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Sonic Earthquakes

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This is an ethnographic study of youths who put elaborate sound systems in their automobiles. I argue that participants in loud car stereo culture share an aesthetic agency, using sound and mobility to construct environments (discussed in this article as mobile heterotopias) that challenge the spatial and temporal constraints of daily life. Their actions and stories speak to, and exist within, broader contemporary debates in the United States about music and noise in public places. Moreover, their sonic booms confront and undermine official attempts to regulate contemporary life and to sanitize public spaces.

Keywords: Soundscapes; Cultural Disruption; Public Space; Youth; City Street; Ethnography

Boom Cha Boom Boom. *Boom Cha Boom Boom*. *Boom Cha Boom Boom*. *Boom Boom Boom Boom*. Mo and I are stopped at a red light. He just inserted a Timbaland CD into his car stereo, and the bass moves in waves, working its way from the trunk of his car through the back seat, ultimately washing over us in the front seats. *Boom Cha Boom Boom*. There's a large faded black Chevy pick-up truck in front of us. The truck's bed is encased by a shell that's missing glass. A girl who was lying down in the back of the truck sits up quickly. She's about fourteen years old, a little chubby, with reddish-brown hair, and pasty white skin. She lowers her sunglasses slightly down the bridge of her nose, imitating a cheeky television star in a made-for-TV movie, and stares at us. The girl seems to be questioning why we've disturbed her otherwise peaceful journey. *Boom Cha Boom Boom*. Her left elbow nudges something that's out of our sightline. A ten-year-old boy, who we now learn was on the other end of the jab, appears. The girl's lips move briefly. Then the boy shoots us a disgusted look before lying down. When the light turns green, we accelerate slowly. The movement will drown out the sound of Mo's stereo, and the girl will once again be engulfed by the sounds of a humming motor instead of the booming bass.

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I am driving in Tampa, Florida with Mo, a twenty-one-year-old African American man who has spent a lot of time and money putting together a car stereo system that creates sonic earthquakes in the midst of daily life.[1] Mo is one of six people I have interviewed extensively and driven with to learn about loud car stereos, including the reasons why they dedicate so much time and spend so much money putting together their systems.[2] To many, the loud sounds are a nuisance, and people like Mo are deemed to be little more than selfish deviants who lack civility. But within the car stereo culture there is a broad range of opinions about using the stereos. In this ethnographic study, I critically examine perspectives about, and uses of, car stereos. I argue that the youths who put elaborate stereo systems in their cars and trucks use sound, sensuous experiences, and mobility to construct environments (discussed in this article as mobile heterotopias) that challenge spatial and temporal constraints of daily life. Participants in this culture are not unified in their approaches to achieving heterotopic spaces, and their attitudes about the ways in which stereos should be put together and used are quite diverse; however, they share an aesthetic agency, piecing together equipment to create sonic spaces and projecting those sounds out of the automobile and into the streets. Their actions and stories speak to, and exist within, broader contemporary debates in the United States about music and noise in public places. Moreover, their sonic booms confront and undermine official attempts to regulate contemporary life and to sanitize public spaces.

Mobile Heterotopias

People with loud systems are striving to find a place (physical and psychological) that exists both inside and outside the confines of daily life. The automobile with a loud system is a unique space that has somewhat broken free from the ordered routines of daily life; it is a heterotopia. Heterotopias "are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted," argues Michel Foucault.[3] "The heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men [sic] arrive at a sort of absolute break with the traditional time."[4] Foucault claims that every culture has heterotopias. These heterotopias can change as a society changes and are linked to slices of time. Time can build upon itself (e.g., a library is a place of all times and continues to accumulate materials from the past and the present), or time can be fleeting (e.g., a fair or festival). Multiple incompatible heterotopias can form in a single real space, but these heterotopias are not generally open to the public. One must receive certain types of permissions to enter. Foucault notes that openings occur in a variety of ways. One is bound to the site (e.g., a prison), one must enter via some ritual, or one receives limited access (e.g., a person in transit who stays in a guest house does not have access to the family quarters). Finally, and perhaps most relevant to this study, heterotopias function in relation to non-heterotopic spaces. In other words, they expose real spaces, or they function as spaces that are other. In terms of Michel de Certeau's tactic, the automobile with the

loud stereo system can insinuate "itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety."[5]

One could argue that certain types of cars can be discussed more generally as heterotopias. For example, the art car simultaneously functions in the same capacity as any other automobile in that the art car can transport a person from one destination to another. At the same time, the art car contests and inverts the typical functions of an automobile vis-à-vis its status as a canvas. It challenges aesthetic norms (i.e., most people stick with standard paint and designs rather than gluing stuffed animals to their cars).[6] For those with quality systems, however, the heterotopia is formed by a combination of music, the sensuous qualities inside the car, and mobility. The person with a bumpin' system is a bricoleur, making use of musical and technical expertise to construct a particular kind of public experience. But it is also important to note that the freedoms that are so central to the mobile heterotopia also underscore broader social inequities. Youths with loud systems represent a group that has less say in broader social and political decisions; however, a majority of the participants in this culture are young males who, in one respect, are struggling to claim the streets that will likely be theirs as they age.

