

Loud and Low: Public Problems of Noise and Justice Near Westchester County Airport

by

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Introduction

As infrastructure, the airport plays a critical role in sustaining the networks of connectivity which have come to define our contemporary economic, social, environmental, and political paradigm. In this regard the airport is, generally speaking, “a manifestation of mobility in the era of supermodernity”, a space where material goods are exchanged and massive volumes of people pass through en route to their destinations. (Woodburn 2016, 24) It is easy to consider these airports as an abstract connected system of runways and flight paths and potential destinations, but this collapse of distance and emphasis of the airport as a node or hub in a supermodern, superconnected network often overlooks the individual and collective concerns on the ground and the residents who carefully and critically examine noise, policy, impacts, planning, environments, public problems, experience, and expectation. In these localized situations, activist networks arise, concerns are expressed, and the broad mechanisms of global air-transportation become meticulously tied to disruptive local experiences.

The situation in neighborhoods adjacent to the Westchester County Airport (HPN) in West Harrison, New York is both common and peculiar. Like most anti-airport activism, the catalyst for these movements was noise and expansion: Westchester County’s suburbanization and commercialization projects were due in part to the proximity to the airport as well as New York City, packing in both affluent and upper-middle class suburban homeowners and businesspeople as well as dramatically increasing the amount of corporate general aviation aircraft taking off and landing at the airport. These concerns have continued into the contemporary moment in which residents have protested a suspicious airport privatization deal

and continue to rally against airport noise, landing patterns, and water contamination through hybrid resident/official advisory boards, online activism, and other community engagement efforts. What becomes peculiar is the discursive ways through which these concerns get expressed: proportionately affluent residents, using the language of environmental justice, a concept based around “the concern that many poor and nonwhite communities bear a disproportionate burden of risk of exposure to environmental hazards compared to white and/or economically higher class communities”, attempt to route suburban concerns of “livability” and “annoyance” through the structurally critical and intersectional idea of environmental justice (Haught 2011, 1).

As a result, the public problem of noise near HPN becomes composed not only of activism, meetings, and experience but also becomes animated through dialogue that positions residents concerned with “livability” issues as victims of private plane noise/airport modernization/environmental risk. Class becomes a rhetorical device through which both concerned residents and airport officials rationalize and point blame, and the most pressing risk to neighborhoods is related to property values and “livability”, effectively avoiding the structural, racial, and economic inequalities that environmental justice is concerned with analyzing and correcting. This leads me to ask: what does the public problem of noise near the Westchester County Airport (HPN) look like, and what does it mean for affluent suburbanites to demand and use the language of environmental justice movements and critiques?

Background: Industrial Noise, Environmental Justice, and Social Class

The Westchester County Airport was constructed in 1942 as a means for aerial defense of New York City during World War II. As the threat of an attack on the city waned, the airport was turned over to the county and dedicated to commercial use in 1945 (Canning 1984, 223). In tandem with the release of HPN into county and commercial use was the postwar suburban development of the county; the large suburban estates that stretched throughout the area were divided and developed into neighborhoods and shopping plazas, increasing the population of the county to 625,816 in 1950 to 894,104 in 1970 and, according to 2019 census projections, around 967,000 at the time of writing this (Canning 1984,189). With the vast amounts of open space, corporate companies and firms tired of the problems associated with operating in New York City like cost, space, etc., began to move their headquarters to the county; one stretch of corporate office complexes in Harrison has become known as the Platinum Mile (Canning 1984, 200). Alongside the general postwar population and suburban housing boom, these sprawling and impressive corporate complexes brought businessmen and their families which helped establish the “county’s reputation as a residential area for the wealthy” (Canning 1984, 199).

Corporate campuses and impressive estates were some of the first distinct components of the Westchester landscape that I encountered. Directly across the street from the entrance to Purchase College is the entrance to the PepsiCo headquarters, one of the world’s largest food and beverage companies. If I were to drive no more than five miles from the campus I would come across similar headquarter complexes for companies such as IBM, MasterCard, Illy Coffee, Atlas Air, Gerber Insurance, and Mitsui Chemicals, just to name a few. This proximity to corporate

headquarters as well as New York City has come to position HPN as one of the busiest business airports in the United States with more than 80% of flight activity being noncommercial.

(Westchester County, n.d.) As stated above, this continued corporate development allowed for the dramatic increase in suburban residential developments, including in areas directly adjacent to the airport and in areas under and around flight paths. Today, there are still residential developments being constructed in areas that are dramatically affected by aircraft noise, with planes only a couple hundred feet from unfinished rooftops. These conditions have in part led to the creation of active citizen networks which mobilize to file complaints, participate in hybrid meetings, and seek overall “justice” in their suburban airport-adjacent neighborhoods.

It is important to briefly contextualize the public problem of noise historically and in relation to listening, particularly listening vis-a-vis mechanization, class, and environment. The idea of the soundscape, then, is useful in understanding the conceptual and material aspects of the fieldsite and problem in general. In her 2008 book *Mechanical Sound: Technology, Culture, and Public Problems of Noise in the Twentieth Century*, Karin Bijsterveld, in analyzing different conceptualizations of soundscapes, comes to prefer Emily Thompson’s view of a soundscape, as “simultaneously a physical environment and a way of perceiving that environment; it is both a world and a culture constructed to make sense of that world... but also the material objects that create, and sometimes destroy, those sounds” (Bijsterveld 2008, 23). Our sonic environments are both physical landscapes and ways of understanding and perceiving that landscape. Culturally mediated through material objects and social conditioning, soundscapes have become particular ways in which we understand our environment. To both Bijsterveld and myself, this way of thinking of sonic environments is useful because “the physical characteristics of sound are not

sufficient to understand why particular sounds came to be defined as noises or why private problems of noise became public ones. These questions require acknowledging transformations in the ways people listen to sounds and their cultural meanings” (Bijsterveld 2008, 24).

While sound and noises have a long class-based history, John M. Pickers’ *The Soundproof Study: Victorian Professionals, Work Space, and Urban Noise* allows us to situate the contemporary problem of noise as an issue relative to both industrialization and middle-class sonic-aesthetic taste and conceptualizations of class. Reactions against London’s noisy “vulgar” pedestrian population, specifically street musicians, represents a “continuing struggle between refinement and vulgarity... [revealing] a segment of the Victorian middle classes in the process of making one of its more elaborate, forceful efforts toward collective action and self-definition” (Pickers 1999, 428). Bijsterveld gives us more examples: “the ban on the slaves’ instruments is just one of the many manifestations of sounds having been defined as noise because they signified a threat to a particular social order. The language of foreigners, the drunken turbulence of the poor, the street music of immigrants, and the emotional expressions of evangelical worshippers have all been, at different times and places, characterized as din by the ruling classes and religions” (Bijsterveld 2008, 34). While industrial noise may be a signal of economic production, the Victorians began a project of sensorial refinement that positioned their class-status against “vulgar” noises that challenged their class-based notions of “liveability” and annoyance. This sonic refinement eventually evolved into organizations such as the British Anti-Noise League, an early noise abatement organization which among other things published a series of magazines titled *Quiet*, which produced a specific understanding of sound, noise, and environments; the magazine covers often employed natural agrarian scenes which “depicted the

tranquil life that the British Anti- Noise League longed for. It believed that nature was without noise and that pastoral life was paradise” (Bijsterveld 2008, 27). While we know that nature can be deafening (think of the orchestras of insects or frogs in the summer months), the British Anti-Noise League came to position noise as man-made, industrial, and not of nature.

