

The Soundscape of American Hyperincarceration

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ABSTRACT: In this paper I situate the Richmond city jail within the highly racialized context of contemporary American hyperincarceration. I describe the ways in which the sounds of suffering were muted in the transition from the old city jail to a new, “cutting edge” facility in 2014. I discuss the music that residents have produced in both facilities and conclude by arguing that the contemporary jail is only one component of several interlocking structures that sonically segregates Richmond’s majority African American population from its minority Anglo-American population. Studying carceral soundscapes represents a political intervention by bringing into the public auditorium the sounds of suffering that have been muted both within and without penal institutions.

KEYWORDS: incarceration, jail, suffering, soundscape, noise, African-American, hip-hop.

Following an invitation by the Sheriff to perform in the Richmond Virginia city jail in 2013, I began volunteering weekly music sessions in the facility and organized the donation of a mobile recording studio in July of that year. At that time inmates were housed at the old Richmond City Jail (RCJ), built in 1964 to hold a maximum of 600 residents; by 2012 the facility was housing up to 1300 residents in overcrowded conditions. In late 2014 the residents were transferred to a new facility, the Richmond City Justice Center (RCJC), built adjacent to the old facility, which has since been demolished. The new facility is a total surveillance state designed to accommodate 2000 residents. Rather than being housed in overcrowded dormitories, as in the old facility, inmates in the RCJC reside in small cells built within six “behavior modification pods” each staffed by a deputy at a touchscreen.

This paper traces the sonic consequences of the shift from the old to the new facility. The new RCJC is a properly neoliberal space shaped by the massive changes in technology, society, labor and incarceration America has experienced since the old jail was constructed in the ‘60s. First I situate the Richmond jail within the highly racialized context of contemporary American hyperincarceration. I then describe the soundscape of the old facility, which was marked by the audibility of human suffering. In the new facility technology and architecture combine to mute the sound of suffering. I describe the studio program and the music residents have produced in both facilities. I conclude by arguing that the contemporary jail is only one component of several interlocking structures that render Richmond’s majority African American population largely inaudible to its minority Anglo-American population.

1. Incarceration in the United States

My experience in the Richmond city jail conforms to Irwin’s (1985) description of the jail as a particular kind of social tool rather than an effective deterrent for serious crime. Its residents are primarily refugees of job precarity and dispossession. Many are addicts or have mental disabilities. The historic capital of the confederacy, Richmond’s post-civil-war history is pockmarked by a series of racist housing policies and attempts to extend Jim Crow laws. This included race-based grading of property values through the Home Owners Loan Corporation, racist zoning and “redlining” procedures employed by the Federal Housing Administration and the use of public housing projects to further segregate populations. In the 1930s, Virginia’s “racial integrity laws,” which prohibited interracial marriage, were used to segregate neighborhoods by disallowing a person from living in an area whose residents he or she could not marry. The Nazi’s borrowed these policies to develop their own Aryan purity laws.

The Richmond City Jail was built in the same era and immediately adjacent to the low-income housing intended for the black communities displaced when the construction of interstate 95 destroyed their historic neighborhoods and business centers, primarily

in the Jackson Ward area, known for decades as the “Black Wall Street” for its high concentration of African American-owned banks and businesses. The Civil Rights Movement succeeded in enacting the 1968 Fair Housing Act, which opened some suburbs to non-white populations. In practice this largely furthered the already ongoing process of “white flight” out of the city, towards the west, further depleting Richmond of its tax base. As outlined in Figures 1–3, the legacy of racist housing is still clearly operative in Richmond (cf. Silver 1984). Figure One shows median income; the jail (indicated by “+”) is at the center of the poorest area of the city, near the intersection of interstates 64 and 95, with wealth increasing towards the west. Income is highly correlated with race, as shown in Figure Two in which African-American neighborhoods essentially overlap with economically depressed neighborhoods. Finally, in Figure Three we see that unemployment density is also highly correlated with race and income. Built atop the ruins of slave shacks and down the street from the notorious Lumpkin’s Slave Jail,¹ the Richmond City Jail is located at the nexus of African American dispossession in Virginia and many of its residents hail from the adjacent low-income housing developments. In their conversation, poetry and song many members of the jail music program have referred to the jail as a “housing program.”

