

The Sound of the Civic: Reading Noise at the New York Public Library

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In a certain way, identity, then, is a noise that interferes with the messages that we transmit and receive. It's hardly audible to others, but we hear it loud and clear. Yet it's not the kind of noise that bothers us; on the contrary; it gives us a sense of reality, a measure of empowerment: it adds "room-tone" to the otherwise hyper-real world around us.

—Anton Shammas¹

This city is loud. Too loud. That incessant rumble that seems to come from below the ground and above our heads; that sound that comes creeping and screeching and pounding; that sound that is utterly omnipresent, yet defies precise representation; that noise that, no matter how hard I listen I cannot ever quite manage to render comprehensible as if it slips out from meaning like it slips in through windows. That noise disturbs, awakens and exposes. It is caked on the walls of my building and is always crawling beneath doors and sliding through open windows. You can't turn it off, and you can't escape it. It simply is. It is one of the most blaring facts of city life. But how does the city make so much noise? And what does this noise mean?

Commonly understood, noise is defined as either incomprehensible or unwanted sound. The New York City noise statute, adopted in September of 1972, defines noise as the production of any sound which, when measured at a dis-

tance of 3 feet from an open window exceeds 45 decibels or, when measured in an open area at a distance of 50 feet, exceeds 80 decibels.² Until it seeps out of a window or disturbs someone across a public plaza, it is only sound. In New York City, noise is, by legal definition, disturbing. It is the by-product of heavy machinery, of busses, air conditioners, and other such mechanized things of urban life. It is cell-phones and car alarms and the metal gates of storefronts slamming. These elements of urban life are only sound until they enter into spaces they ought not. Only then do they become noise. Noise is what you hear when you don't want to hear anything at all. Alternatively, it is what you hear when you would rather hear something else. Or, when you would rather hear nothing at all. French philosopher Jacques Attali has written that noise possesses the potential for liberation for the ways it challenges established codes of symbolic communication.³ Noise, for Attali, scrambles intentional meaning and therefore opens spaces for radical practice or interpretation. While Attali's definition is appealing, there's little in the way of semiotic redemption when a car alarm keeps you up between 2:00 and 4:00 a.m.

Intention and liberation aside, noise is the unintentional and uninvited output of a subject (mechanical, biological, or otherwise) involved in some other activity. He/She/It does not necessarily intend to be noisy, it just is. It is one of the definitive characteristics of life in New York City. The noise of the city is a mad amalgam of busses, cars, sirens, radios, conversations, and airplanes, all of which is underwritten by the more subtly diffuse and ever present hum of radiators and water pipes, air conditioners, and countless other infrastructural elements in the sound of the city. Even abstractly, the city itself seems to buzz or hum without pause. Life in the city is practically unimaginable without noise. Inescapable as it is during the day, by night it is somewhat reassuring, suggesting the safe presence of other people on or near the street—close enough to offer a subtle security for walking alone, but not too close that they themselves become threats. By that same logic, if the street is too quiet, there is certainly something wrong. The ambient noise of the city as it trickles out of passing cars and partially open windows actually communicates something discreet. Rather than confounding intended meaning, as Attali concluded, in the city, noise itself takes on a whole set of meanings of its own. Noise itself means.

Technically, noise exists in any communication loop. Static on radio broadcasts, pixillation of digital images, melted chocolates on Valentine's Day, any unintended accompaniment to the transmission of information would constitute noise.⁴ Noise emerges between the sender and the receiver of a given message during the act of communication, but is not necessarily introduced by either party. It is a necessary by-product of the system. Sometimes it obfuscates the intended meaning, sometimes it enhances it. It is neither absolutely disruptive, nor necessarily unpleasant. Noise is not something that is produced either intentionally or accidentally by anyone. It cannot be produced at all, but only ever received. "Anything that arrives as part of a message, but that was not part of the

message when sent out, can be considered as noise introduced in transmission.”⁵ Noise works against any total and discreet production of meaning by adding unintended dissonance to it; noise is the part of the message that is unintended, unmentionable. Noise is (what is) heard even when it is not meant (to be). It is what escapes in the transmission of information, yet, when consumed, is often (mis)understood as part of the intended message.

Insofar as any system of communication is constructed between social subjects, nobody is necessarily responsible for the noise produced. In materialist terms, noise is consumed but never produced. You can't make noise, you can only hear it. In this way, noise ends up sounding a lot like silence, as silence, too, can be heard but never emitted, consumed but never produced. To produce silence fills it with all kinds of communication, which is always noisy, even if it is not always noise. Yet, by definition, pure silence cannot communicate. It can only be heard, most poignantly, in a vacuum, in the absence of a social(ized) space; once space is socialized, it's too late, too informative, too informed, too noisy. Noise, on the other hand, must accompany information. It is necessarily social. Noise is produced in and by communication. It is communicable, communal. The listener attributes it to the speaker, and the speaker attributes it to the listener. Given the inadequacies and inaccuracies of language, noise is about the only reliable part of the system. It is what you hear when you don't want to, at all. Perhaps it reminds us, like a low-level alarm or a dial tone, that a given communication loop is functioning. If not for the disruption, how can we be sure that the system is working? Like the sound of an urban street late at night, noise in communication threatens to disrupt the system, but ultimately holds the system together. Without noise how would we know what silence was? Music? Communication? Without noise, the system might perform too well, too purely, and, like oxygen, could become toxic. If noise is consumed but never produced, then perhaps the issue at stake in this discussion is not about the production of noise, but its productivity. In other words, how does noise produce the city?

