Quiet Comfort: Noise, Otherness, and the Mobile Production of Personal Space

Mack Hagood

All I could think about was, “My gosh, there must be some way of separating things that you don’t want from things that you want.”

—Amar Bose, Cancelling Noise

A series of white male faces appears on-screen, business “road warriors,” men of action facing the camera in their natural domain—the airport. With enthusiasm tempered by an almost solemn sense of wonder, each offers a one-word testimonial between crossfades: “Fantastic.” “Quality.” “Wow.” The object of their admiration, and the product on display in this advertisement, is the Bose QuietComfort Acoustic Noise Cancelling Headphones. Cut to another white businessman as he leans back in his airline seat, headphones on, eyes closed. The other passengers fade into nothingness, dematerialized by the magic of QuietComfort phase cancellation. In another Bose ad, a business traveler wearing headphones reads the newspaper in-flight as the surrounding air cabin fades into an abstraction, a white line drawing that suggests purity and stillness.

The United States–based Bose Corporation is the original developer and best-known marketer of noise-canceling headphones, which are designed to dramatically reduce the wearer’s perception of ambient sound. Conventional headphones use passive noise reduction, which blocks or muffles the passage of sound waves into the ear canal. Noise-canceling headphones add tiny microphones and signal processing to produce an out-of-phase copy of the aural environment in an attempt to negate its phenomenological existence. Bose QuietComfort and similar headphones have become increasingly popular since their introduction for consumer use in 2000 and are a common sight in airport electronics boutiques and on the ears of travelers. Reviewers and users affirm that the headphones offer clearer audio from portable media in noisy environments, but the devices’ marketing, reception, and history of development suggest that their primary function has more to do with conflicts of sound, space, and self in an increasingly mobile modernity.
Noise-canceling headphones offer air travelers not only the reduction of noise but also the production of personal space. The Babel of airport throngs and the roar of the jet engine exemplify the noise generated in a United States where space is reconfigured to maximize speed and circulation. Screaming babies and screaming turbines signal the fact that, even as we speed through the air toward our goals, our freedom is constrained by physical and social forces. Air travel is a moment in which people with diverse backgrounds, beliefs, and bodies crowd together in unusually close proximity. With the pure, white lines of its dematerializing air cabin and its fading fellow travelers, the Bose ad campaign offers the promise of turning physical spaces and others into phantoms—in effect, tuning our shared space and difference. In the face of the discomfort and forced togetherness of travel, people are encouraged to employ noise-canceling headphones as *soundscape devices*, carving out an acoustically rendered sense of personal space that Bose has marketed as “a haven of tranquility.”

In this article I use noise as a problematic to explore relationships between media technology, space, freedom, otherness, and selfhood in an era characterized by neoliberalism and increased mobility. Neoliberalism is the currently prevailing idea, famously espoused by Friedrich Hayek and associated in the United States with Ronald Reagan, that a global free market, unhindered by government regulation, is the ideal site for human self-actualization. Under neoliberalism, freedom is an individual matter, and relations with others that do not result from individual choice are seen to impinge on that freedom. The type of self constructed in this ideology has Western antecedents in the work of Adam Smith, René Descartes, and others who portrayed the self as a rational mind that deploys techniques and technologies in pursuit of individual goals.

But what does it sound like when such selves cross paths or crowd together in pursuit of their different goals? I argue that noise is the sound of individualism and difference in conflict. Noise is *othered sound*, and like any type of othering, the perception of noise is socially constructed and situated in hierarchies of race, class, age, and gender.

In what follows, I examine marketing, news reports, and reviews to show how Bose’s noise-canceling headphones are positioned as *soundscape devices*, essential gear for the mobile rational actor of the global market—the business traveler. Though the spaces of the air cabin and air terminal have been shaped for business travelers, representations of air travel and the discourse of business travelers indicate that they remain paradoxical spaces in which the pursuit of freedom impedes its own enjoyment. I show that, rather than fight the discomforts of air travel as a systemic problem, travelers use the tactic of *soundscaping* to suppress the perceived presence of others.