Music, Sensuous Qualities, and Mobility

"If we conjure up a picture of what 'modernity' is like as a distinctive way of life, with an image of, say, the Manhattan skyline or some other similar urban landscape—as many television programmes and films do—we could do the same by tuning in to the typical sounds of the late-modern city," claim Paul du Gay, Stuart Hall, Linda Janes, Hugh Mackay, and Keith Negus. "They would include not only snatches of recorded music but other familiar sounds, like the wailing siren of [an] ambulance, fire-engine or police car; the endless murmur of traffic; the exhalations from sooty exhausts, wheezing engines and chugging juggernauts—the modern soundscape."[7] The soundscape refers to acoustic fields (e.g., musical compositions, radio programs, or acoustic environments), writes Murray Schafer. If one is seriously to examine the soundscape then one must begin with efforts to discover "those sounds which are important either because of their individuality, their numerousness or their domination."[8]

The sounds produced by car stereos are notable features of the late-modern soundscape because these sounds tend to overwhelm other sounds, dominating via thunderous bass-heavy booms. These sounds are also unique in that they can roll or they can come in quick bursts, often startling pedestrians, residents, and other drivers. The heavy booms and quick bursts have become more potent because stereo manufacturers have produced equipment that has greater sonic precision and the ability to power louder music with heavier bass. Projection of music from the car stereo system has also become an important feature of the contemporary soundscape because the sonic flashes appear to lack usefulness compared to a range of other loud sounds that help fill the soundscape (e.g., police and ambulance sirens are deemed

necessary for the purposes of public safety). Loud music is treated as nothing more than noise.

Although the booming bass is the most prevalent sound we hear when we come in contact with loud car stereo systems, most people with elaborate systems seek to hear a full range of sounds.[9] "You want to hear the *tick tick* followed by the *boom*; that's what everyone strives for," says Mo. "When I say *tick tick* followed by the *boom*. . . . You want to hear every instrument, everything. When they're in the studio . . . everything they're putting into the beat I want to hear everything coming out of my car."[10] But there can be a difference between what people hear inside the automobile and what's heard outside the car (as a pedestrian, as a driver or passenger in another vehicle, or in one's house). Those outside the car are likely to only hear the rumbling bass, or feel it. (One woman at a cultural studies conference in Manhattan, Kansas told me that she usually feels the music from car stereos since the bass shakes her house.) However, as Jeff, a nineteen-year-old white college student from Georgia, tells me, bass is usually only one part of the desired sonic spectrum for those inside the car. "I wouldn't say that just bass is all that it [a superior system] consists of. If you did that then it would just get old, your head would hurt all the time."

Jeff's comment highlights that the boom, which overpowers the other sounds outside the car, can also become overwhelming within the car itself if the person is too invested in heavy bass. It is easy to see how this uneven sonic mix can occur given the methods used by some bass fanatics to gauge the quality of their systems. "I have people that come in and we'll always joke that when we finish with the car they won't get in and listen to it, they'll turn it up and step outside the car. It's not for their benefit; it's for everyone else's," says Mike, the manager of Sensuous Sounds car stereo shop. While the use of this method to test the system could signal that these people do not understand how to listen properly for a clean sound, a more likely explanation is that they are more interested in the ways in which the system can serve as a tool to present themselves publicly. Even for those who do want a superior system, the public presentation can be an attractive feature of the loud stereo.

"I don't like to admit it because it's kind of lame, you know it's kind of whack to admit that you just want to be seen because of your stereo, but that is part of it," claims Jeff. "Besides just the enjoyment personally of the music, the attention is an attraction for me. You've put a lot of effort into it and you've put a lot of money into it and if other people can appreciate it then its cool. In those situations . . . when you get out people are like, 'That's your car'," he says, finishing the sentence with a tone that reflects admiration.

Jeff, like so many others who have loud systems, struggles to achieve a balance between creating a sonic environment that is his own and sharing the sounds with others, in effect using the stereo to construct a public performance. This is interesting because calling attention to one's presence via the loud car stereo system runs counter to some historical uses of the automobile by teens to hide from the gaze of adults.[11] At the same time, as Jeff notes about the admiration he receives from others, there is a pleasure derived from being noticed. However, that gratification comes at a cost if one wants to move through the streets anonymously. Dick Hebdige calls this general

condition of negotiating surveillance and the evasion of surveillance "hiding in the light."[12] But using music to announce one's presence is very different than other forms of hiding in the light. People who use their car stereos to announce their presence are tucked away in their automobiles, relying on the sounds to make a mark. Unlike the loitering teen on the street corner whose body provides evidence of the teen's presence, the loud car stereo system is unique because it allows the driver to be revealed by intangible, elusive sound, although, ironically, the projection of loud music from the car can conceal the drivers' identity. The music stands in for the driver.

Although the ratio between trying to hide and trying to shine varies depending on the person, the broader dialectical tension between striving to contain the music within the car and projecting the sounds is central to creating and maintaining the mobile heterotopia. Yet, the sounds are only part of the heterotopic experience and the public performance. The loud sound system creates a sonic environment, which also features physical sensations. Booming music makes the metal cocoon pulsate, stimulating the body.

"There's nothing like looking in the mirror and seeing the mirror shake," says Mo. "I like the way it feels on my back when the seats shake. I like watching the mirrors shake when I'm at a stoplight by myself. I like watching the windows vibrate." "So you're looking to feel the vibrations inside?" I ask Mo as he takes the Timbaland CD out of his player. "Yeah. . . . Got to. . . . It's a must," he replies as he fades up an Outkast song. The track begins with a DJ scratching—*wickwickwickwick*—and then the bass booms. Mo is my own private disc jockey, and he has measured his comments as a radio disc jockey would, allowing just enough time for the music to have its hypnotic effects. His status as disc jockey in this moment extends to the car stereo culture more generally. People with loud systems are aesthetic agents, demonstrating another dimension of the relationship between the public and private self. They decide when and where the music will be heard, and show off their ability to select and mix together different songs. This aesthetic agency can help shape the broader tactile experience for those in and around the car. In other words, people with loud systems can choose songs that will feature longer waves of heavy bass or shorter bursts. These decisions will influence how we feel their presence.