Reading Room

In the heart of New York lies the main branch of the New York Public Library. It was built to be a great storehouse and disseminator of information, and it daily stages struggles against noise while actively participating in the production of New York City for everyone from tourists to scholars. The main branch is a public space, but it is not a free space. Anyone who would like to may enter the library, but once inside, behavior is quietly regulated and carefully choreographed. Although it is probably the most demographically diverse space in New York City next to the subway, the social interactions within the library must be quiet ones, so as not to disturb the library and its patrons at work. By staging, scripting, and silencing encounters between people and people, and between people and texts, the main branch of the New York Public Library becomes powerful and deeply productive of a civic, if eternally noisy, city. As a

public building and a potent symbol of New York's status as a global capital of culture, the main branch speaks volumes even when its visitors read only temporary exhibitions or tourist guides. The building speaks because, as a library, it has to. How and what the building speaks—and whom it permits to speak—is part of an ongoing struggle between noise and information, books and people, civility and the city.

In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs criticized city planners for underestimating the power of public spaces to engender civic interaction. Jacobs asserted that the activity and interactivity of people in these spaces—like sidewalks or parks—guarantee both safety and social interaction that, in turn, would raise the quality of life for urban residents.⁶ In a similar vein, Richard Sennett called for the planning and development of “disordered” spaces in which the urban population would be able to freely interact and create its own meanings of and for urban space and life.⁷ Although both authors have different ideas about what those spaces ought to look like and how municipalities ought to go about enabling them, both agree that these spaces are going to be noisy. In particular, Sennett's notion of “disorder” suggests a space that would not only tolerate but encourage mis-pronouncements, misinterpretations, and public clamor. Disorderly space is space that surprises and encourages unpredictable activity. Disorderly interactions are more susceptible to noise as they occur between people who are not necessarily familiar with one another. Practically, arguments and conflicts in and over public spaces—park benches, subway seats, sidewalks—are elements of public discourse that are nearly always noisy. In New York City, public interactions are flavored by accents, entitlement, linguistic differences, contrasting notions of inflection, gesticulation, personal space, and public responsibility. As much a city of immigrants as any other city on earth, public space in New York is necessarily fraught with misinterpretation and often underwritten by total linguistic incommunicability. The sounds in these interactions are always noisy, and the noise of these miscommunications, in turn, escalates the sound. As an ever-present part of the public networks of communication, these noisy interactions define public space and behavior at least as much as the public defines the interactions themselves.

These noisy interchanges are literally the stuff of urban life; they simply cannot take place elsewhere. This is not to suggest that suburban or rural spaces can't foster public discourse, but instead that the density of urban life conditions certain kinds of public encounters. These noisy interchanges—which Sennett and Jacobs would like to see expand and increase—are part of public discourse. Whether or not they are explicitly political or well-reasoned, these discussions are always negotiations within which the very terms of the public are at stake: who sits where, who gets what, who did what to whom and when. Often, their very public staging puts the discussion at risk through the introduction of passing traffic, subway cars, or sirens. The publicity of the exchange and the publicity of the noise it produced, in turn, produce a public that is involved in its social

nd spatial environment. The public is produced both by and in spite of the noise. Like Shamma's "room-tone" or the sound of the street at night, noise keeps urban subjects mildly aware of the public of which they are always a part. As a result, the inevitable noise of miscommunication may open up rather than foreclose avenues of conversation. Jürgen Habermas would consider these moments to be threatening to a public-in-formation, to public information. For Habermas, communication that is going to produce a public must be noiseless. Habermas has written that the creation of social bonds within the bourgeois public sphere relied on the unfettered expression of individual opinion. Such communicative moments were born in salons and coffee houses and fed the nascent notion of a public that was relatively autonomous within the state. During the heyday of the public sphere, debate circulated fluidly and freely among men of the bourgeoisie, unfettered by connections either to commerce or to government. The rarefied air of these discussions must have been noiseless, as noise would have meant miscommunication and therefore threatened the free and equal exchange of ideas. Moreover, noise would have threatened the unity of the public due to differences in definitions of the very public that any given discussion was creating. To be sure, Habermas does permit disagreement, but it is a very understanding kind of dissent, in which each party, it seems, understands the position of the other, and both agree to disagree. Even the most public of discourse is not necessarily organized around consent.

Behind the scenes of Habermas' public sphere were individuals that were actively reading. Fed by the commercial novel and the popular press, these individuals were consuming common texts that enabled greater moments and loci of discourse and commonality. Shared texts would create shared experiences and shared discourse, which would feed a common notion of a relatively autonomous public that took root within the private realm. To be public meant operating under the authority of the state, and effectively limiting the ability of individuals to freely engage in political discussion. Thus, the public sphere was staged privately. The "transformation," or decline, of Habermas' public sphere occurred when discussion began to assume "the form of a consumer item."⁸ Books, theater tickets, and museum admissions, as the cultural items that fed discussion in the public sphere, could be bought and sold without challenging the independence of the public sphere. Conversation, as the site of public discourse, had to remain a non-commodity for it to retain its power within the public. The central relationship here was between reading materials and conversation and the alchemy that would transform the former into the latter. Central to the success of the public sphere was that readership, even as it imagined itself on a one-to-one relationship between book and reader, fed a broader communal process that was rooted in conversation.⁹