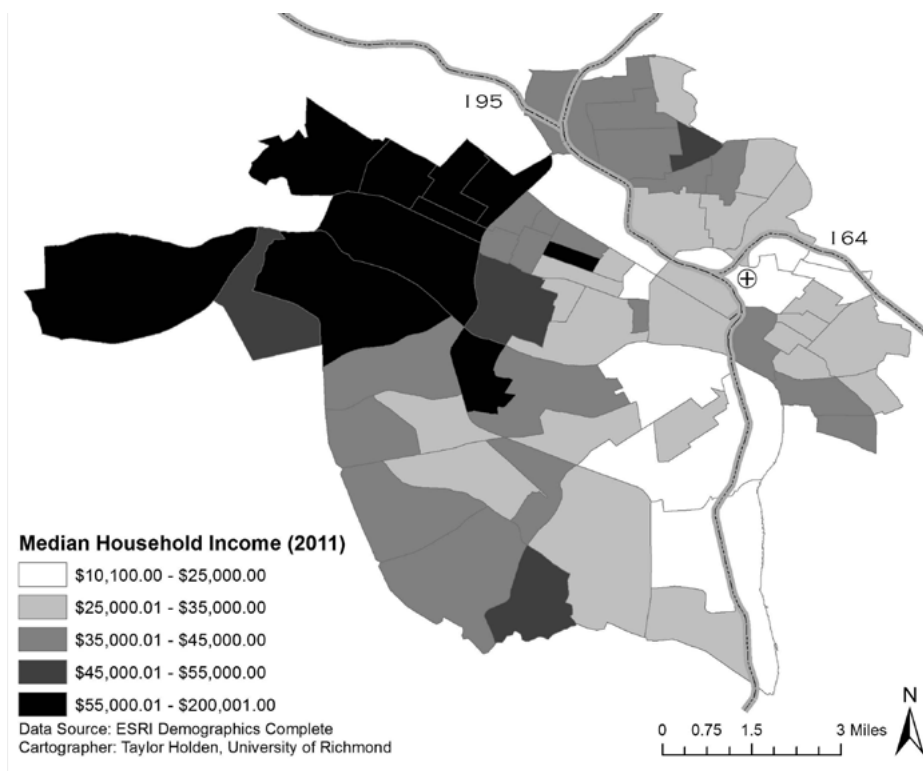


Figure 1. Richmond, VA. Median Income.