In his study of rave culture, Ben Malbon argues that clubbing is sensuous, "where the lights (or darkness), the sounds, the possible use of drugs, the practices (and rituals) of dancing and the proximity of the 'audience' all add to its intensity."[13] Malbon notes that "the ability of the music to transform (and 'create' certain types of) space" is crucial to the clubbing experience.[14] Of course, the people who gather there and the physical space itself shape that experience (this is the reason club goers choose to attend one club over another); however, it is "the ability of music (and sound more generally) to create an *atmosphere* (an emotionally charged space) which is of crucial importance."[15] Like the club, riding in a car with a quality sound system provides the occupants with a sensuous encounter. The pulsating vibrations of the bass make the seats shake in a way that feels like a massager has been turned on. Watching the mirrors vibrate can feel like one's vision has gone haywire. And the loud

music can make one feel as if one's head is about to burst. Although this experience might seem extreme, something to avoid at all costs, music can sound and feel better when turned up.

Both nightclubs and cars with loud systems use loud music and sensuous experiences to construct and maintain an atmosphere. Unlike the club, however, the atmosphere in the mobile heterotopia is also shaped by mobility. The sensory experiences are not tied to a specific location. The automobile is a rolling thunder revue (to borrow the phrase applied to Bob Dylan's 1975 tour). Drivers control where the car will go and how long the journey will last. Driving at night and driving during the day provide different orientations. Similarly, speeding up or slowing down can also magnify the power of the music, increasing the physiological and psychological stimulation that takes shape in the mobile heterotopia.

The bumpin' system helps construct a range of unique sonic adventures for a variety of public experiences, which distinguish the mobile heterotopia from standard car rides to run errands or shuttle to and from school, work, or home. At the same time, the sound system can turn these seemingly mundane driving experiences into something more fulfilling. As Mo notes, regarding the quantity of time he spends driving now that he has a system in his car, "[I]t might sound crazy but sometimes I'll find myself getting in my car and just taking a drive. I just like being in there." He used to walk to the corner store if he needed something, explains Mo. "[B]ut now, since I'm all hooked up, I'll take a ride the long way, come around, and go to the store, because I love it. I love having music in there. I love the feel of the music bumpin' off the trunk and it's just great."

The combination of loud music, sensuous qualities in the car, and mobility add up to a feeling of exhilaration and a sense of power (to sculpt the soundscape via aesthetic selections and thunderous booms). Although people with loud systems do not have a monopoly on this automotive euphoria (I believe this feeling is the reason why many of us have driven faster than the speed limit with our windows rolled down and our stock stereos cranked up), the sensations are intensified when the system is of a higher quality. The music rings out in a crisper and clearer fashion. Bass sounds heavier. One's body shakes and vibrates. And, if timed right, the rhythm of the music and the rhythm of the road can blend together in perfect harmony.

Disparities in the Heterotopia

One of Chevrolet's 2003 television commercials, designed to display the car manufacturer's longevity, featured an older model Impala and the latest model. The two Impalas were shown stopped at a red light. On the left side of the screen were four African American men in an older model convertible. They were dressed in gangsta apparel (e.g., dark square sunglasses, knit caps pulled down to the top of the sunglasses, etc.). A white woman, who appeared to be wearing a power suit, drove the new model. She looked the stereotype of middle class and middle management. Ambient street sounds and gangsta style hip hop combined to form the soundtrack. The driver of the older model Impala tilted his head back and looked at the white

woman, who slightly nodded her head to the music while looking back at the man. Then her light turned green and she went left. The music slowly faded, signaling that she had the loud system.

This commercial sustains public perceptions that young black males are responsible for most of the loud music in the streets and that hip hop is the predominant music blasting from the cars, in turn affirming stereotypes of young black men and rap (a music mostly made by young black men) as menacing.[16] The surprise element in this advertisement stems from the fact that we do not expect women (especially white and middle class) to be bumpin' their music. A positive read of the ad would highlight that women are presented as desiring quality car stereo systems rather than settling for the sounds of the stock stereo. Although most of Mike's customers at the Sensuous Sounds stereo shop are men, he notes that more women are purchasing stereo equipment each year. Younger girls, often recently turned sixteen, come to the shop because "they want the boom," he says, while women twenty and older are usually looking for a quality head unit, CD changer, and decent speakers.

Mike tells me that the bumpin' system is not as important for women as it is for men, although that might be changing. This impression also seems to be reflected in a general lack of interest in discussing their stereo systems. Women I had met, who often agreed to be interviewed about their systems for this study, did not call me when I gave them my phone number or failed to show up for interviews (in most cases after multiple scheduled meetings), and on-line responses to my questions came from men, or people using male screen names.[17] These demographic differences relative to sex and the use of loud stereo systems are important because the distinction reflects historical divides when it comes to the street. The freedoms that people like Mo and Jeff feel on the city's streets exist within a gendered power structure. The street has historically been a male-dominated arena. As Elizabeth Wilson observes, male fears "arose at the sight of women crowding through the streets of the new great cities, women who were not properly within patriarchal control."[18] The loud car stereo system is merely another tool to help males rule the public landscape (and soundscape).