At the main branch of the New York Public Library, people can read or research, but not talk. Moreover, in the library, reading is a public performance; one must not only submit one's request to the librarian in writing, but the tables

and carrels are public spaces, that often betray the presence of people who had previously read and worked there. It is also not uncommon to find other people's notes or bookmarks in books.¹⁰ The reading rooms are full of people and books, each in full view of everyone else. For Habermas, the public library is too public to host a properly public sphere. As a space, it is too public to afford the privacy necessary for free, autonomous debate. In fact, both of the key relationships in Habermas' public sphere are reversed in the library; the books are free but conversation is not. This relationship is probably the definitive characteristic of the New York Public Library. As a public institution that attempts to foster private interactions between people and texts, it is simultaneously concerned with the public at large *and* the individuals who have come to read. Whether or not it is successful in producing these relationships relies on its ability to keep conversation between patrons to a minimum. In other words, the success of the library relies on the silence of its patrons. The success of its texts depends on their silent consumption. The success of the civic, however, relies on their noise. The library provides information but it cannot facilitate congregation or conversation—at least not within its walls. Because of its inversion of the key relations in Habermas, the production of an active citizenry cannot take place at the library, but elsewhere. The library is too quiet to permit conversation, even as it is deeply concerned with producing civic subjects who read. As long as it doesn't happen in the library, public discourse can be as loud as, or louder than, its participants want. To keep noise to a minimum, the library—as a reading space—must be actively involved in the production of subjects who know how to read quietly. Built into the space of the library, and into the public “elsewheres” that the library produces itself against and alongside, is a complex technology of silence, necessary for the discipline and cultivation of a quiet public. By introducing noise into Habermas' discussion of public discourse, the privacy of the act of reading is brought into question. Whereas Habermas simply takes reading for granted, the library offers a counterexample that suggests that reading never happens by accident.

To be sure, the kind of reading intended by the individuals, institutions, and forces involved in the formation of the main branch of the New York Public Library shared an understanding of reading that was quite different than the kinds of public reading practices David Henkin found on the streets of antebellum New York.¹¹ Henkin found evidence that illiteracy was not widespread, and even if people did not have access to novels or longer texts, they could easily navigate the public signage that could be found all over the streets and buildings of New York. Henkin states that he is not concerned with the origin of mass literacy, but with “the process by which reading habits were expanded and democratized in the nineteenth century.” Newspapers, money, handbills, billboards, and other textual sites dot the landscape of Henkin's analysis, yet the practices involved in “city reading” were not the studious, civilized practices that the library needed. Lawrence Levine's work on the creation and interplay of cultural hierarchy around the turn of the century might suggest that Henkin's

reading practices were the popular precursor to the civilized reading imagined and enforced at the library.¹² The awesome and imposing structure, alongside the enforced silence helped to sacralize—and thus elevate—the library from an institution merely of books, and into an institution of high-cultural transmission. And culture can't be transmitted to people who don't behave, don't read quietly, and insist on holding side conversations while the library and their neighbors are at work.

The very space of the library, then, is involved in a few simultaneous productions: the production of knowledge, the production of a civilized citizenry that could read quietly, and the production of the city through public discourse that had to happen elsewhere. The library, as an information machine, was built for a population who was not entirely equipped with the skills and practices such a machine demanded. While the masses could read, they could not necessarily perform the *kind* of reading that would result in the production of a public discourse elsewhere. The people, institutions, and ideas that informed upon the construction and consolidation of the New York Public Library were conscious of this and built these into the main branch and its function.

Some fifty years before the main branch was built, city planners, urban critics and social reformers overwhelmingly favored broad, open public spaces as the appropriate settings for civilized social encounters. Around the middle of the nineteenth century, both parks and cemeteries were favored as antidotes to the ills of urban life. It was widely believed that residents of the dark, dirty, crowded city could be healed if they were to spend some leisure time contemplating life while strolling the green pathways and pastures of public space. The operative theory held that the space would naturally condition peaceful (and therefore civilized and elevated) thought, which would, in turn, condition appropriate civic behavior. Frederic Law Olmsted, architect of New York's Central Park believed that the park would reform the city entirely; by bringing space and calm to the urban order, Central Park would bring order to the social world, as well.¹³ Just as a park could stem the spread of urban slums, it could educate the masses toward taste and away from vice, as well. The belief in the power of social space to shape civic life was so deeply held that between 1856 and the 1903, New York City purchased land for eleven parks, each occupying more than 100 acres.¹⁴ Despite this belief in the power of the "natural" state of Central Park to cure the ills of the urban, it quickly became clear that the masses were in need of greater instruction as to how to make playing in the park perform the civic work that Olmsted and other reformers believed would "naturally" take place in the space created. By the Civil War, only eight years into the park's existence, some 125 different signs appeared in the park, offering everything from directions to "do's and don'ts."¹⁵ Without the signage, the park was too quiet to perform effectively its civic duty.

Or perhaps the intended purposes of the park were not noisy enough. Without the signage, the ideological intentions of the park were too unclear, too quiet

for the masses to understand and abide by them. Without the noise of signage in the park, the park itself could not speak loudly or clearly enough, and the space was imperiled by the actual behaviors that its silence enabled. The signage in the park introduced noise into the serenity of rolling landscapes and panoramas that Olmsted carved into the park. Without this noise, the park could not have performed itself nor could it have contributed to the urban order its creators sought. The park was too quiet to perform properly, and needed some noise upon and through which it could. Without signage, without disrupting its pastoral landscape with obvious urban sign(ification)s, the space could not succeed as its creators had intended. In fact, the fear held that without instructional and directional signs, the park would become a space that would exacerbate rather than eradicate urban ills. What the space lost in silence, it gained in efficiency and functionality. The noise of signage was a rather small sacrifice in the name of civility.

