Teaching Soundwalks in a Course on Gentrification, Black Music, and Corporate America

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Abstract

On May 5, 2018, the C-ville Weekly, a newspaper based out of Charlottesville, Virginia, published an article titled “Sex, drugs and rock ’n’ roll: new apartment complex promises at least one of those.” The headline referred to the complex being built at 600 West Main St. in Charlottesville.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Acoustic Ecology, American Studies, Article, Black Studies, Civic Engagement



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On May 5, 2018, the *C-ville Weekly*, a newspaper based out of Charlottesville, Virginia, published an article titled "Sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll: new apartment complex promises at least one of those." The headline referred to the complex being built at 600 West Main St. in Charlottesville. The complex has since been completed and studio bedrooms currently cost more than $1000 a month. As the *C-ville Weekly* headline shows, the developers were using the term and connotations of "rock 'n' roll" to sell exclusive – and in many ways unaffordable – housing.

After reading this headline, I began to develop an idea for a summer course at my institution, the University of Virginia (UVA). I ultimately titled that course "Black Music and Corporate America" which I offered online during the summer of 2021 (syllabus available for download via the link above). Although the course discussed varied content – from the multi-ethnic, multi-racial, and multi-gendered histories of rock and roll to the endorsement of conspicuous forms of consumption in hip hop – I wanted to spend one unit focusing on the interrelationship between music, corporate America, and gentrification. I strove to solidify this connection by assigning two related articles. The first article, by geographer and sociologist Brandi Thomson Summers, argues that black residents in Washington D.C. adopt go-go music as a form of reclamation aesthetics to combat their city's increasingly rampant gentrification. In the second article, ethnomusicologist Allie Martin conducts a soundwalk of D.C.'s Shaw District to forefront the experience of a black woman in the city and help displace white hearing as the default standard of interpreting sound (see *Sounding Out!*'s *Soundwalking While POC* series from Fall 2019). These two articles served as a foundation for one of the assignments the students had to complete in class: conducting a soundwalk of their own in which they had to walk around a field site of their choosing and think critically about the sounds they were hearing.

Throughout the summer sessions, students completed three main assignments related to the course topic. They had to think about marketing themselves and thus wrote a cover letter for a job or internship they were interested in pursuing in the future. We also, as a class, sent a suggestion

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to literary scholar John Patrick Leary, who has created a list of "keywords of capitalism:" buzzwords that get adopted in corporate lingo; we suggested "rockstar" as a term and offered him a brief explanation why:

Letter to John Patrick Leary about "Rockstar"Download

Students also had to conduct a soundwalk. I asked them to model it after Martin's and to also take into consideration Summers' arguments about gentrification, white policing of black sound, and a community's response to attempts to silence their music and culture.



Rainbow Rush 5K, Ix Art Park, Charlottesville, VA, Image by Bob Mical (CC BY-NC 2.0)

The soundwalks I received merit sharing with readers of *Sounding Out* for three primary reasons: 1) The assignment benefited from the online format, especially since students could conduct soundwalks in Charlottesville as well as in their homes across the country. 2) the students made compelling arguments that deserve recognition. 2) the students brought up issues that teachers interested in assigning soundwalks in the future might want to preemptively address.

Students who walked around Charlottesville focused mostly on The Corner, the portion of the city where most of UVA's student body eats, shops, and drinks. As one student noted, during the regular semester, hundreds of students populating The Corner on any given day during the semester can silence out – literally – the concerns of the homeless and the panhandlers who make the area their home. However, over the summer, Charlottesville's Corner becomes significantly less populated and, as this student noted, much more silent. As a result of this silence, pedestrians might be much more attuned to Charlottesville's rampant inequality. This student, over the course of their summer soundwalk on The Corner, came to a radical conclusion:

while communities might need moratoriums on evictions, or moratoriums on construction, maybe Charlottesville needs a moratorium on student noise as well.



"The Corner, Charlottesville, 2011" Image by Peyton Chung (CC BY 2.0)

In addition to focusing on inequality, many students' soundwalks pointed out discrepancies between what they saw and what they heard while on their soundwalks. Another student writing about The Corner noted how, as a transfer student, the music that they heard emanating from a barbershop helped make them feel at home in Charlottesville. Businesses on The Corner have historically not been entirely welcoming to people of color. Additionally, most pedestrians and patrons of The Corner are white. However, this student remarked how comfortable they felt on The Corner because they could hear one of their favorite artists, Moneybagg Yo, playing from the sound system of the barbershop they were going to visit. Long before they could visually see the business, the soundscape let this student know they were welcome. In this way, this barbershop helped create a sense of community in a similar way that the broadcasting of go-go music from Shaw's many businesses helps create in Washington D.C.