1. Prior to the Civil War, Richmond was home to the nation’s second largest slave market after New Orleans.

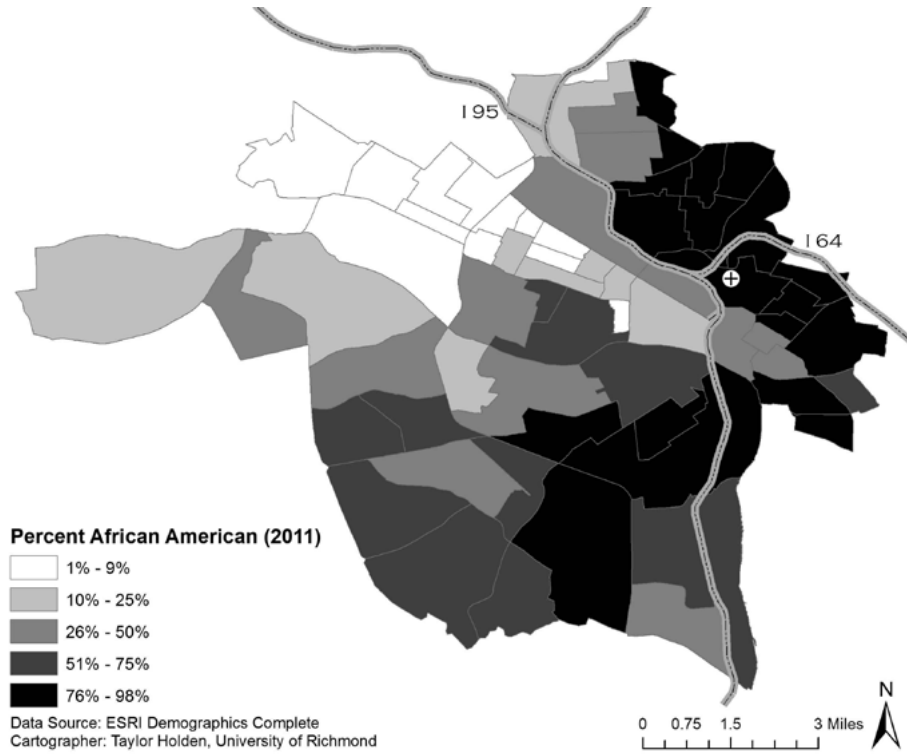


Figure 2. Richmond, VA. Percent African American Population.

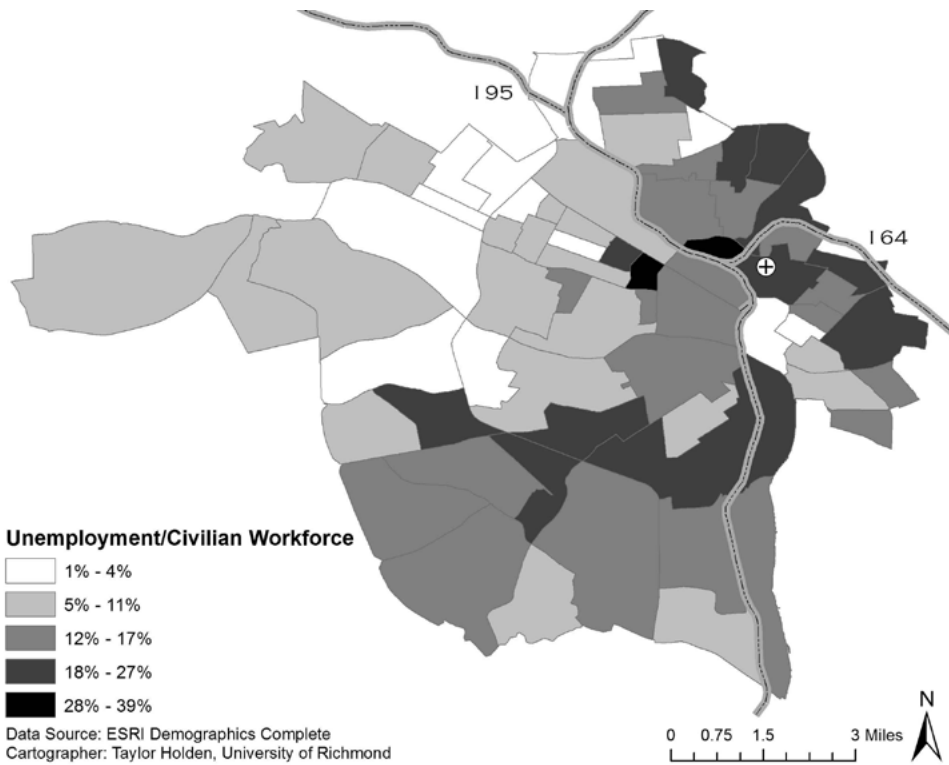


Figure 3. Richmond, VA. Unemployment.

2. Two Facilities

Dubbed the Sanctuary, the education room in the old RCJ was the only space not under constant surveillance. Here residents (men and women) studied together for their high-school equivalency test, took part in poetry and meditation workshops, read or performed and recorded music. As in its original meaning, the Sanctuary was a haven from the law itself, a respite from the dehumanizing and seemingly arbitrary cruelty of regulated life on the residential tiers. It was a space in which residents could engage in defining and creating a community.



Figure 4. Sanctuary. Photograph by John Dooley.

This space and the community that it catalyzed did not survive the transfer to the new RCJC facility in 2014. There is no longer a space or a community called the Sanctuary. Instead, education activities are temporarily held in one of many multi-purpose rooms. Men and women are no longer allowed to interact in any way and the population is fragmented and isolated through the use of individual cells constructed within small group pods. The studio is now assembled on a mobile cart. A maximum of five men at a time have access to it and only when I am in the jail, roughly two hours a week. Previously, residents had access to the studio for up to eight hours a day in the old sanctuary.