**Social Construction of Soundscape Technology**

The QuietComfort brand name conjoins the aural and the tactile—not to mention the aural and the psychological—into a single sign, connoting a quiet respite from physical and interpersonal entanglements. This technological fabrication of physical and psychological space through the aural is what I refer to in the term *soundscape*. Subjects have long been able to alter their personal soundscapes by closing a door or, more recently, by donning a pair of headphones. However, with noise-canceling headphones, *soundscaping* becomes an explicit and primary function in media technology, as the power button offers an (imperfect) on-off interface with the soundscape. It might be argued that this new form of *soundscaping* is merely a technological advance in the application of acoustical principles. However, a brief look at the historical context of QuietComfort’s development uncovers some of the ways that sociocultural beliefs and difference permeate the construction of sound, space, and media technology.

On May 19, 1978, Dr. Amar Gopal Bose (b. 1929), inventor, CEO, and majority stakeholder in the privately owned Bose Corporation, had just plugged a pair of headphones into an airplane armrest for the first time. While he had been excited to experience the sound of this new form of in-flight entertainment, he was disappointed by what he heard. The noise of the jet airplane forced him to turn up the headset volume to the point of distorting the classical music he had hoped to enjoy. “All I could think about was, ‘My gosh, there must be some way of separating things that you don’t want from things that you want,’” he later explained.² It was then that Bose took out a pen and paper and did the calculations that proved the possibility of active noise cancellation.

As an amateur classical violinist with a PhD in electrical engineering from MIT, Bose works at the intersection of the social worlds of music and science, bridging gaps between the cultural and functional expectations of each, and thus occupying the role that sociologists of science and technology have called the “go-between” or “intermediary.”³ Fusing expertise in both electrical engineering and psychoacoustics, Bose has proved particularly adept at designing products that utilize, alter, negate, or simulate the relationship people perceive between sound and space. Bose products that calibrate this relationship include small “Wave Radios” that are said to sound like much larger sound systems,
car audio systems that automatically change music equalization to compensate for road noise, and a computer system that produces acoustic simulations of aural spaces, allowing architects and others to “hear” a concert hall and speaker system before they build it.

However, the social worlds of music and science were not the only important cultural influences on Bose’s development as a designer of audio technology: he attributes much of his experimental drive to his early experience of racism. It seems poignant that Bose found a way to engineer sound to tune out difference in tight spaces, allowing for less friction and greater productivity, as Bose himself used audio technology to overcome racism and find empowerment in the global marketplace. The son of a white mother and a Bengali father, Bose grew up in the 1930s and 1940s in a white Philadelphia suburb. He spent much of his boyhood repairing radios in the basement, a refuge from the racist verbal and physical abuse he says awaited him on the street. In the black-and-white causality of acoustic equations on paper, Bose eventually found an idealized, predictive, and apparently raceless space. His work in fabricating space through sound stands as an example of the idealist spatial practices Henri Lefebvre describes, in which engineers and designers conceive and design space in a conceptual framework. By embracing this scientific rationalism, an idealist view that sees physical space as something to be abstracted, shaped, and perfected, Bose was able to reshape his social world as well. He left behind the neighborhood racism to become an MIT professor and the founder of a corporation with over eight thousand employees and more than $2 billion in annual sales.

As in the case of Apple’s Steve Jobs, journalistic accounts of the Bose Corporation often center on the figure of Amar Bose. Such “heroic individual” narratives make technological innovation a matter of individual excellence; like noise-cancellation technology, these narratives suppress the presence of numerous others to foreground the rationality, independence, and agency of the individual. Read in isolation, the Bose biography threatens to obscure the depth of the social inequities that make it so exceptional. Moreover, the rationalism that Bose used to overcome racism is not without its own racial history. The objectifying cultural turn of the European Enlightenment spawned colonialism and Orientalism, as well as modern science, and though they apply a rhetoric of objectivity, scientists and technologists are never “above” the politics of the social milieus from which they emerge. The historian of technology Rayvon Fouché, for example, alerts us to the racialized aspects of seemingly neutral technologies:

Technology is often thought of as a value-neutral “black box” for inputs and outputs. Critical studies of technology have opened the black box, but there are many hidden compartments that still need to be explored… We need to reassess and expand our study of technology to examine how racially marginalized people, such as African Americans, interact with technology… This is difficult because race and racism, in relation to technology, have always been hidden in a mysterious place of “unlocation.”