In addition to being a male-dominated form of expression, the cost of putting together a system can also limit who participates in this culture. (Let us not forget that the woman in the Impala commercial was meant to represent someone who is upwardly mobile.) Despite that, many of the people who have quality sound systems are not wealthy. Of the people I drove around with, only Grandpa Woss's mid-1990s Honda Civic would be considered "nice." And Mike told me that although he has customers who drive high-end cars and spend money on every aspect of their cars (e.g., new paint jobs and the addition of expensive rims), he also has customers who drive cars that appear to be closer to demolition than the showroom. "I had a kid come in once with an Escort that had rust holes that you could put your arms through and he put $3,000 into a stereo sound system: four 12-inch subwoofers, enough to rattle the rust off the car." This scenario is more extreme than most; however, it demonstrates that quality sounds and powerful vibrations, as the

foundation for creating a mobile heterotopia, can be far more important than repairing rust holes.

The construction of the mobile heterotopia is motivated by a range of desires, including the need to create a space of one's own, a quest to construct (simultaneously) a public and private self, and an attraction to a powerful mix of sound, sensuous vibrations, and mobility. However, the mobile heterotopia can, in some respects, merely affirm another level of exclusion in a world that seems to be moving further away from social and political inclusion. With that said, the role of the car stereo in the lives of enthusiasts is also more layered than most people would think. And, as I discuss in the next section, the loud system also provides a model for a more active and engaged interaction with popular culture while challenging (directly and indirectly) the homogenization and sterilization of public spaces.

Sonic Disruption

Do-It-Yourself Culture

When I ask Grandpa Woss, a twenty-one-year-old white man from Brandon, Florida, about the function of bass as a feature of his system, he tells me something very similar to Mo, Jeff, and Mike about trying to achieve a sonic balance between highs, lows, and mids, but his answer to my question also connects the quality of one's sound system to broader decisions people make based on desires to project images of themselves. "I'm not too much of the whole bassout freak," he claims. "I think people go over the edge with it and I think it's more of a fad almost. People lose the 'Let's make my car sound better' to 'Let's see how loud it can get'." His response reflects an attitude about people who put loud systems in their cars because they want to be viewed as cool. Showing off the system is part of the public performance for most people with elaborate stereos; however, the means to that end can vary. Those public performances that Grandpa Woss designates as fads do not meet criteria (shared by many others with quality sound systems) for thoughtful engagement with one's system and the car stereo culture more generally. Those who chase the fad purchase their gear at full price and then pay to have their systems installed.[19] They are the people, or are representative of the type of people, who receive information, broadly speaking, rather than taking a critical approach to the production and consumption of popular culture.

In contrast, those who research car stereo products, piece together their systems, and alter the technologies display another level of aesthetic agency. Like music bootleggers, they "redefine their relationship to the commodification of popular culture."[20] Striving to achieve an optimal sound in the car and making those decisions without the assistance of a salesperson is an important step in creating a unique and special sonic environment, a mobile heterotopia. "Everything in here is like what I thought would be good. I like the way it meshes together. It's almost like a big melting pot of like here and a little of there," claims Mo about his system.[21]

> I don't think it's fair in the whole car audio thing . . . it's not the same if you go to Circuit City and say, "I want some speakers" and you get some technician who is certified in the thing and he sells you everything, the highest price stuff in the store, and says, "Here, take this and we'll build you a box." If you want to rebuild a '57 Chevy, you don't want to take it to some shop and have them do everything; it defeats the purpose.

Individuals who install their own systems, refurbish old cars, create art cars, or redesign their cars by adding hydraulics, are saying that they will not accept the car manufacturers' visions of what can be done with the cars. They are part of a larger do-it-yourself (DIY) movement, which is guided by an ethic of making one's own culture rather than simply consuming products made by others (or sold and installed by others).

I do not want to overstate the point. People are not building their own sound systems from parts purchased at junkyards; they are often spending hundreds of dollars on commercially available products manufactured by large corporations. However, as Stephen Duncombe notes, there is a difference between commercial culture and popular culture. Commercial culture "may be popular, but its popularity is a means to an end: that of being a profitable commodity. As a result, fans are continually betrayed in their quest to make the culture theirs, and the process of connection must be continually reinvented, ad infinitum."[22] The DIY movement emerged because people realized that they could create alternatives to this broader system of consistent betrayal. And those who piece together their systems are somewhat mirroring these moves by taking a more active role in their engagement with popular culture. They do this by constructing their own sonic environments and increasing control over their public experiences.

Even with these moves to shape their own spaces via the creation of heterotopic sonic environments, betrayal is never completely eliminated. This is another feature of Grandpa Woss's statement about loud systems being a fad. He is claiming that people who do not understand the nuances of the elaborate car stereo system as a broader cultural experience have diluted "authentic" modes of experiencing music. The people who contribute to the loud system as fad will never be able to do things themselves; they will rely on a salesperson at Circuit City to explain what sounds good. Once they purchase their gear (at full price) they will always choose loud over a superior sound.

We might also think about betrayal from the standpoint of the car stereo manufacturers. By now, these companies are certainly aware that their products are going to be used in ways that will fill the soundscape with loud music (or noise). The companies are obviously profiting handsomely from the sales of car stereo products, which continue to increase in quantity and quality each year. However, executives from these companies also likely feel a sense of betrayal when they are driving home from work and youths are dropping bass bombs throughout that journey.[23] The executives have manufactured, marketed, and sold products that are used against them. This form of betrayal is connected to larger concerns about waning public civility.[24] Loud car stereo systems continually challenge norms for proper behavior in

public spaces and have become another activity that public officials claim needs to be regulated.

