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Review: AudibleRVA

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Project

AudibleRVA

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Project URL

<http://audible-rva.org>

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Project Overview

Andy McGraw

AudibleRVA is a digital humanities project that explores the soundscape of Richmond, Virginia. Begun by music faculty at the University of Richmond in 2013, ongoing projects are organized along several themes: “Live Music,” “Infrastructure,” “Education,” “Soundscapes,” “Noise,” and “Carceral Soundscapes.” Content includes material developed collaboratively by faculty and students.

The project’s core humanistic claim is that what Carl Kean calls a community’s ethical life is partly expressed through the allocation of sonic “goods,” including access to music making and listening and musical infrastructure (venues, schools, stores). We ask: How does access to such sonic goods—and the right to make and be free from “noise” — express and reproduce a society’s political theory and ethics? Whose sounds are muted? We aren’t concerned here with normative definitions of noise, sound, or music, but opportunities for sonic *eudaimonia*, or flourishing. Who in Richmond is extended the opportunity to flourish through sound, and how is sound policed to restrict flourishing?

We understand sound as a modality through which a public organizes itself, making it a fundamental means through which residents express inclusion and exclusion, mark territory, and constitute normative citizenship. We are inspired by contemporary urbanists like Mindy Fullilove, who approach cities as holistic systems, describing them in terms of ecosystems or bodies. In this view, a particular region or component of a city cannot be fully understood in isolation from the broader community. Performing, studying, and listening to music can help build up what Eric Klinenberg calls a community’s social infrastructure, while sounds deemed noise might indicate tensions

in the community that need addressing. Similar to the way that physicians use a stethoscope to listen for signs of health or indications of disease in a body, the AudibleRVA project is intended to act as a kind of stethoscope through which to understand the state of Richmond as a civic body.

The AudibleRVA website includes embedded maps (constructed in ArcGIS and Carto), ethnographies (archived in OHMS), audio and audio analysis (developed in Sonic Visualizer), and images and graphs (developed in Voyant and SPSS). A [custom web scraper](#) collects digital music listings, archiving them in an embedded map. The project is partly an exploration of what humanities faculty at a small undergraduate institution can reasonably accomplish without extensive institutional support, funding, or specialized training. We have found that many of the digital humanities tools now available for free or with standard institutional accounts enable humanities scholars to develop robust digital humanities projects in collaboration with students.

AudibleRVA is directed by Andy McGraw, Associate Professor of Music at the University of Richmond, and includes content produced by music department faculty and undergraduate students enrolled in multiple music and anthropology courses at the university. McGraw is an ethnomusicologist by training and has conducted extensive research in Southeast Asia and Central Virginia, focusing on music as an ethical practice and form of social infrastructure. The project is directed towards a general audience but is of especial interest to practitioners and audiences in Richmond's music scene.

Project Review

Imani Mosley

What does it mean to flourish *sonically*? Is it possible to use music, sound, and noise to examine if an urban life is well lived? These questions are at the heart of AudibleRVA, a digital humanities project aimed at studying the sonic landscape of the Richmond, Virginia area. The language on the website's homepage is not solely relegated to the sonic but to the philosophical and to the *ethical* as well. AudibleRVA is concerned with the intersection of the sonic and the social, made apparent in the project's opening credo:

The project's core assumption is that a society's ethical life is partly expressed through the allocation of sonic "goods," including access to music making and listening and musical infrastructure ... How does access to such sonic goods—and the

right to make and be free from “noise” —express and reproduce a society’ s political theory and ethics?

The idea of a sonic ethics is not new; many have been concerned with the concept of ethical listening and music-making. But AudibleRVA takes that idea a step further by connecting it to infrastructure, in all senses of the word—using music, sound, and noise to assess the making and upholding (and in some cases, destruction) of community and social structures. This assessment is done through comprehensive data visualization and mapping. AudibleRVA’ s goal is embodied in their use of the word *eudaimonia*, pulled from Aristotelian theory here to mean “flourishing” (hence this review’ s opening question). Positing *eudaimonia* as both a starting point and a goal, AudibleRVA creates the space to ask questions about who is included and excluded from various types of (sonic) infrastructure: “Who in Richmond is extended to the opportunity to flourish through sound, and how is sound policed to restrict flourishing?” For those versed in civil issues such as redlining and tree equity, this question may sound familiar. Here, music, sound, and noise are seen as indicators of a thriving urban space & access to them or lack thereof identifies inequities.

The website is broken up into various sections including “Carceral Soundscapes,” “Infrastructure,” “Noise,” “Soundscapes,” and “Ethnographies.” “Carceral Soundscapes” is perhaps the most timely part of the site. Highlighting surveillance in one section, it focuses on Richmond in the summer of 2020, motivated by the protests taking place at the city’ s Confederate monuments in the wake of George Floyd’ s murder in Minneapolis and the renewed focus on the removal of Confederate monuments across the country. Tracking the way the police used weaponized sound during the protests (helicopters, flashbangs, etc), they use data visualization to display the impact of sound used by the state against its citizens, recalling the work of Suzanne Cusick, Noriko Manabe, and others.

Overall, the project thoroughly and captivantly evaluates the sonic health of Richmond and its citizens as a way to examine how to better serve, repair, and restore one’ s community. By treating sound as a public good, AudibleRVA, through data visualization and analysis, is able to show Richmond’ s path to *eudaimonia* in real time.