These noise abatement societies came to meet their match in the mid twentieth century as the turbojet aircraft came into commercial use. The jet plane, unlike the propeller plane, produced specific noise that “radiated most of their power at precisely the frequencies to which human hearing was most sensitive” and is easily absorbed by the atmosphere (Bijsterveld 2008, 197). In the United States, aircraft noise abatement has a particular foundation that has come to define the trajectory of abatement practices for years: litigation. Bijsterveld noted that “in 1957, the director of the Port of New York Authority so much feared the upcoming arrival of the turbo jets and the lawsuits from citizens he expected in their slipstream that he wanted to have a norm that “the city would force the airlines to abide by” (Bijsterveld 2008, 198). This actually resulted in New York airports employing dangerous landing and takeoff maneuvers in order to prevent community disturbance and lawsuits. Here, noise abatement isn’t necessarily rooted in any pressing community health concerns, but out of *suspicion* that the local neighborhoods would react to noise and disturbance with legal and financial repercussions. This trend of suspicion has come to mark noise abatement on both ends of the conversation, particularly within the neighborhoods near the Westchester County Airport.

As introduced earlier, the concerned residents in HPN-adjacent neighborhoods have come to use the language of environmental justice in advocating for their communities against noise and other airport related concerns. The idea of environmental justice first came about in the

late 1960s, specifically with the '68 Memphis Sanitation Strike in which African American sanitation workers went on strike to oppose working conditions that placed environmental risks and burdens on black workers paired with unionization efforts (EPA 2017). Environmental justice is a direct result of the civil rights movement, demanding a recognition and improvement of unequal distribution of dangerous environmental risk along racial and class lines, a “political ecology... stressing the power relations, inequalities, and contradictions that join natural and social processes over time” (Williams 2001, 409). In the suburban neighborhoods adjacent to HPN, there is an extremely low instance of systematic environmental risk beyond a few examples that will be outlined below; things like lawn pesticides and building materials are the more pressing suburban environmental risks rather than industrial waste or landfills. In an area with median household incomes roughly double the national average, class and environmental justice rhetoric seems to give some density to the problem of noise, but falls short in actually acknowledging and working on the structural inequalities present in air transportation systems at large, ultimately avoiding actual structural justice.

Methodologies

As a contemporary public problem, I was afforded a number of particular opportunities in research that may not be possible in historical or non-public projects. The majority of my early work and research came from direct experience with aircraft noise in the wooded swaths of land around the Blind Brook at SUNY Purchase as well as student-organized anti-airport expansion/privatization protests beginning in the fall semester of my freshman year at Purchase. From there, I was introduced to the numerous local online networks of concerned residents who

were more than happy to express those concerns with anyone who will listen and share. As this public problem is heavily focused on a county-owned airport, there are countless public records regarding the airport dating back to before the construction of the facility itself; I spent many hours combing through various documents relating to airport maintenance, operations, noise data, noise complaints, environmental assessments, flight data, many documents regarding privatization attempts, and many other topics that will be introduced in the next section. Because of this availability of documents and resources, it was extremely easy and useful to be able to compare what residents experience and claim to happen and what the airport/county is presenting in their documents. These two seemingly opposed viewpoints that I encountered in this research came to inform a large chunk of my analysis regarding different knowledges in relation to the planning, measuring, and operating taking place at the Westchester County Airport.

Beyond public documents and local online activist networks, I attended numerous meetings of the Westchester County Airport Advisory Board (AAB), a recommending body composed of residents and county officials who discuss various topics and issues that are then passed onto the airport officials as things the advisory board (representing communities and county) agrees with and wishes to recommend. After these meetings, I had the pleasure to meet concerned residents in attendance, executives of various agencies that charter planes, members of the advisory board, and airport executives like Peter Scherrer, the general manager of the airport; many of the residents who I met and heard from were those who I knew or remembered from their presence in the online activist networks, linking those involved with digital interaction to the physical interactions on the ground. In addition to AAB meetings I also attended an open house in Chappaqua, New York held by the county and the Federal Aviation Administration

(FAA) that further facilitated the conversation between residents and officials. As noted by Bijsterveld and other public problems theorists, public problems are dramatized and theatrical in order to make the issues comprehensible (Bijsterveld 2008, 29). My research and fieldwork was very much embedded in this dramatization and allowed me to orient myself within a prime example of what public problem theory is tasked with understanding.

On top of my research in public records, academic journals, meetings, conversations, and interviews, I have also been working on an independent study project with sound artist Liz Phillips relating to my research. Over the past academic year, I have been making and compiling various recordings of the environments around SUNY Purchase and their relationship to plane noise. This has allowed me to take some of the concerns, ideas, and experiences taking place within my text-based project and expand them into a sonic-aesthetic experiment. Stretching sounds, merging recordings, and playing with duration have facilitated the creation of artistic environments that investigate, emphasize, and improvise with the various components of plane noise and their relationship with the various spaces under the runway 34 approach at SUNY Purchase. Through these sonic experiments and manipulations, I have been able to acquaint myself with the sounds of my fieldsite in a way that in a way, answers the call made in *Soundscapes: Toward a Sounded Anthropology* for the expansion of critical ethnographic field recordings and various ways to understand field sites and various contexts through sound and sonic environments. There will be a section regarding this briefly at the end of the paper.

An extremely diverse range of methodologies has allowed me to embed myself deeply within the public problem of noise near HPN. I believe that this range has facilitated my ability to understand the ideologies and motivations behind each involved party while also allowing me

to be structurally critical of the situation as a whole. My audio recordings, to a degree, allow for an understanding of the sonic features and relationships existing in the fieldsite environment (though this process is done through manipulation and must be understood through this lens). These methodologies have thus culminated into the following findings.

Findings

A. Topography of the Public Problem of Noise near HPN

Local Concerns, Complaints, and Activism

As introduced above, airport noise abatement is situated within a larger social history of listening and refining said listening, with sounds being reframed within new class contexts that would come to shape urban planning processes, sonic environments, and how many individuals listen to their surrounding environments. The public problem of noise near HPN follows many of these histories but also comes to inhabit a very particular space regarding listening, environment, and justice, where concerns of noise parallel both the commercialization and expansion of the airport as well as the increased suburbanization and corporatization of Westchester County until very dramatic shifts which began to take place roughly twenty years ago ultimately sped up and made known the public problem of noise (and justice) around the Westchester County Airport.

Public problems are distinguished from *private* ones in that public problems are concerns and controversies that are “owned” by a public entity or aimed at arenas of public action; in the case of noise, it becomes a public problem when organizations, institutions, agencies, etc. “own” the problem through abatement, regulation, or studies (Bijsterveld 2008, 7). While I have yet to

find a specific date in which “private” problems of noise became “public” ones at HPN, I have found a report from a 1982 NASA workshop titled *Airport/Community Noise* which references in detail the trouble that HPN has been having with issues of noise and adjacent communities/organizations, indicating that this is not a particularly new problem and that federal agencies were actively engaged in discourse regarding noise in relation to airport-adjacent communities. David Heal, the airport manager at the time, opened up the workshop’s first roundtable discussion by saying that at the Westchester County Airport “we live, breathe, and may be destroyed by the issue of noise. Everything we do at the airport is controlled by noise... our problem is the public’s perception of the role of the airport and what might be considered to be reasonable noise exposure limits within the community” (NASA 1982, 2). It is apparent that by 1982 a majority of the operations, maintenance, and planning taking place within and around the airport were already dominated by various problems of noise.