The Street

The built environment can be viewed as a material reflection of competing goals. Sometimes citizens decide how public spaces will be designed, but public officials and commercial interests set most city planning agendas. These official plans tend to encourage specific forms of consumption (e.g., providing tax breaks for large companies to revitalize an area rather than helping small businesses) or solidify particular historical heroes (e.g., creating monuments and strategically placing those monuments).[25] In addition, these decisions help shape our perceptions of what's possible in particular sites and how we should act in those spaces. City planning reveals hopes and concerns but also fashions new ones.

Michael Sorkin claims that one of the central characteristics of contemporary city planning is an "obsession with 'security,' with rising levels of manipulation and surveillance over its citizenry and with a proliferation of new modes of segregation."[26] Private security guards and surveillance cameras have been employed to help eliminate activities that are deemed to be troublesome. In addition, a variety of techniques have been implemented to regulate sensuous experiences in this new landscape. "[T]he Western street is comprehensively deodorised, and sometimes re-odorised with commodified smells," argues Tim Edesnor. "The ordering of smell accompanies the process of removing perceived dirt and clutter which clears the street of 'surplus' stimuli."[27]

The loud car stereo system is a direct challenge to attempts at controlling sensuous experiences in public spaces. It blasts away at serene soundscapes, and it adds another layer of noise to the already crowded urban soundscape. Like other acts of performative cultural resistance (e.g., carnival-style reclamation protests in the reclaim-the-streets movement), the loud sounds rupture our spatial routines. However, unlike many forms of resistance, the use of a loud stereo is not always connected to a cultural politics. In some cases, the loud stereo system is attached to explicit political undertakings (either confronting policies that regulate public experiences and expression or being disruptive for the sake of disruption). At other times, the acts of disruption appear to reflect personal goals only (individual desires to be heard or, from another standpoint, selfish defiance for the sake of being heard). And sometimes it is not so clear which motivation is guiding the person with the bumpin' system. "I think mainly what they're trying to do here in Tampa they're trying to destroy the city with their sound. I have guys that drive by when they leave my apartment complex and every time they drive by my alarm goes off. Every time. And I think they do it on purpose," says Mo. "Granted it is a nice feeling when you drive by and your boom hits and the alarm goes *wooowooowooowooo*, but for some guys it's a little extreme." Trying to destroy the city with sound might signal a tactical use of the stereo for the purposes of cultural disruption, the act could merely reflect a series of moves to proclaim one's alpha status, or it may be a bit of both.

Using the car stereo to detonate a chorus of car alarms is the type of act that serves as grounds for claims that laws need to be created to regulate the soundscape, bringing the control of sound in line with the ordering of sights and smells. Public officials treat these challenges as threats and respond by claiming that loud music is noise pollution, which, they say, must be eliminated to ensure order and safety. For example, the city council in Houghton, Michigan recently passed a law regulating loud music from vehicles and allowing police officers to ticket drivers whose music can be heard from 40 feet away. Council members argued that a minority creates the loud sounds (certainly a statistical fact since very few people have sound systems loud enough to be heard from 40 feet away), but the presentation of the statute suggested that the majority is subjected to constant and overwhelming acts of aggression by that minority. "[I]t isn't fair for one person to disrupt the tranquillity of many residents," said Councilwoman Barb Klass. "In the last couple years, the noise pollution is becoming more extreme and at some point it has to stop."[28] Interestingly, Klass and her colleagues did not create a measure to limit the noise generated by snowmobiles or logging trucks, producers of greater quantities of noise in Houghton.

Other cities have incorporated tiers for multiple offences, including increasing fines and confiscation of equipment, although the reasons for ticketing and confiscation may vary from state to state. Robert wrote to me in an e-mail that he has received many tickets in Missouri. "[W]here I was they are assholes and will write a ticket if it can be heard more than 15 feet from the car. I have found that the look of the car and type of music you are playing matters." Police officers are more likely to pursue people blaring rap and/or driving cars that are lowered, feature fancy rims, and painted with racing stripes. The profiling that occurs in these instances grows from past experiences with bumpin' systems. However, stereotypes also influence how and when the laws are enforced. If a police officer observes four or five cars traveling through an intersection and hears a pounding system, but obviously cannot see the music, that officer is not likely going to suspect the middle class woman in her 2003 Impala (or the kid driving the rust bucket with a $3,000 system).

This profiling extends to broader public perceptions about who has loud stereo systems. Loud stereos have been associated with people who are aggressive and abusive. Houghton mayor Tom Mertz reflected this sentiment when justifying the town's new ordinance. He claimed that the sounds from car stereos could be irritating and frightening, and his overall account of people with loud systems sneaking up on unsuspecting pedestrians seemed as if he was describing a mugging.[29]

The thunderous sounds in the streets are not the only reason why bumpin' systems are associated with aggression. Physical sensations produced by the stereos are another factor. The pounding system's vibrations, which are central to the mobile heterotopia, are also felt outside the car.

As I drive around Tampa with Mo, I ask him about the use of vibrations to disrupt. "I was riding around with this guy [Eric] and he told me that one time he was next to a bus, a school bus, and he turned up his stuff and he could see the side of the bus vibrating." "I did that this morning," replies Mo. "So you can make other things vibrate besides what's attached to your car?" "Yeah. . . . You can't see it but you can

tell because the little kids this morning were looking over and they were pointing at me and saying, 'It's that car right there'." He mimics the kids in a way that sounds as if they were speaking in slow motion ("IIIIIIt's thaaaat carrrrr riiiiight therrrrrrre"), perhaps to add a special effect or maybe because that's how he heard them given the layers of glass and sound that separated him from them.

