

Listening-with: aural diversity and participatory listening research

Slide 1. Introduction

Hi I'm Bethan Prosser and my paper today is titled *Listening-with: aural diversity and participatory listening research*. I'm a PhD social sciences researcher. I recently submitted my thesis and awaiting my viva.

I'm also a musician (a violin player) and have a background working in the voluntary/community sector, which are important influences and experiences that have shaped my research. In particular to mention, I have collaborated throughout my PhD with a local community music organisation and I'm continuing to develop listening projects with them.

This is my first dissemination activity since my thesis submission. Thank you to all involved – it's a timely opportunity to discuss my findings and approach with those with expertise and passion for exploring the different ways that we listen

Slide 2. Introduce paper

In this paper, I will first discuss aural diversity and pluralising approaches to listening. As a starting point to my research, I am taking a particular philosophical stance of a participatory ethos that recognises issues of power in knowledge production systems and values different types of knowledge. This orientation is informed by aural diversity and other non-normative listening approaches, which I group together under the umbrella of pluralising.

I will then put this into dialogue with my doctoral research and share my project, its methodology, my analysis approach and share some key findings around listening. Through this I will develop the concept of listening-with as a form of participatory listening research. This is a relatively ambitious paper - trying to present material from 2 chapters of my thesis to engage with the themes of today's workshop.

Slide 3. Questions

These are the big questions that bring my research together with aural diversity for today's workshop.

- How can a participatory listening research approach conceptually and methodologically support aural diversity?
- What forms can listening-with take that ensure representation and enhanced understandings of aurally diverse societies?

I will return to reflect on these at the end.

Slide 4. Pluralising

There is a growing body of work in sound studies that interrogates issues of power and oppression and pushes back against universalising and potentially exclusionary ideas about

listening. The main focus of today is on aural diversity but I would place these under the umbrella of pluralising listening.

These chime for me with thinking about issues of social justice, equality and inclusion. There is increasing attention and space given to such issues of power and oppression and my research was guided by social, spatial and mobility justice.

I'm a social sciences researcher, not within a sound studies department so I have had to find my own way through and into this realm. I came to aural diversity first (through the work of John Levack Drever), which led me to read Deaf Studies and other scholarly critiques that move into the more cultural, social and political dimensions of listening alongside the physiological.

In particular, the work of Dylan Robinson, an Indigenous Canadian scholar and his book *Hungry Listening* has been heavily influential and I keep coming back to key concepts within. He develops resonance theory: drawing on Indigenous knowledges and approaches sound as having subjectivity and agency in itself. Plus also the idea of settler listening being hungry....which I think chimes with how we are as researchers, the way we listen is informed by a hunger for knowledge which spreads throughout knowledge production.

I have worked with the idea critical listening positionality (CLP) which I believe speaks to all of these critiques. It is about questioning "how race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and cultural background intersect and influence the way we are able to hear sound, music, and the world around us" (Robinson, 2020:10). I applied CLP for research purposes: critically reflecting on my own researcher listening positionality, but also thinking about how we can understand the many aspects that influence research participants' plural listening positionalities.

I'm interested in how we can build critical reflection and reflexivity into research for everyone involved, to generate better understanding about what shapes our listening and therefore the knowledge produced by everyone listening differently. I believe CLP offers this potential without getting into the realm of relativism whereby everyone listening differently becomes meaningless.

I'm going to share next how I used these ideas in my PhD project and findings about listening...

Slide 5. My PhD project

My project has been investigating residential experiences of urban seaside gentrification and displacement injustices on the UK south coast – so not about sound per se. Listening started as a method from my interests in creative, sensory and mobile methods. But has gone beyond the methodological into the conceptual and epistemic. e.g. I believe listening has a distinct role in generating knowledge and listening to gentrification and displacement is my main contribution through this research.

So I used listening methods to elicit residential experiences about gentrification at the urban seaside – so how they are experiencing their changing neighbourhoods. I worked across 3

neighbourhoods along the south coast in Brighton, Worthing and St Leonards-on-Sea. 22 people took part July-November 2020.

The pandemic hit just as I was about to start doing fieldwork which was going to include spending time in the sites, recruiting people to do walking interviews and group soundwalks with participatory focus groups. Instead, I supported people individually and remotely to do deep listening, then silent listening either on a walk or in their home, capture this and then a follow up interview.