Fouché provides examples of African Americans who repurpose technology in ways that make black people more audible, visible, and empowered as a group. Bose, who was mistaken for—and persecuted as—an African American by whites, followed a different trajectory, finding his own individual technological empowerment by excelling in the white-dominated social worlds of academic and entrepreneurship, engineering expensive products for middle- and upper-class audiphiles.

More importantly, noise cancellation seems to have been socially constructed to effect a variation on Fouché’s “unlocating” of difference, employing ostensibly neutral technology to distance otherwise in the crowded, allegedly democratic spaces of modern travel. Bose noise-canceling technology was first used to diminish engine and wind noise in the two-way communications of pilots’ radio headsets, functioning as a communication-facilitating device. However, in Bose’s marketing for its one-way, retail headphones, “separating things that you don’t want from things that you want” takes on social as well as sonic significance. As seen in the fading passengers of its commercials, Bose markets the QuietComfort brand to consumers as an isolation—rather than communication—device. In particular, these headphones have caught on with those exemplars of neoliberal agency, Bose’s fellow business travelers.

Fine-Tuning Space for Circulation

Bose headphones’ popularity with business flyers is underscored by the tongue-in-cheek opening paragraph of a review in the flagship British edition of Business Traveller, a consumer magazine published in ten countries, including the United States:

On a recent trip to New York in business class, I realised that I didn’t fit in. I was wearing the same uniform as everyone else (either a suit, with no tie, or chinos and a blue shirt and jacket). I had the same traveler’s paunch, and I still got excited by the champagne selection in the lounge. But once on board, everyone pulled out a pair of noise-cancelling headphones. I had none. I was clearly an imposter and should find another cabin in which to travel.
Well-fed, dressed in masculine attire, discerning in matters of champagne and electronics, the “everyone” of business class presented here is far from diverse—and quite similar to the succession of road warriors who give their testimonials in the Bose commercial mentioned earlier. The market research firm Mintel reports that men are more than twice as likely as women to travel for business. The average air traveler is between thirty-five and fifty-four, college educated, and relatively affluent, possessing “the disposable income needed to pay for added convenience, comfort customization and lifestyle appeal.”

Indeed, the road warrior’s recent use of noise-cancellation to fabricate personal space is part of a longer history in which public space has been customized for his convenience, comfort, and tastes. The business traveler has become an important economic engine, market category, and recognizable social type for whom specialized magazines, websites, luggage, electronic devices, frequent flyer programs, and other products have been developed. Saskia Sassen points out the “uncontested claim” international business travelers have made on global cities, noting how they “have reconstituted strategic spaces of the city in their image,” creating homogenized and exclusive spaces of “airports, top level business districts, top of the line hotels and restaurants, a sort of urban glamour zone.” The spaces of the airport and airplane are also configured to include special areas for these first class, executive, or business passengers.

Such spaces are not, of course, democratic, but rather reflect the tastes and needs of the travelers they are meant to attract. Such travelers are, in fact, “at work” when in the airport or in the air and often expect—or are expected—to be productive at such times. In these spaces designed to promote the efficient and friction-free circulation of economic agents and capital, there is an effort to suppress the unfamiliar, idiosyncratic, and potentially uncomfortable. In short, any kind of difference, any deviation from the normative expectations of the mobile business class, including noise, may be perceived as counterproductive. In the airport and airplane, the forces of market capitalism render what Lefebvre calls abstract space, a type of space that “functions ‘objectally,’ as a set of things/signs and their formal relationships,” smoothing out natural, historical, and cultural differences that threaten to slow the flow of goods and capital.

But what does abstract space sound like? Over the years, postmodern theorists, critical geographers, media scholars, and others have described the condition of contemporary space as degraded by speed, illusion, abstraction, and visual distraction, but they have rarely framed the spatial problematic in terms of sound. Scholars working in sound studies, however, have shown that since the Enlightenment, sound, like space, has been rationalized and abstracted for exchange, circulation, and expansion. Emily Thompson, for example, has documented how a “culture of listening” that emerged in the early twentieth century led to changes in architectural design and building materials as designers tried to capture an idealized sound in built space for the purposes of aesthetics or productivity. And in his characteristically polemical style, R. Murray Schafer describes an “imperialist” and “synthetic” soundscape analogous to Lefebvre’s abstract space, as the microphone and loudspeaker alter the aural for the purposes of time-space compression and semiotic exchange.