Incarceration in America is a form of sensory impoverishment. The soundscapes of both the old RCJ and the new RCJC are almost entirely composed of electronic or anthropogenic sound. When visiting the old RCJ guests passed through an aging magnetometer in the jail's entrance before proceeding through the first of a series of heavy steel doors to reach a

molded plastic bench in the cramped waiting area. Here visitors were immersed in the facility's booming, bass heavy soundscape, giving one the sense of being deep underground. In human audition, environmental sound is affective in Massumi's sense; it is registered prior to the activation of semantic, causal or cognitive listening; sound gets under our skin in ways we are hardly conscious of. The heavy thud of large metal doors swinging shut and of men walking in line, the constant clanging of Joliet keys and chains, large loud fans rather than air conditioning, unending chatter and shouting combined into a constant dull roar that seemed to produce an "affective jitteriness" (Goodman 2010:64) for most residents. Because of the difficulty of locating their sources, these constant low frequencies can produce an engulfing sense of disorientation and fear; it seems as if an attack could come from any direction.

In contrast, the shining lobby of the new RCJC is nearly indistinguishable from a modern airport lobby, with its numerous flatscreen televisions continuously broadcasting news and soap operas. A flat, non-resonant soundscape of amplified voices, buzzes, and beeps accompanies visitors as they are moved along through modern scanners, checkpoints and special gates separating them from residents. As one resident artist rapped: "NSA, TSA, RCJ, Inside, Outside; it's getting hard to tell the difference." In the RCJC a small fraction of the population – those who have displayed good behavior and are placed on the sixth floor where the music studio is located – have access to the external soundscape through open grills in the gym. Located in an industrial area near highway overpasses and train tracks, nearly all sound that enters these grills is anthropogenic. Occasionally residents report hearing crows.



Figure 5. Overcrowding in the Old City Jail. Photograph by Eva Russo.

Citing a Center for Disease Control report suggesting that overcrowding in the old facility represented a health threat to its population, the new facility was constructed around individualized cells. Although the official use of inhumane solitary confinement has been technically reduced in the new facility, isolation has become generalized through individual housing units and constant video and audio surveillance either by a human or, reportedly, software using behavior-matching algorithms. In the new facility each pod cell, housing one to four inmates, as well as all bathrooms, hallways and multipurpose rooms are continually monitored through video and audio surveillance devices, data from which is stored for an unknown period on hard-drive. Staff are unsure exactly how many cameras are in the facility, but all agree that the number is between 800–900. While objectively a safer space from an epidemiological perspective, the new facility is a site of extreme sensory impoverishment. The facility's pneumatic locks produce a rhythmic “fuh-fuh-fuh” sound as they automatically open and close in a pre-programmed order. Many residents describe this sound as “eerie” and “sci-fi;” they hear it in their sleep and it becomes the soundtrack to nightmares.

Ellis and Tucker describe the “affective atmospheres of surveillance” and their effect to produce “disruption, disfluency, and hesitation” in speech (2013:716). I frequently encounter effects of the surveillance atmosphere in the facility's recording studio. All residents know that any swearing or critique of staff may result in their being punished. When recording their rap, residents reflexively censor themselves or replace swears (crucial to the idiom) with bland alternatives. Many residents complain that the affective jitteriness they experience in the jail, its “heavy vibe,” interrupts their “flow” in ways they can't quite explain. The affective atmosphere of surveillance causes subtle interruptions and pauses in their performance that seems to occur on the borders of consciousness. Some performers are only aware of this when hearing the playback. According to one performer: “I can't flow in here like I could in the [RCJ] Sanctuary.” Casually listening to music (turned up to drown out the background sounds) and conversing as if we were on the “outside” for a period of time can help re-set the atmosphere conducive to establishing musical flow.

3. Hearing Suffering

How can we respond to pain if we cannot hear it? How can we abolish mass incarceration if we are unaware of its effects? Following Wacquant (2009) I argue that a combination of materialist and symbolic perspectives is needed to analyze the sonic experiences and expressions of incarcerated populations.