For those still concerned with civility and urban life, the question of space remains: if there are to be “free” spaces, how to best ensure that they—and the people found there—will properly perform? In some measure, the space must be socialized. David Henkin’s point about the signage in Central Park is that it only “made sense” to people who were already habituated to reading in public spaces.¹⁶ This begs the question of public spaces designed specifically for that practice, and what and how these spaces were socialized. Henkin is concerned with the publicity of reading, and the ways in which reading in public is itself a kind of spectacle. Henkin is keen in his reading of public reading, but what happens to urban spaces when they are organized around the practice of reading; if reading is “written into” the space itself, what strategies of socialization need be in place in order to make this space perform?

The Sound of the Space

Obviously, a city does not present itself in the same way as
a flower, ignorant of its own beauty.
It has, after all, been ‘composed’ by people, by well-defined
groups.

—Henri Lefebvre¹⁷

We know from Benedict Anderson that the formation of “imagined communities” is deeply indebted to the dissemination of print material.¹⁸ Although Anderson is specifically concerned with modern nationalism, his observation is valuable to us in the library. He wrote, “[n]othing perhaps more precipitated this search [for a means of linking fraternity, power, and time together], nor made it more fruitful, than print capitalism, which made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways.”¹⁹ These “new ways” included a consideration of others along national or communal lines that had not existed before the common

encounter with a specific text. Reading Anderson through Henkin, the reading practices shared by disparate proto-nationals were, in a sense, awaiting a text that would write them into a nation. The people were readers before they were nationals. The introduction of a text did not produce the nation *ex nihilo* out of populations who shared nothing, but rather it fit into an extant set of shared cultural practices. In a sense, they were already performing a vaguely defined common culture, they merely (literally?) lacked a shared textual experience that would articulate their commonality. By 1900, the masses of New York had already evidenced their voracious appetite for books; that year the New York Free Circulating Library ranked first among the ten largest cities in books circulated, even as New York ranked ninth among per capita municipal funding.²⁰ In a city as large and ethnically diverse as New York, perhaps no text could shoulder the responsibility that Anderson assumed inherent in them. Instead, the library offered a way to produce the city not on the level of content but on the level of practice. Coordinating reading practices through the library could be a more effective technique for civilizing the masses as it truly enabled linguistic and ethnic particularity to flourish while requiring each individual to conform to a particular pattern of behavior. By valuing practice over content, the library could instruct its patrons without jeopardizing the freedom of information that it sought to house and circulate. It would channel the practice for the masses who, it was imagined, would create a civilized urban public in turn. All of this is not to downplay the significance of content, but to highlight the practice of reading; not everyone in the library is reading the same thing even as they are participating in a collective culture and in the production of a specific space. Spaces, like people, must be socialized as well.

Henri Lefebvre suggested that “social space does not have all the characteristics of ‘things’ as opposed to creative activity. Social space *per se* is at once *work* and *product*—a materialization of ‘social being’.”²¹ [emphasis in the original] Social space, or the space that enables the staging of social life, is a construction that is at once ideological and concrete. Social space is both a staging ground for exchange, while it also structures those very exchanges. Social space is not a passive vessel, but a medium that acts upon the subjects and objects that circulate within it. Further, social space “contains a great diversity of objects, both natural and social, including the networks and pathways which facilitate the exchange of *material things and information*. Such ‘objects’ are thus not only things but also relations.”²² [emphasis mine] In social space, the exchange of information is as significant as the exchange of material objects. It follows too that the practices or conventions of exchange are as involved or informed by the space, as well. The building was responsible not only for facilitating the exchange of “material things and information,” but also it was responsible for spatially informing these exchanges and their resultant social relations.

Prior to 1895, New York City did not have a city-wide public library system. Unlike other leading cities of the day (Boston, Chicago, London, Paris,

Amsterdam), New York's two notable research libraries were private endeavors, independently owned and maintained by two of the city's wealthiest families, the Lenoxs and the Astors. Both were devoted to scholars, bibliophiles, and researchers and neither offered a circulating collection. Although they were open to the public neither operated under the pretense of being a "public" institution, favoring and catering to the city's elite. The remainder of the city's population, which was growing rapidly due to a massive influx of new immigrants, did not have an organized lending library until 1878 when the endeavors of a handful of teachers at Grace Church were finally realized in the establishment of the New York Free Circulating Library.²³ The NYFCL was housed in small libraries and reading rooms throughout the City of New York and operated without a main branch. It, too, was privately funded, yet the distinction between the Astor and Lenox libraries and the NYFCL was quite sharply drawn on the basis of class and ethnicity. This was keenly articulated in the formal announcement of the incorporation of the NYFCL, published in the *Evening Post* of March 18, 1880. It read:

The Astor Library supplies in a great measure all the requirements of a reference library. The Mercantile Society and other libraries satisfy the wants of the class of readers who can afford to pay a small annual sum for their privileges, and the Apprentices' and Young Men's Christian Association libraries furnish books to persons who belong to the classes which they represent. Only one class of people in our city are unprovided for in the matter of reading—that is the very poor, some of whom cannot afford to pay annual dues to procure their reading, and are not eligible for the free libraries.²⁴