We might add to these examples the sonic spaces designed for the road warrior. Like the visual aesthetics of interior design or the feel of leather chairs, aural architecture is an important aspect of environments tailored to business-class mobility. In his aural analysis of the Mall of America, Jonathan Sterne details the important role programmed music (Muzak) plays in the production of commercial spaces and the circulation within these spaces. The use of different types and volume levels of music in the mall’s hallways, stores, and parking lots builds, encloses, and divides the acoustical space, managing and coordinating the relations between different parts of the mall. “Music programs correspond to the demography of the Mall’s desired, rather than actual, visitors,” Sterne writes, noting, “the Mall desires an affluent (and usually white) adult middle-class population.” Airports, which have come to look more and more like upscale shopping malls, have in some ways come to sound like them as well. Listening to airports suggests that, regardless of the demographics of actual users, the mediated sounds found there skew toward the tastes of older, wealthier, and predominantly white listeners—be it CNN, classic rock, jazz, or new age music. Executive lounges represent even more rarified sonic spaces in which thick walls and acoustical tile block out the noise of the many in the terminal.

Filtering Out the Sound of Otherness

So why then, if the aural environment has in many ways been tuned for their ears, are business travelers so eager to tune it out with noise-canceling headphones? There are several reasons for this, many of which are tied to the successful proliferation of human and capital mobility under neoliberalism. First, not all sounds that are custom designed for a particular audience are designed to benefit those listeners. Sterne points out that in the use of programmed music, not only is music commodified—the listener’s response to that music is commodified and sold to store and mall owners by music programmers. Likewise, many of the sounds of the airport are designed to attract, distract, and open the traveler’s pockets, in effect trying to pull mobile subjects into human and capital flows that they may wish to resist. In the face
of the commodification of aural attention, soundscaping through headphones may function as a defensive tactic for travelers, creating a sonic refuge from what Margaret Morse calls “nonspace”—space that privileges exchangeability and convertibility above all else, reducing all things to signs and measuring all things according to exchange value.18

Second, business travel is not the only kind of air travel to expand since the 1970s. Much of the noise, crowding, and delay that characterize contemporary air travel are unintended consequences of neoliberal deregulation’s success in—to use the common conflation of consumption and political representation—“democratizing” air travel. Instituted in 1978 under Jimmy Carter, deregulation led to increased competition, drops in ticket prices, and the hub-and-spoke system of stopover (rather than direct) flights, which created greater cost efficiency but also cascading effects of delays in cases of bad weather or mechanical issues. The wisdom of air deregulation, with its mixed results of increased passengership, cheaper fares, industry destabilization, and customer dissatisfaction, is still debated,19 but ubiquitous news stories on holiday delays and “air rage” suggest that many flyers do not perceive their increased mobility as a source of freedom.

Despite their being molded in some ways for a privileged class of traveler, the air terminal and the air cabin are still strange spaces in which one is implicated in flows and stoppages not of one’s choosing. Modern transportation puts us in close proximity with diverse strangers while leaving the rules for interaction largely up to negotiation and interpretation. In such circumstances, it is little wonder that many people choose to retreat from sociality through books, newspapers, and media devices. Anne Tyler’s 1985 novel The Accidental Tourist contains the following prescient passages, which highlight soundscaping’s utility in minimizing contact between the business traveler Macon Leary and another passenger:

On the flight to New York, he sat next to a foreign-looking man with a mustache. Clamped to the man’s ears was a headset for one of those miniature tape recorders. Perfect: no danger of conversation. Macon leaned back in his seat contentedly . . . .