An overcrowded urban space, jails are typically louder than most prisons and penitentiaries, which are often placed in rural settings and incorporate an architectural style influenced by the original Quaker model and its ideal of penitential silence. In the old jail the sound of suffering in the form of crying, pleading, singing, rapping and chatter was nearly

omnipresent through the space's open acoustics. The wails of those going through drug withdrawal and enduring manic episodes were audible throughout the facility. The voluntarily organized sound of the Sanctuary defined the figure of its community against the noisy ground of the overall population.

In the corner of the waiting area in the old jail, two Access Corrections ATM machines constantly beeped while presenting a slide-show of images illustrating how visitors can deposit cash into inmates' accounts for a fee. Past these machines was a narrow visitation space, a row of eight thick Plexiglas windows with holes drilled through them.



Figure 6. Visitation in the Old City Jail. Photograph by Eva Russo.

There was no privacy in visitation. During my first visit I overheard a mother speaking in hushed tones to her husband through the glass. Their young son, about the same age as my mine, was oblivious to the concept of privacy and cried loudly for his father: “why can’t daddy come home now?!” Grown men in the adjacent waiting area, involuntary witnesses to this family’s pain, avoided each other’s glances as their eyes welled up. Similar scenes occurred frequently during visits to the old jail. In contrast, the architecture of the new facility makes hearing others’ suffering much less likely.



Figure 7. Visitation in the Richmond City Justice Center. Photograph by Daniel Sangjib Min.

Visitation in the RCJC is managed in a separate space in which visitors speak to residents – located on a separate floor – through screens placed in cubicles. Residents believed these conversations were recorded and monitored. Although I was unable to verify these claims, the fact that such technology is believed to be in place accomplishes the same result of self-surveillance.²

4. Music

Music existed in various forms in the Richmond City Jail prior to the establishment of the Sanctuary studio. For years, the institution’s religious services incorporated a gospel choir and impromptu rap was sometimes performed on the tiers. In the Sanctuary’s long-running poetry workshops, Hispanic residents often sang their poems with the accompaniment of a guitar donated to the Sanctuary years ago. However, because it incorporated easy to learn music software pre-loaded with hundreds of samples, loops and beats, the Sanctuary studio provided a musical outlet to a much wider community, beyond those with technical training in instrumental performance or singing. Within three months after being installed the studio’s hard drive was becoming overloaded and files had to be regularly downloaded to external drives to free up space. By this time the community had collaborated to draft a “music manifesto” that outlined their shared intentions and differentiated their musical activities from their active poetry program:

2. See also: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/29/opinion/a-virtual-visit-to-a-relative-in-jail.html?_r=0.

You can read our words as you wish to, but you might miss the purpose, the animation, the revolution in our voices. Our recordings invite you into our emotions, into the intimacy of sanctuary, where every word carries a piece of our souls. Sound communicates expression that words on a page can not. It allows us to emphasize meaning, to infuse layers of music and mood, to collaborate and create a memory that will live in a different kind of permanence.

The choice to create recordings empowers us to reach out in more ways than before, in dimensions previously untouched *. Hear the feeling toning through our voices. Embrace the rhythms of our hopes, loves, and struggles. we are throwing out our hearts to you. we are creating, giving, and sharing, so that you can relate. Does it strike a chord? Or does it strike your soul?

Figure 8. Sanctuary Music Manifesto.

Several residents produced tracks anticipating and reflecting on the shift from the old to the new facility, fearful of the dissolution of the Sanctuary community. “No Just-us” is representative of these.

I can feel wind blow
 bouncin' off bricks and through the window.
 I feel the breeze through my sheets.
 It sparks thoughts I can't let go.
 Thoughts of this new jail.
 where you won't feel the wind no more.
 They're callin' it the Justice Center.
 And to everyone who don't know yet,
 there won't be no Justice in it.