Some of the earliest anti-noise/anti-expansion activism regarding HPN I could find was produced by Purchase College students and circulated in a variety of student publications, most notably the student paper *The Load*. For example a December 1983 issue of *The Load* ran an article by Noah Kaufman titled *Airport Threatens Purchase*, where it is explained that students and administrators were concerned with the potentially dramatic expansion of the airport highlighted in HPN’s master plans; the article goes on to remember the 1981 time that, concerned with the noise, emissions, and potential crash hazard of planes flying directly over the campus, students and administrators “led the air control tower to issue ‘Notice to Airmen’ letters, where it suggested that pilots not fly over the campus” (Kaufman 1983, 4).

Early Purchase students and administration had plenty of reasons to be concerned with the overhead flights beyond those problems of noise, as the 1980's saw a handful of minor plane crashes on and around the campus. One such crash took place in early April 1981, in which "a disabled plane preparing to land at Westchester County Airport was forced to crash-land on a playing field at the front of campus... the third airport-related accident in a period of less than six weeks" (Gregg 1981, 1). Other airport-related issues at Purchase include a 1985 anti-expansion, anti-noise campaign advertisement and a March 1981 article which outlines concerns regarding expansion that calls for the creation of a noise abatement program at the airport, among other things (Cascio 1981, 5). As these student publications make clear, the airport (and its always looming expansion), are problems that have always been of great concern for students, administrators, and residents who find themselves in similar locational situations. It is also safe to say that into the early 1980's, there was no noise abatement office or programs, meaning that there were no explicit "owners" of the problem of noise and that pushback had to necessarily take place at voting booths and in protests. However, as business went on, the public problem of noise near HPN became more defined and concerns shifted in new ways, demanding new techniques and language to articulate concerns and experiences.

Within the last twenty years, two major developments took place that came to define the public problem of noise and airspace infrastructure around HPN more generally. One of these developments was the FAA's NextGen program: a modernization effort "creating new interconnected systems that fundamentally change and improve how National Airspace System (NAS) users see, navigate, and communicate" (FAA 2019). HPN began implementing NextGen programs in 2017 which use satellite communication to optimize routes, altitude,

communication, fuel efficiency, etc. Mixed with a redesign of the NY/NJ/PH airspace, these technologies shifted certain flight paths and brought increased noise to areas around the airport that were previously unaffected, or minimally affected (Westchester County, n.d.). The second development was the 2015-17 proposed master plan-- the infamous plan to fully privatize (and expand) the airport under a 40-year lease in which the money the county received upfront would be used to bandage the budget and prevent tax increases as well as provide the county with millions of dollars every year. Leasing the airport would also allow the county to use revenue from the airport outside of the airport, something that they couldn't do as owners (Stern 2018). This plan was met with fierce opposition and the coordination and creation of various environmental protection groups, concerned citizens, and temporary residential students at SUNY Purchase; one such group was Citizens for a Responsible County Airport, a group comprised of concerned local residents who were already annoyed with plane noise and concerned with their drinking water. Citizens for a Responsible County Airport was concerned that this new privatized master plan would necessarily create conditions that favored expansion, going against the Westchester County Board of Legislators' position of "supporting no increase in the total capacity of the Airport... prompted by our desire to protect nearby residential communities" (Wang 2017, 1). This group, like many other groups and individuals, feared that the lease would give an incentive for expansion and that the new master plan pointed towards that expansion, and subsequently, more noise.

The privatization pushback by local residents sets the stage for the public problem of noise to come. The Coalition for a Responsible County Airport organized many community meetings and online collaborations. Supported by the Purchase Environmental Protection

Association, Federated Conservationists of Westchester County, and the Sierra Club Lower Hudson Group, Citizens for a Responsible County Airport published the “White Paper” a.k.a *The Deleterious Impact of Privatization Under a Long Term Lease and the Draft Airport Master Plan*, an eleven-paged public document contextualizing the push for privatization and the new master plan which then documents in detail how this expansion/privatization process would negatively affect residents and the environment. The entire process to privatize the airport was a mess; the first contract was made in an unacceptable no-bid process, and was then followed by the review of three other proposals. As this was taking place, George Latimer, a democrat then running for county executive, ran and won on an anti-privatization platform, effectively ending the current plans for privatization after public hearings regarding noise and environment (Stern, 2018). Although these plans are off the table for the time being, the activist networks would continue to express their various concerns with the airport, specifically in terms of noise and eventually water contamination, utilizing various networks set up before and during the privatization situation.

Today, the public problem of noise near HPN is a bigger concern than ever. After the popular support and activism following the fight to stop expansion and privatization, the groups of concerned individuals began to redesign and increase participation in anti-noise campaigns. Some of my first encounters with these networks took place online, where local residents have established various private FaceBook groups dealing with the mapping of loud planes, airport-related conversations, gathering data for complaints, and reminding residents about various events and meetings taking place regarding the airport and noise. While these networks have existed for decades, the contemporary moment has brought this issue into the hands of an

ever-increasing number of residents who, fed up with noise, want to make some sort of change. The next section deals with the ways in which residents feel their experiences with sound aren't expressed or captured by the "official" mechanisms that those in charge of the problem of noise use to measure, map, and plan regarding that noise and how the situation often becomes locked in these differing experiences and knowledges.

Knowledge Bodies

In these attempts by both local residents and airport officials to manage, represent, and communicate noise, an apparent gap seems to form between the sonic experience of concerned local residents and the officially generated data and reports which draw conclusions regarding noise in and around the airport. This "gap" in representation is the source of much frustration for residents who feel as though the ways in which their sonic environment is officially represented and recognized do not represent the same weight as lived, experienced phenomenon taking place within the home. As a result of this assumed difference in representation, residents feel the need to push back against the "official" data, arguments, and conclusions regarding noise. This process of pushing back ends up producing the illusion of clearly differentiated modes of understanding and representing landscapes/environments. In her 2016 dissertation *Pushback In The Jet Age: Investigating Neighborhood Change, Environmental Justice, and Planning Process in Airport-Adjacent Communities*, Amber Woodburn describes these modes of representation as different types of knowledges: "official knowledge generated through noise studies [and other bureaucratic methodologies] and local knowledge generated by residents' experiences" (Woodburn 2016:47). Echoing the arguments that are presented by local residents at meetings

and in online conversation, Woodburn continues to express that these “fixed federal methods for generating noise contours created a scenario where local knowledge was not treated as significant to the decision making process, no matter how much local residents contested the validity of the federally sanctioned noise contour methods” (Woodburn 2016:47).

These knowledges manifest in a number of ways. Local knowledge is experiential and based on feeling and perception. Residents feel as though their living in proximity to the airport and daily experience with plane noise in the home provides them with a firm experiential knowledge that can only be gained through living there (meaning purchasing a home-- investment-- there), and that their participation in local economies/politics and cultural projects such as suburban homeownership make them valuable members of the community worth listening to. That in the experience of low passing planes contains some disorienting and inarticulable rupture. There is a shared sentiment that the data which gets produced through standardized noise monitoring, mapping, and abatement processes cannot take into consideration the disturbance-- the annoyance, of the constant passing aircraft. As we will see, however, this inability to incorporate annoyance broadly is a result of the highly subjective and performative nature of these types of problems as well as the complicated and bureaucratic methods of standardization in local noise data gathering.

Local knowledge also becomes informed by citizen science and research; many individuals who I had conversations with both in person and online consistently keep up with news relating to noise, emissions, accidents, spills, physical or mental health, and nearly every other bit of information related to airports hypothetically, globally, nationally, or locally. Additionally, residents have taken to recording and photographing particularly low planes as a

visual aid in legitimizing their concerns and experiences, generally sharing the pictures online or on posters to be read by “officials” during events and meetings.