The man beside him took off his headset to order a Bloody Mary. A tinny, intricate Middle Eastern music came whispering out of the pink sponge earplugs. Macon stared down at the little machine and wondered if he should buy one. Not for the music, heaven knows—there was far too much noise in the world already—but for insulation. He could plug himself into it and no one would disturb him. He could play a blank tape: thirty full minutes of silence. Turn over the tape and play thirty minutes more.20

In this scene Tyler crystallizes the conflicting relationships between freedom, otherness, and selfhood in the spaces of mobile capitalism. If it is only through the other that we know who we are, then interacting with others is always a presentation and renegotiation of the self—a process that might be felt as fatiguing or even threatening to the constant traveler. Technology, however, comes to the rescue, creating “insulation” between the “Middle Eastern” and American travelers, containing the “ethnic” sounds of the former and potentially protecting the latter from the “noise of the world.” In such situations, noise is the sound of otherness, sound that an “accidental tourist” does not wish to integrate into himself or be integrated into. In the air cabin, both the jet engine and conversation can be perceived as noise. In her protagonist’s imagined listening to the blank tape, Tyler foreshadows Bose’s web marketing of its noise-canceling headphones, which offers “a quieter world” and “the tranquility you desire”; in her use of the word “insulation” to describe this effect, she also foreshadows Bose’s marketing of the production of quiet as the production of personal space.

QuietComfort for the Neoliberal Self

As seen above, though space has been reshaped in many ways for the business traveler, the inertia of circulation nevertheless involves physical and social forces that can affect one’s sense of being a free and individualized self. Bose’s message that QuietComfort soundscaping offers a sense of physical and psychological space has been well received. Reviews and journalistic accounts of QuietComfort have been remarkably consistent with the narrative encouraged by Bose’s marketing, suggesting that users understand these devices as self-preserving tactical aids in their navigations through noisy spaces filled with others. These pieces also construct an image of self that is similar to the portrait scholars have painted of the self in neoliberalism, one that is autonomous, reflexive, and self-managing.

An examination of ninety-six newspaper and magazine reviews and articles published in the United States, Canada, Australia, England, and Ireland between 2001 and 2009 reveals that all mention air travel, with many following the same crisis-resolution pattern: an opening description of airborne horrors leading to the presentation of Bose headphones as technological solution. The New York Times consumer technology critic David Pogue, for example, uses this pattern to frame his comparison of Bose and other noise-canceling headphones, beginning with the following list of travels:
As you may have heard, air travel this summer isn’t going to be pretty. You’ll be crammed in, delayed and bumped—if you’re lucky. If you’re unlucky, your flight will just be canceled. Fortunately, not all of this misery is out of your control. Take, for example, the noise-canceling headphones that Bose began making popular a few years ago. It is notable that the foregoing indignities are spatiotemporal rather than aural in nature. Being “cramped,” “delayed,” and “bumped” suggests a self impeded from its rightful free movement through space. The headphones are suggested as a way to control at least some aspects of this “misery.” In the next paragraph, Pogue takes an aural turn, describing the technology of phase cancellation and the relief it can bring as “the roar of the engines is magically subtracted from the sound that would otherwise have ground away at your well-being for six hours.” While there is presumably some playful hyperbole at work here, there is also the clear implication of a self that must protect itself through technology. The implied reader is not a wide-eyed adventurer but a savvy and world-weary accidental tourist, guarding his well-being through technologies of the self.

This mobile self-manager of Pogue’s review, navigating the throngs and waiting out the delays, resembles what scholars have referred to as the neoliberal self. Recounting the critiques of neoliberalism offered by Barbara Cruikshank, Nikolas Rose, and Wendy Brown, Ilana Gershon notes that each scholar refers to a “reflexive relationship in which every self is meant to contain a distance that enables a person to be literally their own business.” As their own businesses, such subjects must manage and care for their own skills and assets while negotiating their dealings with other autonomous agents, be they individuals or corporations.

If the neoliberal self is responsible for reflexively developing its assets and creating strategic alliances, it must also conserve and protect those assets, strategically avoiding and severing unwanted ties. As spaces where multitudes of these free agents must negotiate with one another, the airlines, and the Transportation Safety Administration, sites of air travel become paradoxical spaces where too much freedom for too many becomes a freedom that crams, delays, bumps, and grinds. In these spaces where freedom proves illusory, soundscaping technology provides at least an illusion of freedom, offering the ability to disconnect from the networks of sound and sociality in which one is implicated.