Slide 6. Method

Using listening for research requires capturing – which was a challenge remotely!

The format included each participant having a silent listening experience on their own either through a listening walk (where they chose the route) or at home for minimum 20 minutes then re-walking/sitting and capturing their observations and discussions either through

a) a phone call with me as they re-walked or re-listened and I made an audio recording of this

b) capturing it themselves through whatever media they wanted e.g. audio recordings, photos, videos, notes, drawings etc

It appears there are some similarities with Neil Bruce's methods from this morning, but with a different set of research questions and topic, which is interesting.

I had a hardware set up so it could be as accessible as possible and flexible to what equipment and software participants' already had and were used to e.g. someone could literally use a landline and pen and paper. However of course there were exclusions still. In particular I was reliant on mainly recruiting people through social media, social networks with some targeted street mailouts.

The silver lining to the pandemic conditions was it increased the participatory elements. Participants chose where, what and how material was captured within some flexible parameters and helped me begin to analyse this in the interview process

Slide 7. Using listening in analysis and dissemination

Along the way I had recorded a lot of 'behind-the-scenes' audio material ...so I decided to have a go at creating my first sound piece to try and understand this method better...

This sound collage started to formulate into a coherent piece called Unintentional Ex Situ Listening to explore the research practices. It became a way to sonically share and explore the methodological journey. I called it unintentional ex situ because of the unintended and extreme position I was in as a researcher compared to the conventional emphasis on being in situ in lots of placed based, ethnographic and sensory research approaches.

I don't have time to share this today but publicly available on soundcloud – here's the link.

I used listening in my analysis and thesis to critically reflect on the entanglement of different listening practices and positionalities in the research...so listening became part of a creative analysis approach.

Slide 8. Plural listening material

I needed to develop a creative listening analysis approach because it generated a lot of material. In that way, it is a successful method: 10 commented walk audio recordings, 17 participant recorded audio recordings, 235 participant photos, 53 participant video recordings, 22 pages of participant drawings, 5 pages of participant notes.

The participatory elements included a person-centred approach and increased choice for participants. For example, the listening-at-home option allowed participants with mobilities/health issues including those shielding from Covid to take part more easily. There was also flexibility in the ways participants could approach the listening walks and tailor this to their own situations. For example one participant used a mobility scooter, another was visually impaired and two had hearing impairments (deaf in their left ear and tinnitus.)

This challenged my own hearing typical assumptions that participants with hearing impairments would not want to take part in listening methods. This took me back to Deaf Studies critiques and aural diversity - although there still remains some exclusions in the methods around digital exclusions, those in the Deaf community and also due to my restricted recruitment reach during Covid.

Because of interest my interest in social justice and commitment to a participatory ethos, I was able to see that this plurality in the material generated by listening is significant in itself and could be part of my analysis and interpretation.

9. Pluralising listening

So it's through listening with residents that I've become committed to pluralising listening. I have challenged my own hearing typical assumptions and tried to understand more about how my participants listened differently. This includes where they chose to listen, even if they were in the same street or landmark as others, what they decided to capture, what sounds they focused on, what they found important and how it stimulated them and directed our discussions.

I did not do co-analysis or co-production, so the findings are very much based on elicitation and my analysis. The key challenge for me was working out what knowledge is generated about urban seaside gentrification from this plural listening?

Through developing a creative listening approach, I experimented with a layered soundmapping technique...

Slide 10. Layered soundmap examples

Here are some examples of this layered soundmapping technique. I used layers of tracing paper to annotate the route maps that I had drawn with participants during the follow up interviews. On the left is the layer drawn from listening-back to a commented walk, so an audio recording of a participants describing the sounds, sensations and observations as they re-walked their listening walk. On the right, I created another layer where I categorised the sound-sources : vehicles/traffic, human interactions, environmental/nature, material/object. Most described sounds in these terms which is an interesting topic for discussion in itself e.g. the limitations of sound descriptors and reliance on sound-sources as ways of talking about sounds.

Slide 11. Layered soundmapping technique

I added the interview discussion as a final layer. So the image shows a zoomed in section of a layered map focusing on an event that caused a diversion in the walk and discussion of the soundscape of some stairs and their meanings to the participant.