Audible here is the rhetoric of "improvement" that was so popular some 20 years earlier and could be widely heard and read in the parks movement. "The intellectual elevation of the masses" seemed to be the popular philanthropic aim of the day, whether it come by brook or by book.²⁵ What is even more striking about this document is its recognition of the ethnic divisions that striated the city. These different libraries not only served different populations, but also symbolically represented the numerous publics that lived in the city of New York but who did not yet engage in a common text or even a common space. To be sure, economic forces and residential necessity provided ample room for the city's ethnic communities to mix, and very few neighborhoods were so mono-ethnic so as to provide insularity against the city's other ethnic groups.²⁶ While the various populations of the city were living a coordinated if not cacophonous existence, the Trustees of the Lenox and Astor libraries had consolidated their efforts and were courting the city in an attempt to establish a state-funded public library system that would also house and maintain the existing collections of both families. For the Trustees to produce a "civilized capital" rather than

disorganized metropolis necessitated an elaborate production of the city in a way that would convince New York City government that a unified, publicly supported library would benefit the city at large. The carefully crafted proposal would follow on the consolidation of the Astor and Lenox libraries under the guidance of John Bigelow, an attorney and trustee of the Tilden foundation.²⁷

The formal proposal for the NYPL, presented to New York Mayor William L. Strong on March 25, 1896, is as much about the building (as a noun and a verb) of the main branch as it is about justifying the library's establishment. The success of the library project was reliant on the symbolic conflation of the building itself and the civic function of the library. Both the physical building and the civic benefits were projected on the bodies of the citizenry, who were become the agents for the noisy transmission of information and the "imagineers" of New York.

Indeed, a popular public library, bringing sound literature within the reach of every man's home, is in a very real sense a part of the educational system of the State. Education ought not to stop with the public school, nor even with the high school. It is necessary also to provide the higher school which a well-equipped popular library can alone afford. Moreover the State has a profound interest in aiding the circulation of ideas that are not ephemeral. The best influence of a popular press must largely depend on its having within reach a complete storehouse of scientific, economic and historical facts, with which to correct the crudeness of hasty judgments of great social and national movements.²⁸

The State will benefit from the spread of ideas, and will improve the lot of the popular press and the citizens who read it. In other words, good libraries breed good institutions that make good citizens who, in turn, make a good city that deserves to be considered among the capitals of the world (long before that became New York City's tourist slogan for the summer of 1995). The beckoning agent of civic interpolation is the information captured by "sound literature," the sound of literature, the call of literature, the response of the literate. The circulation of information is, necessarily, a noisy process, even as its civic agents are compelled to be silent. The silence of the agents, however, is an indication of the success of the library project; if the masses are to be civilized, the transmission of information cannot be obfuscated by noise in the system or in the library. Participation in the active improvement of the State, then, is imagined here to be saturated with noise, yet it is to be carried out by a silent and studious population. There is no room for noise in either the library or the city.

The public, however, was given a voice in the popular press: all of the major New York papers supported the construction of a central branch of the public library.²⁹ The question as to its location remained, however. Both Seth

Low, President of Columbia University in Morningside Heights and Henry M. MacCracken, chancellor of the University of the City of New York on Washington Square approached the Tilden trust with offers for partnerships for building the library. However, neither the uptown nor the downtown locations befit the new building. Other locations were discussed before the Coroton Reservoir on Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street emerged as a front runner. It was centrally located near the tonier neighborhoods in the East 50s and above, and between the new Metropolitan Opera House on 40th Street and the hub of mass transportation, which converged at 42nd street. As well, this location would provide access to the immigrants who had begun to settle in the Bronx and Brooklyn. Although public opinion supported the reservoir site, the Trustees needed more convincing. The Board of Aldermen took no official position on the matter, beyond a statement that they supported the selection of "a proper site" for the main branch.³⁰ On April 16, 1895, Alderman Frederick A. Ware pronounced the reservoir "an eyesore" that "should be devoted to some public and beneficial use." He added that the absence of a library ought to be remedied with the construction of one "worthy of the name . . . and commensurate with the wealth and dignity of New York," and that such a "library centrally located . . . would be worthy of the city both from an architectural and literary standpoint."³¹ Ware, though not speaking on behalf of his colleagues, voiced a notion of urban reform and improvement that was gaining in popularity among urban planners and politicians of the day.

Ware's linkage between "wealth and dignity" and the "architectural and literary" bespeak some of the ideals of an urban planning movement known as "city beautiful," which held that urban ills could be cured through the planning and construction of monumental buildings that would inspire the "lower classes" to civic greatness. This was an outgrowth of the parks movement, in which taste and recreation were two of the guiding ideals. If beauty and civility could be inculcated through encounters with landscaped parks and "breathing spaces," then the same ought to be true of properly urban spaces. The construction of such spaces would make them, in the words of Lefebvre, both work and process, as such spaces would stand for a particular ideal, while also giving shape to its performance among and upon urban residents. Urban studies scholar M. Christine Boyer has written:

The municipal art, city beautiful and civic improvement crusades grew as piecemeal efforts, movements that aimed to convert a city built primarily for utility into an ideal form through artistic street signs, well-designed municipal bridges, using color in architectural elements, and improving public squares and buildings. In a similar manner, these crusades were aimed to express the fullness of the human spirit . . . so that the better impulses of the most elevated men would soon become common to all. These lofty attempts at city decoration

sought a new conception of public life and civic loyalty, a restoration of a lost community ethic through the enhancement of public spaces, decorating them with monuments, beautiful street vistas, majestic and classical architecture for public buildings, and allegorical murals in public places.³²

The city beautiful movement falls closely in line with Lawrence Levine's analysis of American cultural hierarchy in its assertion that beautiful cities would be a beautiful citizenry. A crucial part of a beautiful citizenry was its ability to behave according to the rules of decorum handed down by "the most elevated . . ." In museums and theaters, that meant paying quiet attention. It meant proper dress and hygiene. In public space, it meant controlling one's bodily functions and the volume of one's voice.³³ In the library, that would come to mean silent reading and mandatory productivity (no loitering in the library). If the key to controlling public behavior was through the creation of beautiful public spaces, the library was no exception.