It'll be Just Us in it.
Inmates, residents or tenants.
Whatever you call it.
White, Black, Brown.
Men and Women.
Who nine-tenths of
didn't get a proper defense of
their cases
because of overworked public defenders who can't remember their faces.
And we are told to obey laws
that are so flawed.
How can a mother who injures her kids get bond
and bail be denied to people with a simple drug charge?
Oh. I forgot.
There is supposed to be a war on drugs.
But in the midst of
there's been a mix up
because the war is on us.
It's all over the paper, printed, the words
In God We Trust
And trust in God we must.
Because you can't trust the senate or the congress.
They're wolves in sheep's clothing, roaming amongst us.
And their disguises make it so easy for them to hunt us.
Who? The elected public officials, who push issues
That are no more than tissue
With shit on it.
Spit on it or flush the toilet.
The democrats sold it the republicans bought it.
Or vice versa, depending on whose in office.
We just elected the lesser of the two evils.
An olive branch and arrows clutched in the talons of eagles.
Symbols of a republic that don't truly represent its people.
So behold the pale horse. Of course.
A red one, a white one and a black stallion galloping
A sign that the apocalypse has come
So run.
Let's face it.

We have to face it.
 This new place is
 a newly thought-up high-tech form of incarceration.
 So why am I mad?
 I didn't catch this charge I chased it.

The Sanctuary in the old jail and the smaller studio program in the new jail engendered soundscapes of conversation, listening, intimacy, friendship and community against the alienating din in the old jail and the alienating anomie of the enforced silence in the new jail. Much of the music recorded in both facilities incorporates a distinctive reverb profile and equalization. Preferred reverb profiles are reminiscent of open, natural spaces such as forests. According to one resident artist: "It's my voice, but I don't sound like I'm in here." Preferred equalization is extremely bass heavy. More than high pitches, energetic bass frequencies makes one's presence known to others. Strong bass allowed musicians in the old jail's Sanctuary to penetrate the noise of the tiers and allows the musicians in the new facility to be heard through the thick walls separating inmates from each other.

5. Inaudible Richmond

Black Richmond is virtually inaudible to middle and upper class white Richmond. While this is the case in most American cities, sonic segregation between the communities is especially pronounced in Richmond. The city jail is one node within a network of interlocking structures that sonically segregates black and white Richmond. The first structure in this arrangement is the school to prison pipeline. More than any other state in America, Virginia criminalizes problematic youth behavior, locking up more than 10,000 juveniles every year – primarily African American young men. The state spends fifteen times more on incarcerating youth than educating them. At this rate one in three Virginian black men will be incarcerated some time in their lives.³

In addition to silencing this population by physically isolating them through incarceration, the high correlation between race and Richmond's municipal ordinances and permits pertaining to live music further mutes the community.⁴ Virginia's alcohol laws disallow the public consumption of mixed beverages outside of restaurants, meaning there are no bars in Richmond.⁵ All establishments selling any kind of alcohol (including beer and wine) must also meet a \$4,000/month food sales quota. As a result, most live music in the city is performed as the background to dining, restricting the kinds of music one tends to hear. The

3. <http://www.performingstatistics.org/the-project>

4. https://www.municode.com/library/va/richmond/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=CORIVI01

5. <https://www.abc.virginia.gov>

Alcohol and Beverage (ABC) permitting office may also restrict the types of music performed in an establishment applying for permits; according to city officials, hip-hop appears to be targeted for exclusion. In 2011 a special exception was made for microbreweries, which tend to attract middle and upper class white patrons and cater to their musical tastes. Many musicians and lawyers in town viewed this as race-based legislation, suggesting that older conservative legislators continue to fear “pandemonium” in black neighborhoods if bars are legalized.

Also in 2011 a strict dancehall ordinance was passed that requires venues to pay for special permits, a yearly fee and security if more than ten percent of its floor space is used for dancing. That same year the city passed a very restrictive sound ordinance in which sounds exceeding 55 dBA when measured inside of structures within residential zones are in violation of code and may result in citations. When we add to this the restrictive permitting and licensing of building codes for venues the cumulative result means that most musical activity within the city of Richmond is somehow illegal. The practical enforcement of these structures is determined by the whims of the police and therefore related to their implicit and explicit biases, which often correlate with race.

The Richmond City Jail is characteristic of the sonic urban identity of American hyper-incarceration. It is one component of a complex ecology of legal and social structures that sonically segregates Richmond’s black population from its white population and renders it inaudible to the structures of political power. These structures mute the sound of black political voices, black suffering and black joy. Understanding and explaining this soundscape represents a political intervention in which we can begin to imagine the sonic architecture of social change.

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