Even though the kids were excited about Mo's bumpin' system, or at least they were in his version of the story, vibrating the school bus just might be the ultimate act of disruption, the sonic equivalent of taking candy from a baby. Moreover, it is not likely that the bus driver was quite so titillated by the vibrations produced by Mo's system. Those outside the car do not always share the pleasures derived from the vibrations, as John Graber describes in the *Sierra Vista Herald*. Graber writes about being stuck in traffic during a typical Arizona summer afternoon. "The temperature is reaching toward the century mark so you're probably not real happy anyway, when some guy in a jeep starts blasting his music so loud your fillings start coming loose."[30]

Feeling as if one's fillings are coming loose is an intriguing description because the phrasing re-frames the sensations as risk, and this risk is an important feature of some arguments in favor of sound ordinances. For example, Houghton city councilwoman Dorothy Love said that she supported the noise provision in Houghton because she was concerned that "these kids" will develop hearing problems.[31] Potential loss of hearing is a legitimate concern when people remain in close proximity to loud noises for prolonged periods of time. However, Love's use of the term "kids" rather than "teens," "young adults," or "people" reflects a rhetorical strategy whereby she constructs folks with loud systems as incapable of making decisions about their own health and well-being. Instead, these "kids" need an adult, in this case Love, to protect them.[32]

"The study of noise legislation is interesting, not because anything is really accomplished by it, rather because it provides us with a concrete register of acoustic phobias and nuisances," writes Murray Schafer. "Changes in legislation provide clues to changing social attitudes and perceptions, and these are important for the accurate treatment of sound symbolism."[33] The loud system is one device used by youths to play "with the only power at their disposal: the power to discomfit. The power, that is, to pose—to pose a threat."[34] Laws regulating loud stereos and paternalistic claims about noise are direct responses to attempts by young people to stake out some sense of ownership when it comes to public spaces. The sound ordinances reflect a collision between the real sites of power and the counter-sites.

It is important to note, however, that the regulation of the soundscape has not been entirely successful. The laws are difficult to enforce because the sounds are not always clearly connected to a specific automobile, which is often the case if the automobile is moving. The inability to see sound confounds regulation. This movement, combined with the ephemeral qualities of the music and the vibrations, makes the loud car stereo system a unique tool for social and cultural disruption. The car weaves through the streets, temporarily disturbing life in a section of a city or town. Seconds after the disruptive act can be identified, it no longer exists, but the trace of the disruption continues to work on the people who heard the sounds. For

some people, the trace takes shape in the form of curiosity or even admiration for the quality of the booms, but most are angry. And for city officials, irritation mixes with a need for control.[35]

"The state fears unregulated traffic," observes Richard Schechner.[36] "Official culture likes its street displays to be orderly, arranged in longitudinal rectangles moving in one direction, and proceeding from a known beginning to a known end in time as well as space."[37] The car may move within the grid layout favored by city planners and public officials but it is not held hostage by the grid. It can move through poor, middle class, and wealthy sections of the city, angering a range of people along the way. (Grandpa Woss told me that he likes to blast country music when he drives through African American sections of Tampa and he likes to blast rap when driving through working class white neighborhoods, demonstrating a tactical dimension of aesthetic agency.) Further, the sound blasts not only mess up clean city grids but also confront the sight-centrism on which the city's hygiene depends.

Again, these acts of disruption can reflect political tactics, or the acts can merely be the product of drivers who only care about themselves and their own sonic experiences. Still other drivers may try to contain the sounds and vibrations, but both can go errant. In these instances, the disruption is unplanned, but the effects remain the same. In some instances, the stereo is used in a fashion that reflects personal pleasure, while others are engaged in tactical disruption. Either way, people who bump their systems have adopted Guy Debord's call to re-imagine the role of the automobile. "The mistake made by all urbanists is to consider the private automobile essentially as a means of transportation," wrote Debord. "We must replace travel as an adjunct to work with travel as pleasure."[38]

The automobile is transformed into a mobile heterotopia because of the unique sonic and sensuous experiences produced by the quality stereo system. The effort some people put into selecting and installing their equipment to create this heterotopia taps into a broader DIY movement, which combines with the disruptive potential of the loud car stereo system to contribute to a unique blend of cultural consumption and production. It is crucial to note, however, that the specific methods used to construct and enact this heterotopic space are varied, and the acts of cultural disruption do not reflect unified goals for the drivers. Additionally, as I explain in the final section, there are a range of attitudes and approaches to using the sound system, highlighted in decisions about turning the music up and turning the music down.

Turning It Up and Turning It Down

At this moment, there are hundreds of angry people stopped at traffic lights in towns and cities throughout the United States. These people are upset because someone next to them or behind them is blasting loud music and shaking everything in close proximity. Perhaps the owners of these loud systems find the disruption to be humorous, joyful, and/or a reflection of power, akin to the people who trigger Mo's car alarm daily. The scene I describe is likely to be read as normative, affirming a general impression that loud systems only belong to selfish deviants who lack civility, and

possibly serving as a reminder that civility more generally is a thing of the past. But this view of people with loud systems glosses over a range of approaches to volume control.