BLACK LIVES MATTER poster in the front window at Logan Circle in the 1800 block of 13th Street, NW, Washington DC on Tuesday afternoon, 20 October 2020 by Elvert Barnes Photography (CC BY-SA 2.0)

Another student focused specifically on the contradictions between the activism they "saw" demonstrated in their upper-class Boston suburb and the activism they "heard" while walking around their neighborhood. This student noted that residents of their neighborhood strove to create an inclusive atmosphere by putting up "Black Lives Matters" and "Immigrants Welcome" yard signs. However, they also cited Jennifer Lynn Stoever's work – who we read in class – and noted the presence of what Stoever calls the "sonic color line." As this students' own field recordings of their neighborhood illuminated, most residents of this neighborhood valued silence. Harlemites during the 1940s and 1950s, as Stoever writes, certainly appreciated restful nights, but her scholarship also demonstrates how dominant narratives constructed black communities as "noisy," "chaotic," and "dangerous," and white ones as "silent," "efficient," and "disciplined." Although residents in this Boston suburb think of themselves as progressive and demonstrate their liberalism through visual signifiers such as yard signs, this student concluded that they still live in a community that privileges certain (silent) soundscapes. In doing so, such communities continue to perpetuate the sonic color line.

Sample of Student Work #1 (Needham, Massachusetts)Download

Admittedly, several students living in America's suburbs struggled to conceive of the sounds they heard as worthy of discussion. For instance, the sounds of cars made frequent appearances in their writing but were often dismissed as inconsequential. Instead, students lamented that they were not experiencing a vibrant public sphere that resembled the setting of Spike Lee's 1989 film, *Do the Right Thing* (a film we watched together in class), as if that representation wasn't a very particular historicized and localized representation. On an individual basis, I tried to get students to think more critically about the sounds of cars in their neighborhood. We read about the role of automobile in the development of G-Funk during the early 1990s as well as the death of Jordan

Davis, who was murdered in his car for playing rap too loudly. However, neither article resonated with students' experience on their soundwalks since they were simply hearing cars passing by their houses or driving down the street. Most of the time, they could not tell what type of music was being listened to at all inside the car nor could they hear it emanate onto the street.

Student Sample #2 (Rockville Centre, New York) Download

Therefore, teachers, depending on the living conditions of their students, might want to preemptively include discussions of car culture within American society. After all, more than go-go music broadcasted from storefronts, or second line parades, or music playing from boomboxes, or the noise of nature, (my) students typically hear cars in their day-to-day life. As a result, teachers assigning soundwalks may want to talk about the role of highway construction and the automobile industry on suburbanization and white flight. Discussions of automobiles within the context of environmental racism might also be useful for students to consider. Steph Ceraso's *Sounding Composition* also discusses the immense time and energy corporations have devoted to car sounds and soundscapes *within* cars, buffering occupants from car noise as well as that of the neighborhoods outside.



Route 29 Solutions, 2011, Virginia Department of Transportation, (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

In addition, I found that students need a more robust historical understanding of suburbanization in the United States, particularly alongside an understanding of their own racial and ethnic histories. Some students living African American suburbs could have benefited from some contextualization about when and how they came to be. Talking about suburbanization in general, the development of White suburban liberalism in the 1970s and 1980s would have helped the student living in a Boston suburb make more sense of the politics of their neighborhood. Karen Tongson's *Relocations* also provides context for shifts in America's suburban landscape after sweeping changes in immigration law in 1965, as well as a rethinking of expressions of sexuality in

the suburbs. These are just some topics I wish I had focused on more to help prepare my students for their soundwalks.

Future teachers may feel inclined to refer to the conclusions my students came to, as well as the literature I wish I had included in course, as they think about assigning soundwalks in their own classes. Both my students and I appreciated the soundwalk assignment and its invitations to listen differently. Teaching soundwalks in a course focusing on "Black music and marketing strategy" prompted my own necessary meditation as a non-Black scholar working in this field. Guided by Loren Kajikawa's new research on "Music, Hip Hop and the Challenge of Significant Difference" that examines how the popularity of courses on black music help subsidize a university's classical music offerings, I want to incorporate future discussions of Black music as sonic diversity marketing in contemporary higher ed, both at the microlevel of scholarship and the macro- institutional level, which remains far from equitable despite ongoing challenges to its status quo. For students, the soundwalks–in their words–allowed them to learn about themselves and think differently about the area in which they live. They also become more attuned to their surroundings–questioning what makes a neighborhood and for whom?–and how different cultures use their voices where they live, necessary skills for our moment that will help us envision a world beyond it.

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Featured Image: Wall Mural right next to Bowerbird Bakeshop in Charlottesville, VA, image by Tom Mills, (CC BY-SA 2.0)

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***REWIND!*...If you liked this post, you may also dig all this good stuff about sound studies pedagogy! Good luck with Fall semester, folks!:**

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