Significantly, the very presence of a technological “solution” to this problem of conflicting freedoms reinforces the essential neoliberal belief that problems must be solved individually and within the market rather than addressed as systemic issues: individual consumption, rather than collective action, is the site of social agency. Obscuring the systemic nature of travel woes by making them a matter of personal responsibility also encourages passengers to perceive their problems in the form of irresponsible copassengers. This perception is on display in one long-running and “most-viewed” thread in the Business Traveller forums, titled “The fattest person I have ever sat next to . . .” The initial post is little more than a link to an image of a very large man who is somehow seated in a coach-class seat despite being twice its width. The next poster complains about “subsidizing” fat passengers’ weight in ticket prices, notes fat people’s larger carbon footprints, and suggests weighing people, since airlines already weigh luggage. Other posters concur, with one suggesting screening passenger size with a metal cage like the one used to limit the size of carry-on luggage. The thread spoils out in a succession of complaints about “rude,” “smelly,” “greasy,” “chatty,” and “ugly” flyers. These posts overwhelmingly portray travel woes as a problem of difference, as others fail to conform to norms of behavior, class, appearance, hygiene, race, or nationality. It is forms of difference—not, say, overcrowded planes with undersized seats—that is understood to burden these travelers. It is also telling that both problems and recourse are framed in market language: subsidy, ticket prices, surcharges, taxes.

Where the airlines fail to surcharge these nonconforming bodies off of the plane, the market supplies the dematerializing properties of noise cancellation. The Bose advertisement’s fantasy of fading fellow passengers is, in fact, only half the equation: by facilitating the shift of attention to the virtual space of a stereophonic soundscape and/or computer screen, soundscaping allows users to disappear their own bodies as well, an ontological shift that reconfigures subjects’ relations to their surroundings. In this shift, hearing takes on something like the imperious and objectifying perspective usually attributed to vision. Writing in the 1980s, Michel de Certeau, for example, uses the view from the height of the World Trade Center to explore representational spatial practices in which the powerful define and contain the other. The politics of soundscaping, however, reflect controlled listening’s utility in moments when the powerful wish to define, disappear, or make themselves socially inaccessible to the other. Like sight, sound dominates.

Close readings of ads, reviews, and articles uncover what sorts of selves are to be dominant and dominated through Bose headphone use. In the Business Traveller review mentioned earlier, Bose headphones signify one’s belonging in business class. Similarly, another Pogue review explains that the wearer will “strike . . . fellow passengers as a savvy, experienced hard-hitter who knows all the tricks in the travel game.” Other reviews and articles cite the head-
phones' popularity with "the travel set," mentioning the destinations of Paris and Phuket, Thailand, or voice concern about "a tool for one to obliterate the sound of the many," an objection that nevertheless affirms the status and exclusivity the devices project. As previously described, Bose commercials center primarily (though not exclusively) on a white, male, middle-to-upper-class perspective. When the white business traveler reclines with eyes closed and his fellow travelers fade away, or he opens the informational shield of the newspaper and the air cabin becomes a white line drawing, these technologically focused visuals suggest spaces cleansed of racial, class, and gender differences, places where a pure Cartesian self can meditate and envision, undisturbed. In such a sublime space, Adam Smith's rational actor can be his most rational, with the differences and conflicts that complicate a libertarian view of free markets and free selves held at bay. The normative self in the QuietComfort discourse, then, is white, male, rational, monied, and mobile.

And what is the noise that this normative self seeks to diminish or eliminate? Nearly all references to noise in the advertising and print discourse fall into one of two categories: the sounds of transport and the sounds of other people. The first category includes noise from jet engines, trains, subways, buses, automobile traffic, road noise, and car horns. This is to be expected, both because Amar Bose first conceived these headphones for air travel and because active noise cancellation works best on droning, lower-to-mid-frequency sounds (which describes all of the sounds mentioned except for the car horns).

However, although active noise cancellation is ineffective in suppressing transient, higher-frequency sounds, voices—particularly women's and children's voices—are referenced in reviews almost as often as the sound of the jet engine. Against the peace and logical geometry of the Bose commercial's abstracted air cabin we can contrast "the most rambunctious child's shriek or a woman complaining to her significant other," "a crying baby and a nervous, talkative flier," and the "annoying coworker in the next cubicle... or, ahem, a nagging spouse," all of whom are portrayed as noise sources in (male-written) newspaper pieces. These voices are emotional, distracting, and annoying—generally too young, feminine, and irrational to silence themselves. This theme is also present in the imagery of a Singaporean print ad campaign for Bose QuietComfort, as described in a trade column:

The campaign features mime artists in situations where people would typically make loud, unwelcome sounds (shouting, crying and pain-induced yelling), silently acting out the scenes. A woman sits comforting two sobbing babies in one shot, while a couple have a heated argument in another. In the final shot, a man appears to be in agony as he waxes himself.

