

Fear of a Black (In The) Suburb

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Abstract

Editor's Note : This month *Sounding Out!* is thrilled to bring you a collection of posts that will change the way you hear cities. The *Sounds of the City* series will prompt readers to think through ideas about urban space and sound. Are cities as noisy as we think they are? Why are cities described as “loud”? Who makes these decisions about nomenclature and why?

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Black Studies, Cultural Studies, Hip Hop, Identity



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Editor's Note: This month *Sounding Out!* is thrilled to bring you a collection of posts that will change the way you hear cities. The [Sounds of the City](#) series will prompt readers to think through ideas about urban space and sound. Are cities as noisy as we think they are? Why are cities described as “loud”? Who makes these decisions about nomenclature and why?

We kicked things off two weeks ago with [my critical reading of sound in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*](#), a play about African Americans in Chicago that still rings/stings true today. Guest writer [Linda O' Keefe](#) took readers last week on a soundwalk of Smithfield Square in Dublin, Ireland and specifically of the Smithfield Horse Fair, in order to illustrate how urban renewal disrupts city soundscapes and how sound reclaims those spaces. Next week CFP winner **Lilian Radovac** will share with us a photoessay on the sound installation *Megaphône* in Montreal.

Today's post comes from regular writer [Regina Bradley](#) whose post reminds us of the recent verdict of the Michael Dunn case, the “loud music case” when he shot 17-year-old Jordan Davis at a gas station. She discusses the dichotomy of urban and suburban in the context of sound (noisy versus quiet) and hip hop.

Edited on Feb 17, 2014 at 9:35 am EST: the first published version of this post did not acknowledge Nina Sun Eidsheim as the coiner of the phrase “sonic blackness.” We have added a reference in the post to recognize the work Eidsheim has done in theorizing this concept.—**Managing Editor Liana M. Silva-Ford**

In a recent Chase credit card commercial a white woman pulls up to a gas station and pumps gas into her minivan while blasting loud music. Her windows rattle and the toys of her children vibrate to the beat. After pumping gas, the woman hops into her car, puts on a pair of shades, and bounces to the beat like a “cool mom.” In the context of the commercial, the white suburban mother is not threatening. The commercial reminds me that [Jordan Davis' life](#) ended at a gas station in Jacksonville, Florida. His loud hip hop music was not cool; in fact, he and the music are perceived to be threatening.

<https://youtu.be/nGfLOxgsVSk>

The woman in the Chase commercial borrows what is instantly recognizable as sonic black (masculine) cool. [Nina Sun Eidsheim](#), in her article “[Marian Anderson and ‘Sonic Blackness’ in American Opera](#)”, theorizes sonic blackness as the racialization of sounds that listeners perceive to be coming from a black body. Borrowing from her concept, I extend sonic blackness as the sound that are perceived as black that enter spaces where physical blackness could be readily refused. Of particular interest for this essay is the connection between black mobility, urban space, and sound. I focus particularly on hip hop as a mobile form of sonic blackness whose origins are based in the city. Hip hop reinforces conceptualizations of contemporary blackness as urban. In this context, sonic blackness collapses the absolute binaries in which blacks are frequently forced to exist, i.e. urban and rural, working class and middle class, silence and noise. Yet when it is situated in hip hop, sonic blackness can also be considered a disruption of suburbia, a dominant trope of white privilege at the end of the 20th century. Using examples from the contemporary cartoon show [The Boondocks](#), I posit that the show’s use of hip hop underscores how the white suburban soundscape is constructed in contrast to black urban sounds.



Screen Shot Leave It to Beaver ending credits

America’s popular imagination portrays the suburbs as white, middle class, and quiet. Constructions of the suburbs in recent history have not strayed far from the idealistic neighborhoods of the 1950s and 1960s portrayed in shows like *Leave It to Beaver*. Take for example the inclusion of gated communities as the upper echelon of suburbs and white privilege seen in *The Real Housewives of Orange County* (which opens with the viewer ‘walking through’ opened gates into the Orange County community). I’d like to emphasize the connection between whiteness and quiet, as privilege in these types of spaces is present but often not visible or audible. Suburbs are the result of urban industrialism, anxiety of close association with an increasing minority community, and the need to sustain a romantic ideal of the American dream. A suburb’s physical parameter is a middle-class manifestation of manicured lawns, gates, and homeowner associations. At the level of sound, the suburbs’ class privilege is represented as the hum of lawn mowers, chirping birds, and screeching breaks of school buses. As Steve Macek points out in *Urban Nightmares: The Media, The Right, And The Moral Panic Over The City*, [suburban sensibilities cling to an idealistic notion of a physically and sonically constructed white](#)

[ambivalence to racial and class anxieties associated with cities](#). Any dysfunction associated with whiteness is *quietly* tucked away from public view.