Driving with Grandpa Woss as he blasts Sepultura's "Refuse/Resist," I scream questions over the pounding bass and growling vocals about his decisions to turn the music down. When we reach a stoplight, he pushes a mute button that cuts the sound about halfway. "Is that what you usually do?" I ask. "Yeah. . . . Cause this isn't loud. I'm sure they can't hear it outside, especially if they're in another car," he says. "So you would never leave it at that level? If you were rockin' out, and you were into it, you would always hit that power button?" Laughing at the scene that is likely playing in his head, he answers:

> Yeah. . . . For the most part. . . . I mean, I don't know. I guess there's times where I'm really into it and groovin' with my friends maybe. Normally if that happens, I'm jammin' out. Normally the people will laugh at me. So rather than get annoyed they get entertainment watching me dance around like an idiot.
>
> I understand that some people don't want to hear some of the stuff that some of the music is saying so I don't subject them to it unwillingly. That's just respect and that's another problem with all the systems. You know, kids just don't care and they'll pull up next to Grandpa playing the loudest crap and I just don't want to hear it sometimes.

For Grandpa Woss, the annoyance of a loud system is partially influenced by the specific music that's blasting from the cars (i.e., "crap" does not seem to be a blanket term applied to all music). Although he never explains what constitutes "crap," his comment mirrors that of many people who consider the loud music to be appalling. The difference is that his critique reflects a level of subcultural taste, whereas others do not like any music that seems loud or disrupts them.[39]

Grandpa Woss's comments also demonstrate that keeping the music at full volume when reaching a stoplight is socially irresponsible. Most of the folks I spoke with tended to share this approach to turning down the music when the loud sounds could be deemed offensive in some way. Further, people with systems never get credit for turning their music down. In part, this is because of the obvious fact that we cannot hear the music when it is turned down, which means we will not even know the person next to us or behind us has a loud system. ("[Y]outh is present only when its presence is a problem, or is regarded as a problem," says Hebdige.[40]) But this is also because we have come to believe that people with loud systems really only care about themselves and their sounds; it is not even fathomable that they could turn the music down.

Most people are also unwilling to consider the variety of motivations for installing loud systems, the different reasons (purposeful and accidental) that the sounds and vibrations float through the public soundscape, or how and why the temporary jolt from our daily routines might actually be good for us in the face of increasingly sterile cookie-cutter public landscapes. Instead, they seem to want all jarring sights, sounds, and smells removed.

Even people who tend to advocate alternative approaches to public art and expression are slow to view the loud car stereo system as defensible because the sonic

disruption is rarely motivated by a desire for social and political change, as we see with other modes of cultural disruption (e.g., street theater, stickering, or graffiti). Democratic talk and debate are not features of loud systems (even though the systems can inspire such conversations). In fact, the mobile heterotopia can actually function in ways that would be antithetical to a participatory public sphere. As Per Otnes observes, "The car is a physical version of 'quiet aversion' that makes the blasé an act of keeping the world at a distance."[41] Otnes uses the term "blasé" in reference to Georg Simmel's discussion of psychological and physiological barriers urban dwellers embody and enact in an effort to shield themselves from the barrage of stimuli that is a feature of life in the city.[42] The automobile can provide another layer of protection, isolating individuals within their metal cocoons. We might say that physically separating oneself via the car and sonically insulating oneself by keeping out (or overpowering) other sounds hinders opportunities to produce a more socially engaged and politically active public sphere, a sphere which, in theory, should be desired by people who tend to be excluded from public conversations and debates. (It is also interesting to note that sound ordinances function in a similar capacity; they exist to shield the public from unwanted sounds.) However, expecting every act of cultural disruption to further explicitly a political cause ignores the communicative issues raised in this site of popular culture.

"The relations between people in the society are often seen most easily by looking at the institutions of communication—how the people regard each other, what things they think important, what things they choose to stress, what things they choose to omit," claims Raymond Williams.[43] The car stereo as a communication tool foregrounds a relationship between mobility and music (or noise) and highlights one way that youths, who rarely have much say in their home life or the public sphere, create opportunities (temporarily) to mark out territories of their own, to sonically write the city.[44] Viewed through this lens, the loud system and the mobile heterotopia, even if put together solely to fulfill the desires of individual drivers, are intriguing and exciting because they challenge the broader regulation of contemporary life, including official attempts to sanitize public spaces.

Notes

[1] I identify people in this article by the names they have requested. In some cases, a pseudonym was requested.

[2] My ethnographic work, which was conducted with approval from Michigan Technological University's human subjects committee, consisted of participant observation, observation, interviews, and soundscape recordings. I emphasize these individuals because my time with them was extensive. But I also quote from interviews and exchanges gathered from shorter conversations (in person or via e-mail and Internet news groups) with other people. All of my respondents live in the United States, which is the geographic frame for this study.

[3] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16 (spring 1986): 24.

[4] Foucault, 26.

[5] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xix.

[6] Reverend Al Cacophony, "Moving Violations," *LA Weekly*, 29 April 1998, excerpted from http://www.laweekly.com/ink/archives/97/23opener-4.29.98-1.shtml (accessed 1 May 1998).

[7] Paul du Gay, Stuart Hall, Linda Janes, Hugh Mackay, and Keith Negus, *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman* (London: Sage, 1997), 19.

[8] R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (1977; Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1994), 9.

[9] Each of the people I drove with had a head unit (the stereo) and a variety of speakers to help project a range of sounds. Tweeters, small speakers often placed in the front of the car above the dash and along the frame between the door and the windshield, put forth high-pitched sounds. Medium-sized speakers (generally six inches by nine inches), similar in size to those that most of us have inside our car doors, produce mid-level sounds. The subwoofer, which is usually kept in the trunk of a car or behind the seat in a pick-up truck, generates the bass that we hear rumbling through the streets.