Upon its opening in 1911, the building received some criticism because its original plan was not considered classical enough, although the façade and landscaping were widely praised in the popular and professional press for their "beauty and purity." Reviewing the furnishings, the *American Architect* wrote that they would be "a valuable lesson in decorative art to the hundreds of thousands of people who will annually pass through [its] splendidly equipped apartments . . . have constantly before them the surroundings in harmony with their serious purposes in seeking the educational benefits of the institution."³⁴ Externally, the building was praised for standing out in a "city of ugly architecture," and thus adding to the cultural cache of the city, even if it were to lay empty. In the press, at least, this monument to truth and beauty was already improving the city's standing among cosmopolitan centers.

The only part of the building that received substantial criticism was the interior floor plan, as it did not conform to the ideals of symmetry and balance emphasized in classical architecture. The asymmetrical interior space, however, was designed to foster the practical needs of the library. In fact, the Trustees studied the shortcomings of the recently completed Boston Public Library and were careful not to replicate the mistakes made in that library's construction; among the criticisms of that building were that it conformed too stringently to the classical ideals and sacrificed some of the efficiencies necessary for the smooth transmission of information. The trustees of the New York Public Library consulted expert engineers, architects, and librarians so that they would construct both a "convenient store-house for the literary and artistic treasures of the corporation," and "one of the chief monuments of the city."³⁵ It was going to become the focal point of civic beauty, moral elevation, and high art. Its mere being was to offer a beacon of civic pride through which the city at large would be able to imagine itself as a true cosmopolitan leader on par with European capitals and surpassing its American counterparts. All of this was to

be built into the space, but its success relied on the participation of a noisy and unpredictable party: the masses who were both the object and the subject of the library. Like the parks movement illustrated, the multi-ethnic, multilingual, poor, working, largely immigrant masses could not be counted on to willingly perform civility according to the ways in which the planners had imagined. Would the library be any different? Could the uncivilized masses keep their voices down and perform predictably?³⁶ Once orchestrated, the noise of urban communication was supposed to signify civility, a notion that the city cohered spatially, socially, and sonorously. The main branch was to house and coordinate the information through which the city would be able to noisily imagine itself outside its walls. Inside was a different story.

The production of silence remains a rather noisy business. The great fabricated silence at the heart of the circuit of information, imagination, and production required intense preparation and excruciating regulation. The silence of the building was enforced in the name of the information itself; only when the building was silent could the information speak clearly, without impediment and without noise. Yet this silence was already implicated in the noisy production of information, access, “the public,” and the space of the building relative to the city at large. Although the city was to imagine itself around and about this building, the building and all of the information it contained could only speak in terms of the city that lay beyond its walls—the city was produced elsewhere. The library could only signify the city if it could be inhabited, socialized, informative, informed. In other words, the space of the building, this great silent marble space could only anchor the imaginary production of the city if it were noisily narrated by people who lived in the city, provided they narrate elsewhere. Therefore, what became necessary in the production of the main branch of the New York Public Library was an urban subject who would not only listen intently to the sound of civility prompted by the circulation of information, but who would contribute to the silence necessary for the production of the social spaces of the building and the city itself.

Disciplining Noise

It is not simply at the level of consciousness,
of representations and in what one thinks one knows,
but at the level of what makes possible the knowledge
that is transformed into political investment.

—Michel Foucault³⁷

The building itself was to be “a great central library of reference and exhibit,”³⁸ not a lending library. It was fully intended, as described in the formal building proposal, to be a place of scholarship and learning, not one of civic congregation nor one of actual circulation. In other words, despite the great amount of information contained therein, the building itself was supposed to be silent. But not mute. In this way, the library can be read (an appropriate method-

ogy for rendering a library) as a disciplinary machine. But machines, too, are noisy things—gears gnashing, motors revving, wheels spinning, doors opening and closing, sirens blaring, pages turning, communities imagining. What kind of noise is heard in the disciplinary machine, and how is this noise productive? In his study of discipline, Michel Foucault draws the correlation between discipline and knowledge, productivity, regimentation and docility. Foucault defines disciplines as “techniques for assuring the ordering of human multiplicities.”³⁹ Insofar as the main branch of the NYPL was charged with the duty of disseminating and coordinating information and people, in order to participate in this change and impact the production of space, one was obligated to conform to a particular model of civic behavior. If you are too loud, you will be asked to leave the library.