Again the primary noisemakers hail from the domestic realm: aggravating babies and a fighting couple. The unwelcome scream of the self-waxing man is a humorous deviation from the domestic noise theme, though it is worth noting that he becomes a noisemaker in the act of "feminizing" himself.

In this discourse, the rational, normative agent must protect himself from the inchoate sounds of the jet engine, woman, or child. This gendered marketing and reception of QuietComfort points to these devices' place in a longer history of masculine-coded audiophile products. As home audio equipment has long been used to construct a masculine refuge in the shared domestic space of the home, noise-canceling headphones are used to construct a mobile office or den by actively diminishing the audible evidence of the shared space users inhabit. The woman and child are others who bind the self-regulating, corporate self, limiting the number and variety of alliances available to it. QuietComfort shields the rational actor from types of communication that distract from the pleasures of production and consumption.

It can be argued that another type of irrational other lurks between the lines in both the advertising and the critical reception of noise-canceling headphones: the terrorist. The original QuietComfort headphones were released to market in the year 2000, the year before commercial passenger jets were used as missiles to attack the Pentagon and World Trade Center. The widespread consumer use of noise-canceling headphones, and the cultural conception of personal space that is attributed to wearing them, have developed during a decade in which air travel has been dominated by the nebulous threat of terrorism. A sense of danger and suspicion has become attached not only to air travel in general but to one's copassengers and even to one's self, as checkpoints, screenings, and pat-downs become the norm.

In the attacks of September 11, 2001, racial, ethnic, and religious differences of the sort that an idealized free market promised to render irrelevant became explosively visible. The psychological and symbolic import of destroying the centers of U.S. military and trade power were clear, but no more important than the blow struck to air travel as the symbol and embodied enactment of mobility and freedom. Shuffling through homeland security, shoes in hand, the business traveler is more temple supplicant than road warrior. Though the terror felt by travelers has receded, the uneasy atmosphere that lingered in its wake gives us other ways to read Bose newspaper article headlines such as "Far from the Maddening Crowd," "Headphones to Make the World Go Away," and "Hear No Evil—Wherever You Are." In such a setting, cultural difference is not only devalued as impinging on the enjoyment of travel—it is also seen as a threat that costs "us" money, dignity, and freedom of mobility. In spaces
seemingly threatened by irrational, suicidal others, the rational neoliberal self has all the more reason to produce personal space through audio technology.

**Putting on the Interface**

I have described how the use of noise-canceling headphones as soundscaping devices reflects a set of social, historical, and technological dynamics that have influenced the production of public space in capitalism. In putting on a pair of QuietComforts to block out the sounds of others and better concentrate on a spreadsheet or movie, the road warrior creates a small field of Lefebvre’s abstract space, in which difference is minimized so that the circulation of texts and commerce can be maximized. This soundscaping technology, like the more exclusive spaces of the air terminal and air cabin, has been developed with the business traveler in mind. Business travelers, however, are not the only consumers of this technology, and I want to conclude by considering what happens when diverse selves put on devices that minimize difference, positing the idea that, just as these headphones are reflective of a rationalist European history, they are productive of a particular ontology and set of social relations.

The use of headphones with portable media devices is, of course, nothing new, and others have considered the spatial and phenomenological effects of the Walkman and iPod. What sets noise-canceling headphones apart is that they do not merely block out the aural world but mediatize it in order to cancel it out. These devices meet Lev Manovich’s definition of new media, in which content and interface are no longer one (as in the “old” media of film or painting), but instead the user accesses a database of information through a separately designed interface. The power button on noise-canceling headphones is a new-media interface designed to turn the aural world into a database of content that can be selectively accessed. Understanding just how such new-media devices position users as objects and subjects requires what Lisa Nakamura calls a theory of “digital racial formation.” Nakamura considers the subjectivities that white, male-designed interfaces impose on diverse Internet users—a line of questioning we might extend to the interface QuietComfort forms with the sound of lived space. This line of questioning acknowledges that individuals’ subjective horizons are profoundly shaped by the media they utilize and works to locate racial formations in the black boxes of media technologies.