White suburbia sustains its desirability because it is a physically and sonically segregated space. Yet white suburbia is also the site of black Americans' most recent migratory efforts. In ways that northern cities signified opportunity for blacks in the early 20th century, the ideals of racial progress and class in the late 20th century have shifted to U.S. suburbs. Thoughts of the middle class in the black imagination amplify the suburb as a utopic space because of its initial lack of access. The suburb becomes the mountaintop of racial access and privilege.



"A Raisin in the Sun 1959 2" in the public domain via Wikimedia Commons

Consider the premise for [Lorraine Hansberry's 1959 play A Raisin in the Sun](#). Hansberry examines in the play the high stakes of home ownership in a 'good neighborhood.' The Lee family leaves the Southside for the opportunity at a better life and more space for their growing family. [As Liana Silva-Ford pointed in her discussion of A Raisin in the Sun two weeks ago](#), the Lee family's decision to move into the Clybourn Park neighborhood disrupts the suburb as a space of white privilege and annotates the cusp of the emerging Civil Rights Movement. Additionally, visual demonstrations of black protest that reach suburban areas are annotated by sonic markers of struggle i.e. the sound of attacking guard dogs, police officers screaming at protestors, spraying fire hoses, and screams and moans of black bodies under attack. The audio-visual representation of the struggle of integration collapses the notions of white suburbia as a site of 'perfect peace.' The above referenced sonic markers also destabilize classifications of black trauma as restricted to urban spaces like the inner city, which is believed to embody blacks' realities.



"Damen – Boondocks" by Flickr user Ian Freimuth, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

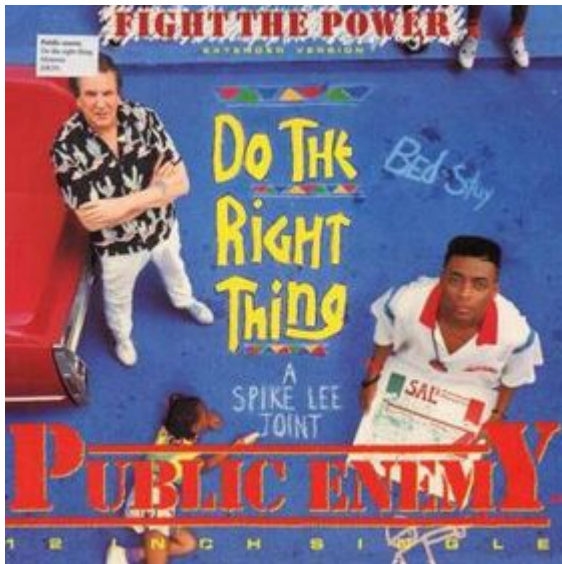
Where Hansberry's interrogation of space and access in *Raisin in the Sun* is an initial foray into constructions of white privilege vis-à-vis suburban communities, [Aaron McGruder's](#) 21st century suburban space of *The Boondocks* pivots on the romanticized ideas of blacks in middle class spaces derived from the 1950s and 1960s. The show introduces viewers to patriarch Robert (Grandad Freeman) and his two grandsons, Huey and Riley Freeman, who have left the south side of Chicago for the white suburb of Woodcrest. McGruder incorporates sonic markers of race and class that collapse suburbs as white only spaces. Aside from lighthearted lounge music style piano riffs during dialogues that indicate whiteness, McGruder incorporates sonic elements of hip hop that interrupt white suburbia. Elements of sonic registers of hip hop, like heavy bass kicks and songs like "Booty Butt Cheeks" or "Thuggin' Love," disrupt the quiet of the Woodcrest community.



<https://youtu.be/j7hRlu4ibAI>

The clash of hip hop's loudness with Woodcrest's quiet demeanor is best demonstrated in the episodes "The Story of Thugnificent" and "The Block is Hot." In "The Story of Thugnificent," rapper Thugnificent decides to move to Woodcrest. His presence is heard before it is seen, a caravan of cars with bass systems playing "Booty Butt Cheeks" before he actually appears on screen. Thugnificent's arrival is striking as he introduces hip hop as a literal and sonically disruptive element of black working class cultural expression. The disruption is celebrated, however, because of Thugnificent's allure as a rapper. He gets a pass that Grandad Freeman questions because he sees Thugnificent as a threat to what he perceives to be as a delicate existence of his blackness in a white community.

Grandad Freeman's vehement opposition to embrace "the homie" Thugnificent destabilizes notions of policing as a one-sided scare tactic by whites. Yet to repel Thugnificent's physical and sonic presence, Grandad resorts to hip hop and records a diss record that demands Thugnificent to leave Woodcrest. The diss record parodies the sonic notes of a rap battle: Grandad starts the track with ramblings of "yeah" and "uh." Where these terms are used in a rap battle to try to "catch the beat," Grandad's use of these words is an offset attempt to try to find something to say. The result of Grandad and Thugnificent's rap battle on wax is a rise in physical violence against senior citizens in Woodcrest. The awkwardness of Grandad's diss track parallels not only a generational dismissal of hip hop as an outlet of protest but the sonic awkwardness of hip hop being the voice of protest for a suburban space.