To use the library, one must not only be quiet, but industrious as well. Loitering is prohibited. One must read, research, or produce, but the noise of production must be highly regulated. Not only is noise regulated, but in order to sit and read in the building’s main reading room you have to be reading the library’s own materials!⁴⁰ So, not only must you be productive, but you must participate in the production of the library, as well. Regardless of the content or intent of the research, the regulation of noise and the enforcement of productivity serve to channel all library activity into the elaborate staging of itself and the city. If you are going to be in the library, you are going to have to keep your voice down and work. The noise of the civic drowns out the noise of any particular text, and *what* is being read is subordinated to the fact that *anything* is being read *at all*. Remarkably, this notion is made quite explicit in the concluding paragraph of the library proposal. It states:

When we consider the extent to which an institution of the character proposed may fairly be expected to strengthen the police, diminish crime, raise public standards of morality, attract to our city men from every department of industry and every walk of life, add to the operative power of our people, and extend the influence of our Commonwealth, it can hardly be regarded otherwise than a privilege for the City to share in the work.⁴¹

Within the library, the quiet activity of reading becomes utterly noisy and social. Reading, no matter how private, is already scripted into the production of the civic, and is therefore a public event. Similar to the noise of the city that keeps us awake at night or calls our attention in the street, the noise of the civic invades the private consumption of information. The free circulation of information would produce disciplined citizens who could efficiently contribute to the moral and economic fabric of the city. The noise of reading overwhelms what is being read; it is consumed but never produced. Only in its consumption is it able to be productive.

Of course, its consumption is easily disciplined. The librarian can always hear you, even when she's not listening. Not panopticism but panauralism. When you enter the library, it does not matter if one is actively being listened to. Instead, those large white marble halls amplify even the smallest sound and betray one's "uncivil" behavior immediately. Civility, however, is never a silent matter. The clatter of keyboards, backpacks, and briefcases all contrast but do not impede the silence of the disciplinary machinery at work. Indeed, these are the sounds of the civic at work in this space. People walking, writing, typing are all involved in the performance and the production of the civic, and therefore these sounds amount to little more than the white noise of the machinery. These audial eruptions are not considered noise in the library because they are expected and even necessary for the machine to function. Were it too silent—no footsteps, no pages turning, no pencils scraping—we could not be certain that the machine was working. Like a heartbeat or the smell that had to be added to natural gas to alert us to its presence, these permissible sounds define the space and the behaviors that this space encourages within it and beyond it. In the main reading room patron-citizens are especially conscious of the small sounds they make, and try even to control them, keeping zippering bags and rippling papers to a minimum. In the library, noise will blow the cover of uncivil behavior. Producing the fantasy of always being in the line of sight requires a complicated architectonic scheme. Producing the reality of always being within earshot is a fact of social space. In this way, the most unpredictable fact of social life, the sound that cannot be produced, intended, scripted, becomes the most highly regulated, channeled, and staged.

The noise of civics thus becomes the meta-narrative of the New York Public Library. Participating in the production of the space becomes a civic duty, a public duty, one that is conducted between the individual subject and the city. Communication is highly regulated, controlled, legislated, and must always travel through the circuits of the library. If you are going to talk, you will be asked to step outside. By talking in the library you are already stepping outside the civic circuits of information and communication. You are creating unwanted, uncontrollable, noise that is troublesome to the smooth efficiency of the library and the civic. The disciplined civic subject can hear the difference between the managed silence of the library and the noise of the civic, and she will behave, produce, exchange, and circulate accordingly.

The Noise of the Civic

Tell X that speech is not dirty silence clarified. It is silence
made still dirtier.

—Wallace Stevens

As the by-product of social exchange (not to be confused with a product of exchange), noise is an inherent characteristic of social space. In this way, noise

is always “white”; its omnipresence enables the social to be written, staged and performed in space. Even as it is productive, noise is generally believed to be counterproductive. It disrupts, disturbs, and disables. Countless studies have sought to reduce noise in the workplace and the school because it inhibits productivity.⁴² Noise is inherently undisciplined because it can’t be controlled in communication. Neither the speaker nor the listener can introduce it, nor can they discipline it. Yet, the struggle against noise in communication has been waged continually from the Radio Act of 1927, which sought to reduce interference between broadcast stations, to noise statutes, to the latest in hi-tech entertainment devices designed for reproducing the clearest sound or the cleanest picture. Noise, with rare exception in the experimental art world, is rarely something striven for, but something to be limited, reduced, erased. At the main branch, this was certainly the case.

If you make noise, you will be asked to leave the library. But both silent civility and a civility of perfect communication are both impossibilities. Participating in the civic order is a noisy business. Engaging others in discourse over books, subway seats, and identity is a noisy business. Anton Shammas mused that identity is noise that shades everything we do while it also grounding us in the world. If this is true, then noise, the very thing that obscures or muddles any message we care to transmit, makes communication possible in the first place. In other words, the very thing that imperils our communications enables them. Like the sounds of the city that remind us that there are lives going on behind the windows and doors of apartment buildings, and that signify safety on New York streets, noise reminds us that the city is there and that we are part of it.

Controlling noise at the library was a critical feature of its civilizing ideals. Proper literary practice was central to the library’s conducting of civic subjects and of the city at large. At the library it does not matter quite what one reads, but how. The growth of New York City around the turn of the century begged the question of how the city, the multilingual, multiethnic city that stretched from Far Rockaway to the Bronx, would constitute itself as one city. Separated by class, gender, ethnicity, language, and location, the library was to become the building and the institution that would coordinate these efforts. As an heir of the parks movement and the city beautiful movement, the main branch offered a ripe opportunity for the construction of a beautiful building that would be deeply and intimately involved in the production of an active, urban citizenry. Additionally, the design and construction of a beautiful building that was also functional would succeed in putting New York on par with other capitals of the cultured world.