In putting on noise-canceling headphones, diverse selves put on the Western subjectivity that has been built into their technology, one that attempts to construct an on-off interface with the aural environment and the space one shares with others. Though this interface technologically quiets the perceived noise of difference, it does not affect all difference equally. No matter the cultural background of the wearer or the content of the media being listened to, the headphones cast people who culturally value talk as noisemakers, discouraging sociality between strangers and even family members. When Amar Bose sat in an airplane and dreamed up a way of “separating things that you don’t want from things that you want,” he was thinking of sound, not culture. This act of separation is a form of culture, however; it is a technological way of being in the world that separates us from things—and people—before we have a chance to know whether or not we want them. To the extent that the use of noise cancellation becomes the norm in the spaces of transit, the cultural value of circulation will suppress the cultural value of embodied copresence; in addition, whatever opportunities these spaces offer for intercultural interaction will be minimized.

This last point may be particularly relevant for cultural scholars, many of whom, like other neoliberal subjects, fly frequently and often work in transit. In fact, two readers of earlier versions of this essay read it while in flight: one wore noise-canceling headphones while doing so and the other wished for a pair as a baby cried. I am writing this very sentence high above the American Midwest, foam plugs firmly lodged in my ears as I ignore the person beside me in favor of an imagined scholarly audience. It is perhaps ironic that cultural scholars—who so often seek to amplify everyday, marginalized, or silenced voices—also treat the voices around us as noise. However, deadlines are deadlines: academics, under ever more pressure to earn our keep, increasingly travel within the aural architecture of the mobile ivory tower, where we are “free to think.” Attending to my soundscaping practices sensitizes me to the economic abstraction of my own aural experience—and perhaps even generates empathy for the pressures felt by the swells up in business class, whose freedom and mobility indeed come at a cost.

As socially organizing principles, technological progress and neoliberalism are productive of certain types of freedom. It is fair to say as well that, at least for those with technological or entrepreneurial aptitude, the contemporary American meritocracy is less overtly racially oppressive than it was in the past—indeed it provided Amar Bose a pathway out of oppression, one that he has developed and guided young people of color along. Where proponents of technological and neoliberal progress often go wrong with regard to difference is in failing to understand these dynamics as culture, a type of culture that shuts down diversity in less overt ways. Neoliberalism accepts all comers, as long as they subsume their differences in the name of circulation. Different ways of being in the world and other forms of sociality are fine when consumed
as media, but they can disrupt the smooth circulation of commodities when practiced in lived space. Paradoxically, the "libertarian" market encourages us to quiet down and keep our noise to ourselves.

Notes
1. This phrase was used in the marketing copy of the American Bose website until a recent update. It can still be found on the Australian Bose website: http://www.bose.com/contoller?url=/shop_online/headphones/noise_cancelling_headphones/index.jsp (accessed July 20, 2010).
7. For an account of the heroic individual narrative as it relates to another soundscaping technology, see Paul DuCay et al., Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman (London: Sage, 1997), 44-46.
8. See, for example, Timothy Mitchell, Colonising Egypt (Berkely: University of California Press, 1991), which explains the role of a modern and objectifying gaze in European colonialism.
12. Lefebvre, Production of Space, 49.
18. Morse sees out to understand the psychology and ontology of subjects whose daily lives are lived in the dominant "spaces" of contemporary capitalism: television and its "analog" such as freeways and malls. She characterizes these as "nonspace", a space of flows between two- and three-dimensional realities, virtuality and actuality, and presence and absence of mind; this nonspace forms the ground of our everyday, semiconscious activity. If we follow Morse's logic QuietComfort users are fighting one nonspace with another. Margaret Morse, "An Ontology of Everyday Distraction: The Freeway, the Mall and Television," in Logics of Televisions: Essays in cultural criticism, ed. P. Meilencamp. 193–221 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).
22. Ibid.
30. A user testimonial video currently on the Bose website, for example, features comments from two women dressed in professional attire, though the great majority of the ad features white professional men.
31. Kellner, "Your Tech."
40. Given my subject matter, the irony is, of course, particularly rich in my case.