The knowledge which is referred to as “official” knowledge is generated by professionals and experts in charge of the airport or regulating agency (the County, various members of boards, airport managers, noise abatement offices, environmental depts, the FAA), or is contracted by the airport or agency (HMMH noise studies, other third-party organizations) and often gets represented in charts, reports, and talking points. What’s interesting about this official knowledge, though, is that it produces to some extent a kind of hybrid knowledge-- the official knowledge or data is not produced independently and becomes informed by local knowledge. However, the definition of “local knowledge” is open for interpretation. While not an entirely new phenomenon, there is a relatively contemporary idea in planning, monitoring, and regulating that the local knowledge of areas being impacted must be interacted with and incorporated to some extent into the planning and regulating process. Stephen Miescher refers to this hybrid knowledge as “high modernist local knowledge”, knowledge that “include[s] precise ideas about the daily lives of workers and their families and commented on insufficient... institutions (Miescher 2012: 377). While in Meisher’s case this knowledge was a necessary result of short-sighted postcolonial planning projects which didn’t consider the lives of residents after initial construction projects or within various dramatic economic shifts taking place, the high modernist local knowledge produced around HPN-adjacent neighborhoods is essentially standard practice in planning and, in many cases, dominates the understanding and language of noise in these neighborhoods.

This hybrid “official”-knowledge-informed-by-the-local is produced through both direct conversations with residents as well as indirect reports and studies that attempt to produce this local knowledge without interacting with residents. The creation and subsequent monthly meetings of the Westchester County Airport Advisory Board is one of the most obvious examples of conversations about local life and concerns being in direct conversation with county and airport officials. According to their webpage (a direct link on the county airport website), the Airport Advisory Board, which experienced a complete turnover after Latimer’s election, is “a regular and direct channel of communication in order to increase County responsiveness to community complaints, difficulties, and proposals relating to the airport... an active liaison among municipalities, groups, citizens, and the airport” (Westchester County, n.d.). The board also has specific parameters as to how it is composed, requiring that the board of eleven members is composed of eight members chosen by the county executive (five have to be residents of airport-proximate communities), a member of the county board, and the commissioner of public works and commissioner of planning. The noise abatement officer also sits in on the meetings. The hybrid nature of this board is emphasized by the specified inclusion of both members of impacted communities as well as county and airport officials and the intention of getting local input (or appearing to) during the planning process.

Most of the time, these meetings are held monthly in the second-floor conference room of the airport’s main terminal at 7pm. I would park my car in the parking garage and make my way into the brown brick terminal, taking time to watch the planes taxi on and off the runways. One plane fills up with passengers as one is emptying. Smaller jets and propeller aircraft also scurry around the tarmac and private terminals. The conference room, which is located within an office

space on the second floor, is tucked in a hallway between bathrooms and the Wing Lady chicken wing bar and lounge that overlooks the waiting terminal below. One wall of the room is a window that looks over the main terminal area as well as some of the action on the tarmac outside. The opposite wall is bare, except for a large, detailed 3-panel painting of a jumbo jet's front profile almost flying out of the canvas with deep vibratory blues, yellows, reds, and oranges radiating and fuzzing around the well-defined edges of the clearly-drawn plane, hinting at a wildly powerful and dominating machine. Board members and the noise abatement officer sit around a long wooden conference table facing the public seating arrangements and in front of a camera recording the meeting.

During these meetings, different departments give updates and reports; noise complaint data is often the first order of business, as it is the center of many concerns, but also included are construction updates, environmental updates, and other specific concerns. Each order of business usually consists of an opportunity for attendees to speak or ask questions, to provoke or influence the board. As a recommending body, a lot of these meetings consist of evaluating proposals and plans and submitting recommendations to the county on behalf of the Advisory Board and, inherently, the residents in HPN-proximate neighborhoods. However, because "official" channels of local knowledge into the planning process exist, it is harder to influence these planning decisions outside of these "official" networks. Due to this reason, the meetings are generally well attended by concerned residents as well as representatives for, and operators of, various airline charters and services who keep tabs on the situation or who wish to speak with the board. With the combination of community members, aircraft interests, and officials on the board, there are moments of tension that spill over into accusation and suspicion, bickering and

disagreement, mirroring the concerns and complaints expressed in the 1982 NASA conference on community noise as well as the contestations mentioned by Woodburn.

At the first meeting I attended on September 25th, 2019, there were a few of these moments. I was sitting next to a woman who introduced herself to someone as being from one of the operators who flies out of HPN. During a conversation about noise complaints, the woman asked about a piece of data regarding individual household complaint numbers and the fact that one Armonk home registered 2,955 complaints during the month of August. This was suspicious to her because a complaint for every plane you hear could not be considered acceptable as the “objective”, “useful” data the complaints should produce. Almost immediately, another woman shot her hand up and stated that she was the person who filed those complaints and that she does in fact file a complaint for every plane that she hears because to her, they are all worth a complaint and this is how she can try and show her annoyance. Hand written on yellow legal pads and turned in to the abatement office physically. All of this is a response to the suspicion of officially generated noise data-- it’s not surprising that local and official data don’t match up because, to a lot of residents, the data (planes registering high on noise monitors) doesn’t accurately reflect the experienced *annoyance* of low passing planes. This annoyance is born from specific circumstances such as expectations of suburban homeownership, quality of sleep/life/work, relationship to the airport, and the fact that the data they are constantly provided doesn’t reflect these experienced disturbances. While I have been thinking of this situation in terms of different knowledge bodies, it is also a matter of different modes of collecting, understanding, and acting upon data.

While most noise data is “officially” gathered, especially through contracted noise studies, it is again a hybrid knowledge in which officials use technological instruments like noise monitors and flight path data visualizations to “generate [more “objective”] local knowledge with and about the people who inhabit” the area without having to directly interact with those who are living there (Miescher 2012: 381). This mode of generating knowledge operates in tune with ideas of scientific objectivity and calculability and thus views the opinions and experiences of local residents with suspicion or some level of distrust; that their data is not reliable or even considered important in these noise studies and decision-making processes and placing microphones within communities is more effective at gathering local knowledge. Local community noise data is mainly derived from a physical, spatial network of noise monitoring stations placed strategically throughout various airport-proximate locations and other processes and computer programs which generate and map noise into regulated contours. These monitoring stations are essentially telephone poles holding a thin metal rod topped with a microphone and antennas; a grey box is fixed to the pole in its midsection, recording and sending out noise information. This generated data is used to corroborate noise complaints as well as register and notify operators of planes that have produced a “high range noise event”, an event registered at or above 90dBA (Westchester County, n.d.). Without having to directly interact with community members, “officials” are producing “objective” local knowledge that can easily and faithfully be plugged into standardized formulas that generate officially recognized data that is used in planning and abatement processes. Local knowledge does not necessarily mean that individual local residents or neighborhoods produce said knowledge, but that the data being collected is from real recorded phenomena within said locations.

When a resident feels as if their experience isn't being accurately captured, or if they do not live within reasonable distance of a noise monitoring location, the county also owns a couple of mobile noise monitoring stations. These plastic-shelled portable microphones sit in yards of concerned residents who are happy to know that their experience can be represented in the data. However, a lot of the active airport activists and annoyed residents have told me in person that they would never consider asking for a mobile noise monitoring system at their residence because, to them, the relative silence of night would factor into the 24-hour average that the monitoring station takes (even in spite of a 10dB weight added to plane events at night) and thus water down plane frequency and noise ranges, continuing to devalue their felt experience, their annoyance. Other residents told me and have complained at meetings that noise monitoring stations have not been placed in some of the loudest communities around flight paths, but are rather scattered in more distant stretches of the noise contours.

