Sound, Heritage & Homelessness

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents early findings from an on-going research project, through which I am exploring sounds and ways of listening at a London shelter for homeless people. In detailing and discussing my research process and the data this has yielded to date, I argue that a focus on the circulation and transmission of particular modes of listening (auditory heritage) may offer researchers valuable insights into the ways in which social injustice is produced and perpetuated.

KEYWORDS: sound, heritage, homelessness, voice, listening.

In the call for submissions for this year's Invisible Places conference, the organizers appealed for participants to take a leading role in the "focused study and intentional stewardship of our sound heritage". They also expressed interest in hearing about works through which the study of soundscapes achieves or aims at achieving a particular social or political intervention. Responding to both these aspects of that call, this paper represents a first attempt to discuss findings from an on-going research project, through which I am exploring what I term the 'auditory heritage' of homelessness.

Since June 2016 I have been working with guests, volunteers, staff and other visitors at a London homeless shelter, trying both to understand the ways in which sound might feature in and shape daily life for homeless people, and to map the routes through which homelessness is made audible to the broader public. In laying out the project here, I have two main intentions. Firstly, I want to argue for an expanded understanding of the term 'heritage', particularly as it has been applied to sound, and to think through some of the potentials that close listening through a heritage framework may hold in store for activists engaging with a range of social issues. This I will do, in particular, through a discussion of the notion of auditory heritage; that is, the very old idea (rebranded for heritage purposes) that each of us inherits and brings to bear on the world a mode of listening shaped largely elsewhere, over time, by other people. (See Feld [1996], Stoever [2010], Back [2011], Abu Hamdan [2014], Iscen [2014], Peake [2014] for a range of perspectives on how, as Francois Bonnet [2016, 4] puts it, our ears are always operating "under the influence".)

My second aim, since, as I mentioned, this is very much work in progress, is to court criticism and feedback as I look to refine a methodology to take the project forward. I want particularly to think about some of the ethical issues raised by the work. Does my focus on homelessness in the context of research that is largely about sound and heritage merely instrumentalise homeless people for the purpose of marginal academic or industry point scoring, and if so, should I call the whole thing to a halt? What I hope, on the contrary, is that the data I present from my work will confirm both the value of engaging with sound across an ever-expanding range of social and political contexts, and the importance, too, of complicating and claiming terms like heritage for activist ends.

Writing from within my home discipline of heritage studies (wherein methods drawn from anthropology, archaeology, cultural geography and cultural studies are deployed in analysing how the past is actively created and used in the present), I very often find myself asking (and in turns frustrated, bored, or fascinated by) the question: what is 'heritage?' What value is the word meant to signify? Is it in any way different to 'culture'? What, for example, is the 'sound heritage' alluded to in the IP2017 call for papers? My sense, with regard to this last question, is that the organizers were referring to a primarily natural resource of sounds. Whatever the case may be, however, all of these questions are virtually immaterial unless one stops to ask what work it is that the idea of heritage really

does on a social level. In addressing this issue, numerous scholars engaged with heritage have emphasised how the work of listing, preserving and interpreting cultural and natural environments and objects enacts a kind of soft power. To designate a particular cultural practice, object, or environment as heritage is to engage in a twofold process of inclusion and exclusion, to celebrate on the one hand, and to cast aside, on the other.

Most often, the heritage industry applies itself to a very narrow range of materials. Critic Laurajane Smith has coined the term Authorised (or Authorising) Heritage Discourse (AHD) to refer to:

> a professional discourse that validates and defines what is or is not heritage [...]. This discourse emphasises the authority of experts to act as stewards for the past and its heritage, but also defines heritage as innately material, if not monumental, aesthetically pleasing and as inevitably contributing to all that is 'good' in the construction of national or group identity. The universality of heritage values tends to be taken for granted, as, too, is the assumption that heritage is intimately linked with the expression and manifestation of 'identity'. (Waterton and Smith 2010, 12)

The link Smith makes here between the concepts of heritage and identity is an important one, and its significance is stated nowhere more clearly than in the work of Stuart Hall. "We should think of The Heritage as a discursive practice," Hall writes. "It is one of the ways in which the nation slowly constructs for itself a sort of collective social memory [... and it] follows that those who cannot see themselves reflected in its mirror cannot properly belong" (1999, 4). Also helpful, I think, in understanding the social function of heritage, and in linking this back to the aesthetic and the sensory, is the distinction Jacques Rancière draws between politics and the police, wherein the police describes a certain highly resilient ordering and distribution of ways of being and sensing, and politics consists in acts so powerful as to disrupt, supplement and reconfigure that order. Crucially, in this analysis, much of what normally goes under the name of politics is considered a part of the police: a system, which far from effecting meaningful change, serves habitually to reinforce perceptual, behavioural, and discursive norms. I propose that we understand heritage as belonging to the class of bodies and agencies that constitute and patrol the police order, and that therefore dictate, as Rancière puts it, the extent to which "a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise" (1999, 29).

