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Soundwalking Through a Policed Soundscape in Needham, Massachusetts

I began my soundwalk by walking down the street on which I grew up ([file 1](#)). Feel free to listen to as much as you want. There's not much to hear. In fact, the quiet is the most notable auditory feature. There's the wind and the occasional car driving by, but otherwise? Nothing. No music, no conversation: just manicured lawns and identical houses looming over the street. [One thing that is present in this town consisting of 85% white people](#) are lawn signs everywhere rejecting racism and bigotry.



Now, there is nothing inherently wrong with white allyship; as long as it doesn't overtake the voices of oppressed minorities, solidarity is valuable. However, are these messages supported by communal action, or are they simply performative signs of a group wanting to be seen as progressive? Let's see if the rest of the soundwalk provides any more insight.

It took a while to hear any unique sounds, as evidenced by the homogeneity of some of the first field recordings ([1](#) and [2](#)). This speaks to the omnipresence of silence in this

community. The silence extends further than you may expect. The [third file](#) showcases Needham Center, the commercial hub in town, yet it sounds almost identical to the previous parts of the soundwalk. This quiet is a far cry from other communities in this country. Take Washington D.C., for example. In the historically black Shaw neighborhood, [as geographer Brandi Thompson Summers notes](#), go-go music was played outside many businesses before the city began shutting down venues that did so when white people began moving in. This is a classic example of sonic policing, something that is inextricably linked to racial discrimination due to go-go's ties to Washington's African American community. Needham's lack of sound in the public space is not *necessarily* driven by the same biases, but it doesn't proactively project support for oppressed groups. This is not intrinsically negative, but it does little to support the town's self-image. For now, let's keep walking.

In the [fourth file](#), I began to hear some sounds that had been deemed culturally acceptable: birds chirping and dogs barking. The pleasant sounds of birds aren't exactly controversial, so I'll focus on the dog. Few would mistake a dog's constant barking as pleasant, but this sound is tolerated. Why is that? Well, we're all familiar with the image of an upper-middle class family with a big backyard and a dog or two. That description fits just about everyone in Needham, so of course the sounds that are a natural byproduct of this existence are permitted. But things may be more complicated than that.

[In her article](#) on the "campaign against noise" in New York during the 1940s and 1950s, scholar Jennifer Stoeber explains that the concept of "loudness" was historically weaponized against black Americans and Puerto Rican immigrants. By linking these minority groups with sonic disruption, the city could target these groups without introducing explicitly racial

legislation. The logical extension of this concept is that white communities are quiet and peaceful, unlike the noisy “other.” Thus, Needham’s lack of sound on the streets could be attributed to these racially motivated anti-noise attitudes. Dogs, however, are not a part of this paradigm: they are as loud in upper-class neighborhoods as they are in any other. But because an image exists of the upper-class white family with a golden retriever, they are afforded more sonic leeway than they might in another environment. How fitting that the people I heard speaking nearby were discussing their dogs (**file 5**)!

Naturally it is easier to analyze that which you hear compared to that which you do not. Each remaining type of sound I heard on my walk contained valuable information about the acceptable soundscape in Needham. There was only one place where I encountered many people gathered: a playground. The sounds of young children filled the air (**file 6**), proving themselves to be another acceptable type of noise. This is not terribly surprising in a town populated by new parents, and it may speak to the town’s image as “safe” or “family-friendly.” It seems that we’ve found something else to add to our list.

The next sound I encountered on my walk was that of an older man mowing his lawn (**7**). Though not terribly disruptive, there are certainly sounds that are more pleasant yet are considered taboo (music, for example). So again, why this sound? I posit that the lawnmower is accepted for two reasons: first, because the all-American image of a white man mowing the lawn of his home fits perfectly into the town through which I’ve spent the afternoon walking, and second, because the pristine lawns are more significant to the image of the town and homeowners association than the mower’s auditory disruption. This may be a piece about a soundscape, but the landscape should not be discounted.

The last significant sound I heard on my walk was also the loudest: construction ([file 8](#)). Skyrocketing housing prices have led to constant demolition and reconstruction of houses across town. One might think that the construction would be the most egregious sound around, but it is a symbol of economic progress, and how could anyone say no to that? So, the sounds of jackhammers and construction vehicles remain, while the rest of the town sits silent.

You may have noticed that every acceptable sound could only exist outside - constructing a house, mowing a lawn, etc. Perhaps the intolerance of other sounds reflects the economic means of this community. [In an article on the sonic history of boomboxes](#), scholars Joseph Schloss and Bill Boyer comment that “indoor community centers in economically oppressed areas are rare,” resulting in music played out onto the street. Maybe the lack of external noise is simply a byproduct of having the means to hide it. Whatever the reason, Needham’s sonic profile in and of itself does not seem as accepting of oppressed groups as many citizens claim. Be it the musical traditions of historically black communities or the economic hurdles to town noise conventions, the progressive image that the town seeks to portray is not supported by its sound.