One particularly complicated component of this hybrid planning knowledge is the HPN Noise Abatement office's noise complaint system. Complaints are one of the most used techniques through which residents express their disturbance/annoyance/frustration with specific passing aircraft events, but the information required to produce a complaint strips away all possibilities of personalization beyond a text box to describe details. Instead, through directing the areas of inquiry, the complaint system tries to produce some 'objective' acceptable local data, like a noise monitor reading. Perhaps complaints can be thought of as a bridge between pure local knowledge and "objective" noise monitor. Complaints can be filed in person, through third party apparatuses, or through the complaints tab on the airport's webpage. To file a complaint, a resident must provide information such as name, contact information, location, time of

occurrence, type of complaint (low, loud, loud and low, pollution, etc.), direction, and type of aircraft. Before information is asked, the website displays some general information. Specifically interesting is the disclaimer reading: “We have instituted a policy that limits the number of complaint responses to 50 per household address per month that will be investigated and responded to. Such responses include investigation, copies of complaints, and flight track maps sent out. Complaints over the 50 mark per month will still be accepted and recorded, but not responded to” (Westchester County, n.d.). This is important because in recent months, concerned residents have been pushing to dramatically increase complaints in order to express their concern. However, by only investigating 50 complaints per month, any other complaints are just numbers that have not been corroborated. That woman I met at the advisory meeting who filed nearly 3,000 complaints in the month of August would only have 50 of them looked at and responded to by the noise abatement office. In trying to produce “objective” local knowledge, the county puts a cap on complaint numbers, furthering the distrust and suspicion that has come to mark the public problem of noise at HPN.

Within the past year and a half, complaints have increasingly been used by residents as a way to express concerns directly as data that will be used by the county, resulting in a dramatic spike in complaints. Many households have come to file 1,000 to 3,000 complaints a month because 1) those residents genuinely feel as though that many planes produced disturbance/annoyance and 2) because even if they are not investigated by the abatement office after 50 complaints, the high numbers are registered and act as evidence that something needs to be done regardless of if the abatement office could investigate. While complaints are mostly filed online through the county website, they are also compiled in two other ways. The first method of

complaint gathering is done on FaceBook, where members compile everyone's complaints for the month and deliver them to the noise abatement office as a large mass of multiple household complaints. Again, another way of expressing sonic experience through large numbers. The other method for generating noise complaints is a button called Airnoise.io that was developed by a third party as a response to nationwide public problems of noise. The Airnoise.io clicker comes in a small but sturdy cardboard case with a small window cut out, revealing the logo and name of airnoise.io. The clicker itself is composed of two parts; the physical clicker and a keychain frame tightly hugging the outside. It isn't heavy but quite light for its size and hardware. The buttons are specialized Amazon Dash buttons which were originally designed for re-ordering consumer goods with a press of a button. Airnoise.io is based on that same technology, but "is designed primarily for developers to program their own functions in, beyond just ordering more of something" (Irving 2016). A chip uses WiFi to triangulate particular planes that have caused the disturbance when the user clicks the button on the surface of the clicker. On the bottom beside typical manufacturing and component warnings is the distributor of the physical device: Amazon. No sticker this time, but a thin, transparent-blue plastic ridge is protecting the amazon namesake. The activating button sits with a slight convex designed for the thumb-- a slight press makes an audible and physical 'click'. Through specific aspects of its design, the airnoise.io clicker becomes something transportable, accessible, and inconspicuous-- a potential extension of one's body which seamlessly files complaints to a noise abatement office. While this mobile, third party complaint-filing device can be useful, it is important to remember that the 50 investigated complaints a month are still in effect with the clicker. It may be easier to file a complaint but it is certainly not more effective. Regardless, their website will still read "the FAA

is making changes to airspace across the US, impacting many communities with loud aircraft noise for the first time. These are communities that used to enjoy peace and quiet. Do you hear the noise? If so, you are not alone, and you are not crazy” or “we do the hard work that you shouldn’t have to. Airnoise makes your voice heard over the roar” (Airnoise.io, n.d.).

The most recent culmination of the spikes in noise complaints coupled with the results of the HMMH noise study resulted in a January 2020 open house with the FAA in Chappaqua. I could tell that it was busy before I even walked inside because the front lobby was shoulder-to-shoulder crowded and people were milling around outside. A woman who I know of through the AAB meetings and online groups was in conversation in the front lobby with a homemade informational poster propped up at her feet reading something along the lines of “Too loud and too low” with other facts and pictures. Other members of the coalition were at the door handing out pamphlets. I grabbed one and made my way into the lobby. Of course, I had to sign in at the front, where I was told about the event and that there was coffee and other refreshments in the room behind me. A stack of papers sat at the corner of the table. Taking one, I added it to my collection and made my way into the main room. It was absolutely packed. Granted, the room wasn’t huge, but there were still probably around seventy people in the room. The walls were lined with large infographics and displays propped up on three-legged holders with familiar faces and other various representatives standing by them, ready to explain and converse. The rest of the room was packed shoulder to shoulder with residents, familiar faces, and politicians talking to representatives and amongst each other. I wasn’t sure what I was expecting but I didn’t really expect it to be this loud and crowded. While there is an extremely vocal online and community presence, I wasn’t sure how these community meetings and events were attended.

The displays and infographics were identical to the powerpoint slides presented during the HMMH noise study meeting, again with many familiar faces standing by them and talking with attendees (noise abatement officer, HMMH rep, board members, etc.). There were FAA and county representatives moving throughout the floor and striking up conversation with the residents in attendance about experience. A lot of conversation was actually more neighborly and social; people seeing friends and community members begin striking up conversation about the new year, the kids' school, or something along those lines. Politicians, who I have come to recognize through my politically active friends, like Vadat Gashi, Frank Gordon, George Latimer and other smaller players also mingled with the crowd-- their constituents. This event is not only informational but political. Who I can only assume to be interns or assistants follow their politician bosses around the room like shadows, trying to subtly sneak candid photographs of said boss in engaged conversations with constituents. I take a few pictures of a mobile noise monitoring device that was set up for display and some of the crowd before I bump my way out of the room into the lobby. The event ended up being an informational session in which "officials" explained how they define noise, how noise is mapped and gathered, and the results of the recent HMMH noise study all in relation to the increased noise complaints and the public problem of noise at HPN more generally.

The topography of the public problem of noise is a diverse and complex space, defined by refined suburban listening, regional political and economic histories, hybrid planning processes, knowledge bodies, and the intersections that take place among these various aspects. While there have been specific events which triggered specific pushback (1980's pushback against noise and flying over SUNY Purchase campus, 2017 privatization plan, NextGen

technologies), the public problem of noise continues to develop in complexity as well as gain attention after these events have passed. However, some of the larger problems or contradictions that exist within this problem of noise are located within the various discursive and performative elements that animate the pushback. Outlined below are two discursive contradictions that deserve attention: the use of class as a rhetorical device by both locals and officials and the utilization of environmental justice language in an affluent area.

B. Class as Rhetorical Device

One particularly interesting finding was the utilization of class as a rhetorical device by both concerned residents as well as the officials in charge of the airport. As we already established, the areas surrounding the Westchester County Airport are, in proportion to national averages, significantly affluent. For example, according to the census, the average household income in New Castle is \$159,691 compared to \$61,937 nationally. Other towns and hamlets are in significantly more affluent brackets, but it is evident that these suburbs in which anti-noise residents reside make significantly more than the average American household. In the 2004 book *Landscapes of Privilege*, James and Nancy Duncan write that Bedford, a local town familiar with aircraft noise, “is highly interconnected into transnational flows and networks of power [and] privilege” and is “a highly controlled space, a semiprivatized domain in which supposedly authentic rural republican American identity can be nurtured [and] its landscapes are treated as aesthetic production” (Duncan 2004, 8-9). Now, while all landscapes can be considered cultural aesthetic productions, it is interesting to think about this particular aesthetic production in relation to the public problem of noise, soundscapes, and the refining of listening vis-a-vis

particular suburban expectations. While it is important to understand the class and power relationships that compose the site and discourse of the public problem of noise near HPN, this is not an attempt to deny humanity or the felt experience of noise. However, when class becomes a rhetorical component of an argument, especially in terms of environmental justice, one should be aware and critical of the larger socioeconomic contexts at work-- how class-based arguments take on particular meanings and forms when being deployed in an affluent and privileged milieu.

