversation about the arbitrariness of noise. The demographical and sociological context of these noise complaints must accompany the raw data, especially when it comes to sound. The analysis also points to the source of the data: 311 calls. I wonder if this is the only way that people in Manhattan (and New York City at large) are dealing with noise. I'm sure that after a century of being "the noisiest city on Earth," folks have gotten creative about it.

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Featured image: "Stranger 10/100 Johano" by Flickr user [MichaelTapp](#), CC BY-ND 2.0

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[Liana M. Silva-Ford](#) is co-founder and Managing Editor of Sounding Out! She is also known professionally as [the Writer Whisperer](#).

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