This was to be a noisy construction, as the people did not know how to read quietly. Literate as they may have been with street signs and handbills, the people did not necessarily know *how* to read. The structure of the main branch was to be instructive on the virtues of beauty, but the silence within it had to be enforced or else the space would get too noisy and would not be able to function

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Noise would obfuscate and blur the intentions of the library both as a space and as an institution. The work of the library was to instruct the masses how to read, not necessarily what to read, and where the power of the space failed to discipline, the librarian could step in. Even if not an overt agent of discipline, the librarian is an agent of production, assisting people in their searches for information, so that their time is not wasted in the library. Productivity and silence, as two critical pieces of the library's function, closely mirror those behaviors of Fordist factory production. The primary difference here is that the products of the library do not necessarily emerge fully formed and ready for market. Rather, they emerge in process, and as elements of urban subjectivity that aid in the performance of these markets, spaces, cities.

Not necessarily interested in producing objects, the main branch of the library is absolutely concerned with the production of subjects. By disciplining noise and attempting to ensure the safe and clear transmission of information from text to individual, the library is deeply involved in productions of the city and the civic subject. These productions go on over and above the noise of public discourse on the street and on the subway. That noise cannot be controlled or limited. Those spaces cannot be silenced or controlled. But the library can and does imagine itself as the silent center of this discourse for all its attempts to encourage a citizenry that knows how to read, and is not afraid to make noise, as long as it is outside the library.

Notes

I would like to thank Professor May Joseph, whose brilliant advice and instruction gave the space for this paper to emerge. Thanks as well to Ben Stewart, Amie Dorman, and to the keen eyes of the anonymous readers of *American Studies*, who saw promise in this paper that I had overlooked.

1. Anton Shammas, "Autocartography," in *The Geography of Identity*, ed. Patricia Yaeger (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1996), 466-475.
2. New York City, NY, Administrative Code §§ 24-201 to 24-269 (1972).
3. Jacques Attali, *Noise* (Minneapolis, 1983), 33.
4. Cited in William Paulson, *The Noise of Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1988), 7.
5. *Ibid.*, 67.
6. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York, 1992).
7. Richard Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder* (New York, 1970).
8. Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), 165.
9. *Ibid.*, 161.
10. There's a famous story about a reader at the Lenox library who found a \$50 bill tucked into a copy of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, accompanied by a note that read "With it goes my best wishes. From one who has money to spare and is a lover of Shakespeare." Retold in Phyllis Dain *The New York Public Library: A History of Its Founding and Early Years* (New York, 1972).
11. David Henkin, *City Reading* (New York, 1998), 22.
12. Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988).
13. John Sears, *Sacred Places* (Oxford University Press, 1989), 119.
14. M. Christine Boyer, *Dreaming the Rational City* (Cambridge, 1983), 35.
15. Henkin, *City Reading*, 66.
16. *Ibid.*, 67.
17. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Donald Nicholson-Smith, trans. (Oxford, 1984), 74.
18. Benedict Anderson *Imagined Communities* (New York, 1983).

19. *Ibid.*, 36.
20. Dain, *The New York Public Library*, 22.
21. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 101-102.
22. *Ibid.*, 77.
23. Between 1871 and 1880, the United States absorbed over 2.8 million new immigrants, the majority of whom settled in urban areas.
24. Quoted in Harry Miller Lydenberg *History of the New York Public Library* (New York, 1923), 204.
25. Quoted in Dain, *The New York Public Library*, 17.
26. Kenneth Jackson, *The Encyclopedia of New York City* (New Haven, Conn., 1995). Hasia Diner's recent work on the Lower East Side of Manhattan also clearly evidences the Italian community that lived there in numbers at least equal to those of Jews around the turn of the 20th century. *Lower East Side Memories* (Princeton, N.J., 2000).
27. The establishment of the Tilden trust in 1886, which dedicated \$2.4 million to the establishment of a "free library and reading room in the city of New York," opened the door for the unification of the two major libraries in the city, and ultimately led to the establishment of the New York Public Library. The New York Free Circulating Library was brought under the administration of the New York Public Library in 1900.
28. Lydenberg, *History of the New York Public Library*, 359
29. Dain, *The New York Public Library*, 152.
30. *Ibid.*, 144.
31. *Ibid.*, 143-144
32. Boyer, *Dreaming the Rational City*, 45-46.
33. Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow*.
34. Dain, *The New York Public Library*, 337.
35. Quoted in *Ibid.*, 159.
36. Riv-Ellen Prell's work on images of Jewish American women focuses partially on the early twentieth-century stereotype of the "Ghetto Girl," whose primary traits were those of conspicuous consumption and poor manner. Chief among public behaviors frowned upon was loudness. Prell cites a handful of newspaper articles and etiquette books from the 1910's that condemn loudness in speech and laughter, and offer women alternatives for public behavior that do not so apparently signify vulgarity. *Fighting to Become Americans* (Boston, 1999), 44-51.
37. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, Alan Sheridan, trans. (New York, 1979), 185.
38. Quoted in Lydenberg, *History of the New York Public Library*, 357.
39. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 218.
40. This was posted on the library's list of rules and regulations, alongside checking your bags and keeping conversation to a minimum.
41. Lydenberg, *History of the New York Public Library*, 362.
42. Numerous studies over the past twenty or so years have indicated that noise inhibits learning and productivity. Schools near Chicago's O'Hare airport have received additional funding for the installation of sound insulation.