These conditions, specifically the aesthetic production of a suburban landscape and the push for a prototypical suburban soundscape presented in the public problem of noise are part of a larger history of refinement and aestheticization of listening, recording, and the ear more generally. This listening, then, has produced a class-based suburban expectation of a particular sonic environment; a soundscape marked by quiet removal from the din of the city that the suburbs try so hard to separate themselves from. Suburbs also attempt to reiterate ideas of “middle-classness” or within some standard of averageness. The disruption and annoyance caused by plane noise near HPN does not fit into the expectations of “quiet” suburban life and, perhaps, this *annoyance* may be further contextualized as the incompatibility of these socio-historically positioned suburban aural expectations and the sonic reality of low, loud, and frequent aircraft noise.

As introduced previously, the public problem of noise near HPN has been marked by suspicion of both residents by officials and officials by residents. In thinking back to the 1982 NASA conference on Airport/Community Noise and the county airport manager’s claim that “we live, breathe, and may be destroyed by the issue of noise. Everything we do at the airport is controlled by noise... our problem is the public’s perception of the role of the airport and what

might be considered to be reasonable noise exposure limits within the community”, it is important to know that this statement was prefaced by the reminder that “the area surrounding the airport is primarily a very high class, residential area, and this is the area that our aircraft overfly” (NASA 1982, 2). In reiterating the airport-adjacent communities’ affluence before emphasizing the problem of noise or that “if we fill a pothole on an access road, someone in the neighborhood will complain that we’re improving the character of the airport”, the officials are positioning the problem of noise as an almost irrational and unsolvable problem rooted in entitled “very high class” local anti-noise arguments-- that the residents are not acting out of “genuine” problems with noise but rather protecting their own financial and social interests: their homes and expected suburban lifestyles (NASA 1982, 2). This trend of officials using the affluent positions of concerned local residents has come to shape the ways in which the public problem of noise is handled-- from abatement to press conferences there always seems to hang traces of class-based suspicion. For example, a January 2020 Patch.com article regarding the FAA open house in Chappaqua included a statement made by John Ravitz, the vice president of Business Council of Westchester, a pro-airport advocacy group, saying that “one of the things we have always stressed and have continued to stress was if there are *legitimate* (emphasis added) noise complaints they should be addressed”. Ravitz continues, reminding residents and readers that “the amount of noise complaints can't be taken at face value, because there have been more than 1,000 calls a month from two or three households” (Taliaferro 2020). While the class discourse isn’t as explicit here, the suspicion of local anti-noise pushback that Ravitz is echoing in emphasizing the need for *legitimate* complaints to be addressed is rooted in the explicit ideas present in the 1982 NASA workshop: the affluence of local adjacent communities produces

grounds for suspicion, that complaints and other forms of pushback could easily be entitled or irrational responses to “an asset to the county’s economy” (Taliaferro 2020).

On the other end, concerned residents have also come to use class as a rhetorical device, though in significantly different ways. In this regard, class is used in two ways: the first way is using class to emphasize residents’ implication in the airport, that residents understand the functions and benefits of the airport and participate in them. The second, and most frequently used class argument is one that attempts to position residents as victims subject to the noise of an elite corporate class flying general aviation planes into and out of the airport. The first point, the implicated ally, was brought to my attention most clearly at the October 23, 2019 Airport Advisory Board meeting in which the results of the HMMH noise study would be presented. At one point a resident in the crowd was trying to make some counter arguments regarding certain noise data, but before he made such claims about his annoyance and experience, he prefaced his statement by essentially saying “look, I know we all use the airport to get to our summer homes, but...”. In prefacing his argument with this, the gentleman is trying to show those at the meeting that he knows many are implicated in the airport processes that are often complained about (using the airport to go to summer homes, for generally privileged uses) and explicitly tries to create a level playing-field in which class or access isn’t necessarily a point of difference and the arguments leveled by officials at the airport are acknowledged. This may be a response to the airport’s suspicion of noise pushback, but also may be a different use of class in this context, one that attempts, to some degree, to acknowledge local participation or reliance.

The most often used class discourse, though, is one which emphasizes a very visible difference in who is producing the noise and who is disturbed, annoyed, or concerned by said

noise. As HPN is the busiest business airport in the country, due to the suburban corporate landscape that has come to shape Westchester County, most of the planes flying in and out of the airport are private corporate jets. The result of this is that frequently, especially in the various aforementioned FaceBook groups concerning noise, arguments are made that refer to the “1%” and the various corporate elites producing violent effects on HPN-adjacent communities. A comment from September 2019, reads “The 1% travels differently than the rest of us Just another example of extreme wealth inequalities...”. Another poster from October 2019 asks if they're the “only one going insane with this constant war zone feeling overhead?”. One post From February 2019 says “This is what a ‘noise ghetto’ looks like. 12 planes in 24 minutes...” and is accompanied by a screenshot of a flight tracking map of HPN airspace. Although the term was borrowed from some other article regarding London’s Heathrow airport, the use of ‘ghetto’ to describe concentrated areas of noise inadequately describes the situation, and adds confusing social/economic/cultural connotations, continuing the trend of positioning residents in distinct opposition to, or as victims of, the corporate elite. However, given the cultural, racial, or derogatory connotations of the word ‘ghetto’ and the relative affluence of airport adjacent communities, this statement highlights the ways in which class is used as a rhetorical device and not necessarily considered as a material condition with material consequences, especially for those with less resources and agency than HPN adjacent residents. While there is certainly a difference to be made between upper-middle class suburban communities and corporate executives who own/charter private aircraft, what happens is that the public problem of noise becomes framed around these class dynamics while not necessarily acknowledging the particular economic demographic of the HPN adjacent communities or the larger structural

processes/effects of air-transportation or global capitalism that make these discussions useful.

This becomes important when the public problem of noise near HPN is viewed through a lens of environmental justice, something that indirectly comes up a lot in talking about the public problem of noise and will be focused on in the next section.

The public problem of noise in communities near the Westchester County Airport is locked in a rhetorical situation in which the relative affluence of the surrounding communities is on one hand used by the county and other officials as reasons to view pushback as suspicious and entitled and on the other hand, used by local residents to position themselves as both implicated allies as well as victims to a wealthier corporate class. When officials route their inability to maintain the airport through the entitled affluence of adjacent communities, the puck stops there and no real attempts are made at working through this tense or suspicious scenario. In positioning pushback arguments around class, concerned residents, who inhabit a relatively affluent economic bracket, craft a situation in which they are victims to an elite corporate class flying private planes in and out of the airport. These arguments are also framed around violence and war-- furthering the idea that residents are, like those in literal warzones, in fear for their lives, their health, or their futures. Because these arguments use language of war, violence, and oppression, it becomes difficult to criticize pushback efforts, as there is the notion that one is negating an experienced violence. In doing so, residents do not have to reflect on their own economic standing and the implications of that affluence when their arguments refer to justice and environmental justice, because they are subject to the violent imposition of the “1% ers” who use the airport and thus produce noise the most.