[10] I use multiple periods to signal the passing of time and to represent pauses in speech patterns. This move is guided by a desire to represent the ways people spoke and to avoid possible confusion with the use of ellipses per style manual guidelines.

[11] I am not suggesting that all youth use the car to hide. Certainly, those who own a hot rod or a lowrider have put themselves on display.

[12] Dick Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 35.

[13] Ben Malbon, "The Club," in *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Cultures*, ed. Tracy Skelton and Gill Valentine (New York: Routledge, 1998), 271.

[14] Malbon, 271.

[15] Malbon, 271.

[16] For a poignant discussion of rap music as menacing, see Tricia Rose's summary of a conversation she had with the head of a music department (63). Tricia Rose, *Black Noise* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994).

[17] The reasons for the lack of response are certainly varied. Possibly, the systems were important for listening to music but not central to their identities—hence a lack of desire to discuss the systems in detail. Or the women did not think I was being honest about the study itself, perhaps viewing my request for an interview as just another bad pick up line in a sea of bad lines.

[18] Elizabeth Wilson, "The Rhetoric of Urban Space," *New Left Review* 209 (1995): 150.

[19] Every person I spoke with (except Mike) told me that purchasing stereo equipment at list price is a major mistake, the act of a uninformed consumer. The informed consumer waits for sales or purchases used equipment and installs the equipment rather than paying for installation.

[20] Mark Neumann and Timothy A. Simpson, "Smuggled Sound: Bootleg Recording and the Pursuit of Popular Memory," *Symbolic Interaction* 20, issue 4 (1997): 321.

[21] Mo's actions are similar to those of people who combine elements of clothing to create new meanings. See Gary Clarke, "Defending Ski-Jumpers: A Critique of Theories of Youth Sub-Cultures," Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, Stencilled Occasional Paper, no. 71 (June 1982).

[22] Stephen Duncombe, *Notes From Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (New York: Verso, 1997), 113.

[23] Throughout the essay, I use a variety of terms to describe the loud sounds flowing from the car. The term "bomb" can reflect a particular kind of aggressiveness that is purposeful for some drivers and accidental for others. But I do think that it's important to point out that my use of the term "bomb" like "bumpin'," reflects a hip hop vernacular. At the same time, the playfulness of the language is much like the play (ludic and unpredictable) that is central to many uses of the car audio system. My use of the term, like the action itself, should be distinguished from bombing as a form of direct violence.

[24] See, for example, the Pew Charitable Trust's publication on civility. Steve Farkas, Jean Johnson, Ann Duffett, and Kathleen Collins, *Aggravating Circumstances: A Status Report on Rudeness in America* (April 2002), http://www.pewtrusts.com/pdf/vf_public_agenda_rude.pdf (accessed 1 June 2004).

[25] For a discussion of the politics of urban revitalization, see Daniel Makagon, *Where the Ball Drops: Days and Nights in Times Square* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

[26] Michael Sorkin, "Introduction: *Variations on a Theme Park*," in *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space*, ed. Michael Sorkin (New York: Hill & Wang, 1992), xiii.

[27] Tim Edensor, "Culture of the Indian Street," in *Images of the Street*, ed. Nicholas R. Fyfe (London: Routledge, 1998), 215.

[28] Quoted in Ryan Olson, "Cops to Ticket 'Noisy' Cars," *Daily Mining Gazette*, 25 July 2002, 3A.

[29] Quoted in Ryan Olson, "Toward a Quieter Houghton: Loud Car Stereos Concern," *The Daily Mining Gazette*, 11 July 2002, 8A.

[30] John Graber, "'Loud' Cars Deafen Others," *Sierra Vista Herald*, date unavailable, 1.

[31] Quoted in Olson, "Toward a Quieter Houghton," 8A.

[32] Mike from Sensuous Sounds and Grandpa Woss also use the term "kid" when discussing people with sound systems; however, they are using youth culture vernacular that is often applied to a wide age range (usually referring to teens through people in their early thirties).

[33] Schafer, 67.

[34] Hebdige, 18.

[35] This frustration on the part of public officials is demonstrated in the following comment from Soundoff: "My friend had stuff confiscated from a very intricate install. They literally ripped the amps out of the fiberglass amp rack."

[36] Richard Schechner, *The Future of Ritual* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 48.

[37] Schechner, 82.

[38] Guy Debord, "Situationist Theses on Traffic," in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), 56.

[39] These layers of subcultural taste also extend beyond specific songs and styles of music to the vibrations produced by the stereo. Rattling car parts can be the sonic product of the vibrations. One goal for most people with loud systems is to eliminate the rattling while maintaining the sensuous experience of the vibration itself. A variety of measures can be employed to prevent the automobile from making rattling sounds. (e.g., using a quality speaker box to hold the subwoofer, attaching the subwoofer to the floor of the trunk, and sealing the space within the trunk with a special foam). Letting the automobile rattle shows that the driver does not understand how to create an optimal environment.

[40] Hebdige, 17.

[41] Quoted in Kalle Toiskaillo, "Simmel Hails a Cab," *Space and Culture* 6 (September 2000): 5.

[42] See Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, ed. Kurt H. Wolff (New York: The Free Press, 1950), 409–24.

[43] Raymond Williams, "Communications and Community," in *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism*, ed. Robin Gable (New York: Verso, 1989), 22.

[44] For a discussion of writing the city, see de Certeau.

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