At this point in my discussion, my purpose for engaging with homelessness through the framework of heritage will hopefully be becoming clearer. Along with others, including contemporary archaeologist Rachael Kiddey (2013, 2017), and Jessica and Matt Turtle who are working in London to establish a Museum of Homelessness, I want to position home-

lessness as heritage for two reasons. Firstly, the concept of heritage, and the industry and networks that have built up around it, represent valuable vehicles through which marginalised people might achieve social recognition and inclusion. Secondly, by juxtaposing homelessness with the range of objects, edifices and environments more usually thought of as heritage, I hope to play some part in disrupting the self-aggrandizing, self-congratulatory narratives that heritage traditionally spins, and which make widespread public satisfaction with a rotten status quo just that bit easier to comprehend. Homelessness, after all, is an enduring social ill, perpetuated by ingrained social inequality, and as such it has many monumental properties of its own. In this sense, it is not so very different to more classical heritage objects: Stonehenge, for instance, or the Great Barrier Reef.

Speaking on the disruption of longstanding norms in heritage practice, it is time now that I said something about sound. One of the most notable developments in heritage practice in the past decade has been an increase in engagement with the sensory, and with sound in particular (see, e.g. Kytö et al. 2012, Benjamin 2014, Schoer 2014, British Library 2015, Kannenberg 2016, Mansell 2016). This is to be welcomed; however, as I have argued elsewhere (Tourle 2016), a concerning feature across much of this engagement has been a reliance on archival methods and the preservation of sounds, over and above any concerted examination of practices of listening. I adopted the term auditory heritage in order to describe a set of perceptual biases, shaped and transmitted through time that come now, in the present, to define the way in which we hear or are able to listen to various sounds. At the time, this was part of an effort to show that heritage professionals themselves seem to have a particular way of listening to sounds, a way of privileging the natural, and ignoring more political aspects of the sonic environment. Nevertheless, I think that the concept of auditory heritage can have many more positive uses beyond critiquing archival practices. In much the same way as I feel it would be helpful for heritage institutions that work to shape public understanding of culture to engage with homelessness as heritage, so too I think it would be valuable for them to look in the same way at the perceptual norms that dictate public engagement with homelessness and in so doing work to perpetuate it.

This brings me to a discussion of my research project. As I mentioned above, the project is based at a shelter for homeless people in London, and has been underway for around nine months. During that time I have drawn upon a range of methods in trying to investigate the significance of sound in the lives of guests living at the shelter, and to understand the various modes of listening deployed there. Having begun initially by making informal observations in my capacity as a volunteer, I moved on to hold a series of workshops mapping and discussing shelter sounds. Later I organised a sound walk around the local area, and more recently I have been working to produce collaborative audio documentary pieces with guests, providing handheld digital recorders to participants. As of December, I have been conducting further interviews with members of a film crew that visited the shelter late last

year to produce a television advertisement for one of its sponsors. Within the confines of this paper, it is not possible to attempt a full discussion of the findings these various forms of research have yielded. I will therefore focus on examining only a few key themes which have emerged so far, and which I intend to explore further going forward. The first of these relates to voice.

I had been visiting the shelter for around three months, gradually getting to know some of its guests, when I made my first attempt to gather together a group to work as partners in the project. I explained the nature of my plan to anyone that showed an interest, handed out fliers, and eventually assembled six guests after dinner one Tuesday evening for a launch workshop. "What are we going to be talking about?", asked Linda, one of those assembled. "It could be any sounds at all that you find interesting," I replied; "the sounds of the building, of your day-to-day life, work, voices even…". "Not your voice, I hope", she shot back. "It'll make people want to kill themselves… it's so monotone, so boring." For a split second, as she said this, Linda's face was poker straight, then moments later it relaxed into a triumphant grin. I was relieved; better to be the butt of a joke than to actively incite suicide. Nevertheless, there was something very troubling about having my voice scrutinised in this way, and it gave me pause for reflection. How did I speak to the homeless guests I met at the shelter, how about the other volunteers, and the staff? Was it the same voice I use when I speak with other people, and, in all seriousness, what was it like to have to listen to me?

The more I reflected on this, and the more I listened to others going about their work in the shelter, the more it seemed that there was something either empty, or if not altogether empty, then premeditated in the voices that volunteers in particular inflicted on guests. It is a somewhat lost voice, one that aims at neutrality, seeking to disguise any sense of judgement, and that seems laced by default with a rather falsely cheerful sympathy. It is very difficult I think to analyse such a voice objectively, or to say where it comes from. My sense, however, is that it is a voice that I did put on, and which I now try hard to take off. I would say I realised when Linda called me up on it, that the voice in question is one addressed to a cause, a malady, or an affliction, far more than it is to an individual; as if I was speaking to homelessness or to a homeless person (and to all the preconceptions I have about how a homeless person thinks, feels and acts) rather than to a person first and foremost. I discussed this with the shelter's founder and manager, and she agreed that there was something in the voices: a degree of performativity that coloured most interactions. For her part, she described a voice she uses herself, drawn straight from a rich back-catalogue of stern, and overbearingly matronly female characters of the kind that populated BBC television and radio throughout the last century. This is a voice that grants a degree of control and necessary emotional distance in a context where guests are often highly vulnerable and prone to becoming attached to caregivers. In this sense it might be

thought to embody a dual heritage, functioning both as a sonic trace of social neglect, and as an echo of female typecasting throughout media history.