C. Environmental Justice in Affluent Communities

The public problem of noise near HPN, as established, is a highly contested and performative space rooted in class, geography, economics, data, subjective experience, etc. While the discourse that defines the public problem of noise uses class as a rhetorical device, conversations also become framed around ideas of justice. I go one step further and in this section frame the public problem of noise in relation to environmental justice, as the public problem of noise is very much a spatial/environmental problem. Through this framing, there are several points of concern to be addressed, but I would also like to briefly explore what environmental justice might actually look like near HPN, or to what degree environmental justice may be applied to affluent communities.

Justice comes out a lot in conversation regarding noise near HPN and plane noise more generally. One national anti-noise public FaceBook group is even called Sky Justice. What does justice mean when thinking about noise, especially in wealthy suburban communities? There are several genuine areas of concern at the Westchester County Airport beyond noise, the most pressing being centered around contamination of the public water in/near the Kensico Reservoir by toxic PFOS and PFOA (used in firefighting foam) chemicals, an issue that became of significant importance in January 2018 when wells near the airport and reservoir were found to be contaminated with levels over EPA guidelines but continues to this day (Wang 2018). However, when these problems get framed in terms of justice by local anti-noise residents (as well as environmental justice), the arguments generally fall short of the ideas embedded within

environmental justice discourse and tend to lack structural change and sometimes take on a NIMBY approach.

Environmental justice can be defined as “the concern that many poor and nonwhite communities bear a disproportionate burden of risk of exposure to environmental hazards compared to white and/or economically higher class communities” (Haught 2011 ,1). It is a “political ecology, stressing the power relations, inequalities, connections, and contradictions that join natural and social processes over time” (Williams 2001, 409). Relative to both the natural and social, environmental justice movements chart both the histories of ecological displacements and racial/social inequalities within these displacements and look for ways to decolonize and redistribute environmental attention. For example, Brett Williams’ 2001 *A River Runs Through Us* explores the ways that Washington D.C.’s Anacostia River “has drifted past the shifting populations who have lived along its banks. Linked transformations in environment and social processes have created unsettled, contradictory, and unjust relations between people and the natural and built environment... because contradictions are always there, and change is always coming” (Williams 2001, 409-410). In a more specific look at environmental justice, Melissa Checker’s 2011 *Wiped Out by the “Greenwave”* looks at the ways in which environmental gentrification (the production of green spaces and green lifestyles which appeal to elitist ideas of livability) builds on discursive successes of the environmental justice movement and “appropriates them to serve high-end development” (Checker 2011, 210). Checker explores the ways in which Harlem “housed most of Manhattan’s environmental burdens... but had far fewer amenities than other borough neighborhoods”, specifically in relation to the construction of a high-end green development. What environmental justice makes clear is that movements

that deal with environmental concerns necessarily have to approach the situation from a critical perspective in order to make any claims to justice. When the public problem of noise near HPN becomes framed in terms of justice, the situation should be considered through a lens of environmental justice.

While the anti-noise pushback groups understand that HPN is cause for many environmental concerns, and is understood to some as a problem of environmental justice, these discussions only focus on the environmental aspect-- not embedding HPN and surrounding communities within a larger socioeconomic context. Part of this is because the environmental concerns are the most experienced; one would most likely experience and react to noise or polluted air faster or more urgently than understanding social contexts and relations. However, for the public problem of noise near HPN to be critically effective, the movement needs to address these contexts and situate itself within a larger environmental history. When focusing only on local concerns such as noise, water, or air pollution, these movements “eclipse the long-standing issue of unequally distributed environmental burdens... in low income neighborhoods and communities of color” (Checker 2011, 214). What makes this focus on social contexts even more difficult here is that these social inequalities are less visible in suburban Westchester. This may be due to the aesthetic production of the landscape mentioned by Nancy and James Duncan, or perhaps because of the high cost of living in a corporate suburban environment; regardless, looking at this in relation to unequally distributed environmental burdens expands and shifts courses of action. Using ideas relating to environmental justice without structural critique and change unfairly sets up these campaigns for a falling short.

What might environmental justice look like within the public problem of noise at HPN? As previously explained, the anti-noise pushback groups are very aware and critical of environmental pollution caused by the airport and often posit ideas of justice, but rarely ever attempt to position the situation in relation to the larger issues around unequal distribution of environmental burdens. One result of this focus on the environmental and suburban standards of livability without the critical framework of environmental justice is that arguments sometimes appear to take on a NIMBY approach in which these problems are only problems because of residents' proximity to them and that noise or air pollution from aircraft may not have been considered if it wasn't happening there, or will cease being a problem if goals are met. An environmental justice approach would consider the status of other airport-adjacent communities and the ways in which other communities bear a disproportionate environmental burden not present near HPN. In her 2016 dissertation relating to airport-adjacent communities in a number of states and cities in the U.S., *Pushback in the Jet Age...*, Victoria Woodburn concludes that "general demographic and socioeconomic trends suggest a vulnerable power dynamic, where airport-adjacent communities are increasingly surrounded by historically marginalized groups over time" (Woodburn 2016, 184). One way of thinking about this is considering what may happen if flights are reduced at HPN. While the public problem of noise may be temporarily resolved, that "warzone like" air traffic would potentially be redistributed to other New York regional airports with adjacent communities that have less power or resources to push back in the ways that may have worked at HPN. It seems more effective, then, to think about this problem structurally as well as locally. Planning must consider both short-term local effects but also long-term, structural, racial, or social effects as well. This may have to involve restructuring

economies to be less reliant on the global air-transportation system, but it is a potential way that the public problem of noise near the Westchester County Airport may be addressed.

One final, more theoretical approach developed by Anja Kanngieser would be to think about the distribution of environmental burdens beyond the human, on an ecological scale, while also highlighting the social, racial, or economic inequalities within the human sphere. I would like to briefly combine her thoughts on imperceptibility and the commons and relate them back to the public problem of noise. Kanngieser notes that sound “calls for a different realization of time, whether a deep time or atemporality” or acts as a “way of building the different ecologies necessary for political attenuations to forms of life and matter” and that through pushing away a sense of oneself, “it might be possible to become sensitive to that which humans have no claim to, or over, and to which humanity is of no concern” (Kanngieser 2015, 3). This making the imperceptible perceptible allows for a more ecological, geophilosophical approach to the commons, an approach that “renders apparent that the world is not for humans. The world is rather with humans” and that the commons must be approached with “a keen sensitivity to polyphony” (Kanngieser 2015, 4). Not only does the environmental justice approach require acknowledging and repairing unequal distribution of burdens among humans, it also requires the understanding that the anthropocentric hierarchies which we are embedded do not apply universally and our sounds and environmental relationships have different kinds of effects, both perceptible and imperceptible, on different organizations of life.

Through appropriating ideas rooted within environmental justice but not critically contextualizing the problem within a larger structural social context, there comes a perverse interpretation of environmental justice where only the immediate environment is of concern.

While there are many possible reasons for this, including the fact that environmental issues are the most locally immediate, Checker, Williams, and Kanngieser emphasize the importance of grounding environmental justice within the social and within the unequal distribution of environmental burdens. In tracing a few ways in which environmental justice concepts could be more accurately applied to the situation at HPN, I hope to bring attention to the ways in which the public problem of noise could expand its focus in a more structural way that is aligned with the ideas of environmental justice often used when commenting on the problem of noise. The affluence of the adjacent communities and small load of environmental burdens does not render the problem of noise null-- the noise is still very much real-- but rather requires a heightened class consciousness and wider social context so that solutions at HPN do not create any more devastating problems in other less affluent communities.