The layering on tracing paper creates a palimpsest effect - layered meanings that each participant associated and attached to the sounds and their sensations.

Slide 12. Listening at home sound maps

I also used soundmaps for the listening-at-home activities but just not focused on a route. Some were still spatial, as shown on the left and some temporal, as shown on the right. E.g. one participant recorded sounds every minute so it became a timeline.

Slide 13. Sound stimuli typology

Through the soundmaps I came up with a way of understanding how these sounds were stimulating discussion and reflections from participants: a sound stimuli typology. This categorises how sound acted on the participants, with the key ones in this research material being: sound layers, sound surprises, sound sparks and sound stories.

Due to carrying this out immediately after Spring lockdown in 2020, there was heightened awareness and participants talked about returning sounds. For example, scaffolding was a prominent returning sound across all the material that sparked discussion around gentrification. Participants discussed why previously the sounds of scaffolding went unnoticed until it was absent during lockdown and then returned. This linked into several aspects of urban seaside gentrification: constant renovation, an increasingly exclusionary housing market, key policy drivers around regeneration and heritage and the environmental degradation of living by the sea.

Slide 14. Plural listening positionalities

And from these sound stimuli I came back to the idea of plural listening positionalities.

I have drawn on Robinson's critical listening positionality to try to understand what shapes participants' ways of listening to gentrification in this research: why they focused on certain sound stimuli and what shaped their discussion and reflection.

I have also leaned on the idea from Anderson & Rennie (2016) of field recordings being documents of their own makers that become self-reflexive narratives. So the material can be understood as participants' self-reflexive narratives. For example, sound stories are personal stories and narratives stimulated, captured and elicited from the method.

This has combined into a creative listening approach that can grapple with the multitude of participants listening experiences and practices. It therefore becomes possible with these framings and guiding concepts to analyse and interpret the layered meanings of participants' plural positionalities and their ways of listening as a form of knowledge production. And specifically how they are listening to gentrification at the urban seaside (which I don't have time to go into for this paper!)

Slide 15. Adjective+listening

One of ideas that has stayed with me from Robinson's book comes from the conclusion, in which he invites two people to reflect on the work with him. Carol Wong suggests that it might be best to think of listening with an adjective to really name and understand different listening practices and experiences.

Running with this I named all the different listening practices I've identified in the material and discuss in my thesis. I don't expect you to read all through - but just to show you what's possible!

This isn't just a gimmick: I have found these crucial as a way into residents' experiences of gentrification and the seaside. E.g. imaginary listening is when people have imagined sounds that they might normally or hear or that might have heard in the past. Imagining sounds of the past in a certain place taps into seaside heritage and temporalities and significantly for my research, what participants think the seaside should sound like (ranging from genteel and upper class leisure activities through to the fishing industry).

I used 6 of these to structure my findings chapters and discussion, so these are core to knowing about urban seaside gentrification.

Slide 16. Listening-with

I'm calling the approach I'm developing 'listening-with', because I'm interested in participatory approaches to listening and how this can be done within research.

It's about valuing, interrogating and learning from the multiple layers of meaning and subjectivity that listening generates. This term denotes an epistemic attempt to lean into

the plural positionalities of listeners and amplify their role and status in knowledge production. And it attempts to protect the space for participatory forms of research that are person-centred and value different knowledges.

And inherent within and integral to this is aural diversity. Because by being person-centered, it follows that diversity and plurality of listening will be supported and embraced and embedded into the research process.

Slide 17. Returning to these big questions

So returning to these starting bigger questions: I think a participatory listening research approach can support aural diversity.

I have offered one way this can happen through the example of my doctoral research. I acknowledge the limitations of my work (many are related to pandemic conditions). Only some elements are participatory, but the guiding ethos is crucial. There are many more forms this could take, that involve participants actively in all stages of research (co-design, co-analysis etc) and would ensure representation and generate better understanding of aural diversity. I'm interested in exploring these further and seeing what the potential for participatory listening research is. And I would welcome your thoughts on this, as so far I have not found many examples of this (as opposed to photo voice or participatory video projects for example).

Slide 18 & 19

Thank you for listening and watching my presentation. Here are my references. Any questions?