Building on the theme of voice, but branching out also to consider elements of the physical infrastructure of the shelter, I found in workshops, as well as through discussions with other volunteers, that there a range of key sounds that contribute to the production of a familiar shelter soundscape. One approach I took to mapping sounds with guests was to try to chart out a timeline of common sounds heard at different times of the day. Unsurprisingly, given that guests live in shared dorms with up to 15 beds in each, the sounds of snoring featured heavily in our early discussions around this theme (a rich topic in and of itself). Eventually, however, we moved on. Janek, who himself admitted to being a snorer, was eager to talk about his friend "Tony 7:30", so called because, each day, volunteers working the morning shift would call in to his dorm to try to wake him ahead of the other guests. 'Tony! 7:30! Wake up!' As a heavy sleeper, Tony takes longer than others to get going.

What was telling about Janek's anecdote was the way in which it led other guests to list the various other, mostly gentle, commands that structure their days, week in, week out. "WAKE UP, TIME TO GO!", first thing in the morning; "DINNER!" at half past seven every evening; on a good day, "SECONDS!", half an hour later, and so on, every day. Though there is very little aggression in shelter life, there is an inescapable, and largely unavoidable violence in the mode of collective address necessarily used to run an operation like the shelter efficiently. This is a problem, which manifests itself in the very fabric of the building, too. Never designed for domestic use, the shelter is based in a converted light industrial unit. Everything is upscale, from the number of bedsprings creaking in the night, to the kitchen ovens and extractors, whose roar fills the building when evening meals are being prepared, to the bank of oversize washing machines parked in a room adjacent to one of the men's dorms. For those guests sensitive to sound (and there are many who are), life on this scale provides little opportunity for peaceful rest. Headphones are a common sight, and as Léon (another guest) explained, he found it impossible to get to sleep without them.

As the series of workshops and discussions I held with guests wore on, we talked increasingly frequently about the importance of peace and quiet. We began to map the places where such a precious commodity could be found. Mary, a young woman, who like 30% of the shelter's guests is working full time but unable to afford to rent in London, described her walking route back to the shelter, which passes through the middle of the city. Very often, she said, she would stop off at the British Library on her way, not to go in, but to sit in the square outside, knowing that she would not be disturbed. Other guests described circuits around favourite parks, or visits to particular churches made for similar reasons. Thinking about homelessness as cultural heritage, one might conclude that it is marked as much by a series of absences as by anything else. A shortfall in welfare provision traceable to inherited notions of what constitutes economic good sense, long histories of underin-

vestment in health and other support services that push people with illnesses out onto the streets, and most pressingly a lack of space, whether in the form of social housing or of protected public land. For Mary, the British Library has less value as a seat of culture, than as a tract of land protected for public enjoyment. The steady if waning investment that organisations dedicated to preserving heritage have enjoyed over the past century pays off in the form of a quiet half hour; a sonic heirloom in the midst of half the world's accumulated knowledge.

As I draw to a close, I want to focus explicitly on the themes of audibility and ways of listening that I introduced above. In the most recent phase of my research at the shelter, I have begun distributing digital recorders to guests in order that they might record any sounds they deem to be significant. This is a way of trying to understand in what ways people experiencing homelessness may come to share a way of listening to the world around them, with the long-term plan behind the project being to produce collaborative audio pieces that might be exhibited and interpreted, particularly within heritage contexts. This work has yet to come to fruition, however, and so for the time being, this paper is all the work there is to show from the process. My voice, deeply inadequate for the task of communicating the experience of homelessness, can yet gain access to certain audiences, such as this one, and is able to talk about the work. Moreover, in the future, it is my aim to work more equally with the guests I collaborate with, in order that we might jointly present the knowledge we have produced together. Generally speaking, though, communication about homelessness in society circumvents homeless people altogether.

In the time that I have been visiting the shelter, its team has taken significant steps to raise the media profile of the organisation in an attempt to attract very necessary funding. Always, however, this process carries with it the risk of misrecognition. Just as when I first arrived at the shelter I found myself listening out for many of the wrong things, and shaping my voice to express sympathy for a weight of experience I had yet to come terms with, when media agencies approach the shelter, it seems they only ever come with one thing in mind. 'They want to see the track marks, the scars', as the shelter's manager puts it. The search for funding puts charities like the shelter I visit in a difficult position. Where government funding comes with ethical strings attached (for example, the obligation to assist the home office in border patrols), seeking publicity through the media means exposing guests to broadcasters, advertising firms and brand agencies who long before they arrive on site, know exactly who and what they are listening for: a redemption narrative; a tale of hard luck, not systematic social failure; something that will sound good cut against a melancholy piano track. The pursuit of social justice must of necessity take many forms; for those of us engaged with sound, however, I suggest that a critical examination of modes of listening is a good place to start.

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