Recording Project: Runway 34

While I was researching and writing this project, I was also engaged in a recording project for independent study credit. I spent a lot of my time recording the soundscapes in the wooded areas around the Blind Brook on the east side of the Purchase College campus, including the many planes that constantly pass overhead. So much of my research was framed around the idea that annoyed residents felt that the way that they hear/experience plane noise is different, or at least cannot be represented by, the “official” data produced by noise monitors and algorithmic mapping programs. Although I argue that this annoyance and demand for ‘justice’ are very particular conditions rooted in class and other related expectations, there is also a very real and

powerful force that is disorienting and overwhelming in the experience of a loud, low passing plane that I wanted to think about. *Runway 34* is in part a way for me to establish my position within the site as someone who was there, manipulating and recording.

[Runway 34](#) is the culmination of this recording project. In the piece, I take my turn sticking a microphone to the sky, producing a critical ethnographic field recording; I am not trying to present anything objectively, audio gets distorted and time seems to operate differently. As the plane rips through the atmosphere, whining or screaming from displacing air, it demands to be heard. The moment drags on as we wait in anticipation for its passing and like that, the birds, construction equipment, and wind gently fill the quiet produced in the wake of the aircraft. Time-stretched aircraft with other effects emphasize the ‘annoying’ or ‘disturbing’ qualities often attributed to them. There are moments when the passing plane peaks, going beyond the input of the microphone, unpleasantly delivering a wall of sound. Other times, though, there are longer stretches of unedited sound that naturally fade in and out of passing aircraft. The sounds of passing planes have become part of this sonic environment as well as agents of scrambling disruption.

When making this piece, I was thinking about a lot of the topics touched upon within the textual project. First, I was thinking about the soundscape and its relationship to anthropological processes and field sites as well as the soundscape in relationship to contemporary listening practices and geopolitics. In *Soundscape: Toward a Sounded Anthropology*, a case is made that the soundscape, particularly the recorded soundscape, when understood and positioned in a way that contextualizes it as dislocated and cultural, has the potential to “materialize sounds, their interrelations, and their circulation, much as Urban (1991) argues for the materiality of

discourse” and that “Critical discussion of field recordings, soundscape recordings, and sound art projects as ethnographic endeavors along with the rapidly expanding literature on studio production practices, circulation processes, ethnographies of listening, the poetics of the voice, and the politics of globalization in relation to expressive culture offers anthropology a possible path toward a reflexive aural turn” (Samuels et al 2010, 338-339). In *Runway 34*, I hoped to produce an ethnographic field recording that claims no objectivity and is distorted and emphasized in ways that relate to the particular experience of a passing plane event in the field and the annoyance/disturbance residents and informants claim to experience in all its exaggerated and distorted ways. Since these exaggerations are relative to certain positions, in terms of spatial location and class, the standardized data-producing noise monitors are not designed to produce and present noise data that is relative to concerned residents’ expressed experiences.

Furthering this concept of critical ethnographic soundscape, I was thinking about Anja Kanngieser’s piece *Geopolitics and Anthropocene: Five Propositions for Sound*, specifically the appeal for “sound to be considered as a geophilosophical provocation to, and a method for, political thought” and that thinking of sound and soundscapes in this way “positions the sonic as a means for opening spaces that challenge hegemonic and violent forms of subjectivation, which are productive of contemporary states of ecological and economic crisis” (Kanngieser 2015, 1). In *Runway 34*, the distorted sounds of passing planes mixes with other less manipulated re-presentations of the sonic environment in a way that emphasizes the power of the experience and allows a discussion of certain forces and processes behind these sounds without necessarily

falling into the sonic material purity often associated with ‘changing’ soundscapes or mechanical sounds within ‘natural’ soundscapes.

In short, *Runway 34* is my attempt at producing a critical ethnographic field recording. Not necessarily just a supplement to the written project, but a critical materialization and temporalization of the sonic experiences I recorded and that the public problem of noise near HPN is centered around. This listening is particularly useful when referring back to ideas of environmental justice and that without being critical of the problem of plane noise structurally, these noises (and all expressed annoyance, disturbance, terror, damage) would simply be distributed elsewhere, perhaps somewhere with less agency or resources to fight against noise. *Runway 34*, if anything, is an extension of the invitation and appeal to critically incorporate and understand the soundscape as a new site of potential analysis and meditation within anthropological and other exploratory practices.

Link to Runway 34

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nInpfbJAiSE>

Conclusion

The public problem of noise near HPN is an ever-changing scenario involving global movements of people and capital, suburban New York communities, science and technology studies, sound studies, bureaucracy, and a wide range of other processes highlighted in this paper. In framing the public problem of noise around ideas of ‘annoyance’ or ‘livability’, we can see the ways in which the problem of noise is associated with very specific and elitist ideas and

expectations of how a suburban environment should operate and sound. When residents argue that the problem of noise is simply a violent imposition by an even wealthier class of CEOs and other executives, locals are creating a scenario in which their affluence, which should be considered, bears little to no importance on the matter because wealthier individuals are carelessly and violently disturbing suburban homeowners on the ground. When these arguments are made, things like suburban sonic expectations and particular social histories fall to the wayside of the “war zone” that is created on the ground.

As a result of these arguments made by residents and reactions by airport officials, suspicion and different ways of documenting/representing community noise on both sides has marked the public problem of noise, positioned as two oppositional knowledge bodies: with a purely local experiential model as well as an official hybrid planning model-- a high modernist local knowledge. Beyond this high-modernist local knowledge, concerned residents actively refer to the need for justice; environmental justice as well as justice in relation to the corporate elites who disturb and annoy residents. When calls for environmental justice are made by concerned residents, there must be a critical understanding of what environmental justice means. It becomes clear that problems dealing with ideas of environmental justice require a structurally critical framework that positions HPN and adjacent-communities within a larger social and historical context that isn't necessarily present in the current discussions around noise. The use of class as a rhetorical device that positions residents as victims is antithetical to their calls for environmental justice, because this victimization is not situated within a larger context that understands the privileges afforded within affluent economic brackets. This is not downplaying the reality of loud and low planes, but it necessarily requires a shift that positions the problem of

noise, listening, and suburbia within proper critical historical contexts, something that I did not find in my research. *Runway 34*, then, may act as an exploration of the reality of loud and low planes, the sonic experience of my fieldsite as well as a critical ethnographic field recording.

The public problem of noise at HPN is, to this day, a growing local concern. The COVID-19 pandemic emphasizes this real-time concern; early on in the spread within the United States, an employee at HPN contracted the virus. This is particularly interesting in relation to the ways in which global transportation systems speed up the spread of these deadly viruses and HPN's participation within said global systems. Furthermore, county executive George Latimer announced in late April that the airport will be shutting down for a month in order to expedite a runway repaving project that was supposed to last four months. It will now be finished in one. HPN is the first commercial airport in the nation to close its doors entirely (Negroni 2020). While this may offer some temporary silence, residents are increasingly concerned that these improvements may result in higher frequency of planes or shifted flight paths. The airport is greatly benefiting from COVID-19 in that these projects can be quickly completed, meetings can migrate online, and the airport's smaller runway can remain open to accommodate any flights that absolutely need to land. This is important because it shows that the work regarding resolving and talking about public problems of noise is not nearly done-- it is a constantly shifting target that requires critical readjustments and moments of contemplation, moments that haven't happened at HPN as of yet. It is a situation ripe with contradictions and blind spots which need to be considered from a perspective of environmental justice as well as other social histories because, as Brett Williams says, "contradictions are always there, and change is always coming." (Williams 2001, 409-410)

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