"Fight the Power" single cover, by fair use under US copyright law

In the episode "Block is Hot," a nod to rapper Lil Wayne's [same titled track](#) (although he nor the song are mentioned anywhere in the show), Huey Freeman blasts rap group Public Enemy's pro-black and anti-police brutality anthem "Fight the Power" to remind his neighborhood he is a black nationalist. He is also dressed in a black hoodie and black timberland boots. Huey is undeniably hip hop in a privileged white space. Huey's physical apparel, a nod to the Black Panther party and the hip hop fashion affinity for wearing the color black is amplified by "Fight the Power." Huey's posturing can also be read as a homage to Radio Raheem from Spike Lee's 1989 film [Do the Right Thing](#) because like Radio Raheem, Huey lugs around a large boombox to play "Fight the Power." Particularly striking is the overlap of the urban hip hop masculinity Raheem signifies with Huey's own hip hop posturing in Woodcrest. While Raheem remains in the 'hood, Huey doubly signifies hip hop's migration from the city into suburban areas as well as his own migration to Woodcrest from Chicago. Huey uses hip hop as a site of social-political resistance and as a way to remain attached to his urban roots. Blasting "Fight the Power" shows how Huey remains conscious of white privilege in Woodcrest. He recognizes the need to identify black agency – even if it is only emphasized through sound – while reflecting on the "new" suburb as a racially ambiguous space.

<https://youtu.be/avta-yVojUk>

The most jarring use of sound to reflect on the racial politics of the new suburb is the shooting of Uncle Ruckus by police officers. The ricochet of the bullets can be heard against cars and other inanimate objects but the bullets miss their target, Ruckus. The gun shots mark an interruption of the suburban soundscape. Gun shots, sonic signifiers of power, death, and trauma, are also markers of black violence as an urban phenomenon. However, negotiations of power shift to speak to reclamation of white privilege in sonic and physical spaces. The gun shots inflicted upon black bodies in suburban spaces could also be read as a subversion of gun shots heard in hip hop. While the sound of a firing gun in the hip hop imagination is expected and acceptable, gun shots in white suburbia are disruptive and displaced because they contest its appearance as a

quiet and respectable space. Further, the sonic significance of the bullets riddling everything around Ruckus is the messiness of the hit-or-miss surveillance of black bodies, particularly black men, as necessary in privileged white spaces.



"Jacksonville Florida Sheriff's Office Impala" by Flickr user Dfirecop, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

The policing of black bodies in suburban spaces, especially over the past two years, begs the question of how suburban soundscapes serve as backdrops of 21st century racial anxieties and whiteness. The centrality of sound in the deaths of [Trayvon Martin](#), [Renisha McBride](#), Jordan Davis, and [Jonathan Ferrell](#),— i.e. 911 tapes and banging on house doors – is critical in identifying race and space. Sonic markers of racial anxiety in their deaths devastatingly reemphasize the connection of race and sound in white privilege spaces. For example, [Davis' killer Michael Dunn stated to his girlfriend](#) that he "hate[d] that thug music." Unlike the suburban mom in the Chase commercial, Dunn is threatened by the sonic blackness and hypermasculinity associated with loud [hip hop] music. The negative connotations of hip hop as "thug music" and Davis' mere presence as a young black man trigger a devastating response to the disruption of white privileged space.

As I work through my visceral response to [Michael Dunn's not guilty verdict](#) for the actual slaughter of Jordan Davis, I think about the frivolity of the suburban mom in the Chase commercial and her enjoyment of loud music. The overlap of her whiteness, gender, and status as a suburbanite protect her from any inclinations of being a menace. She uses loud music as a sense of liberation – a premise for the Chase Freedom card being promoted in the commercial. Unlike Chase's suburban mom, Jordan Davis' use of loud music is not freeing – it contextualizes him in a rigid space of hypermasculinity and pathology that is all too often associated with hip hop culture. [As I discuss previously, the traumas associated with black bodies that cannot be literally articulated take place in nonliteral spaces like sound.](#) Utilizing sound is particularly useful in situating blackness in privileged white spaces like suburbs that displace their agency and significance because of racial anxieties associated with space and class.

Regina Bradley recently completed her PhD at Florida State University in African American Literature. Her dissertation is titled "Race to Post: White Hegemonic Capitalism and Black

Empowerment in 21st Century Black Popular Culture and Literature.” She is a regular writer for Sounding Out!

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Featured image: “Dead End in the Burbs” by Flickr user Vox Efx, CC BY 2.0

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