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# White noise: sound, materiality and the crowd in contemporary heritage practice

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## ABSTRACT

*Sounds of our Shores* was a joint venture between the National Trust and the British Library that employed a crowdsourcing methodology to create a permanent archive of British coastal sounds. In this paper I pursue a critical analysis of that project in order to problematise the recent emergence of practices aimed at capturing and preserving everyday sounds as 'sonic heritage'. More broadly, I use the case study to think through two trends in contemporary heritage practice. These are, first, a turn towards crowdsourcing as a means of democratising representation, and, second, a current trend towards the accumulation and preservation of an ever-broader range and mass of materials as heritage. The framework for my analysis is provided by a dual reading of the term 'white noise'. Thus, for my purposes, 'white noise' describes both an acoustic phenomenon (the product of every possible frequency sounding simultaneously; a sonic expression of perfect equality and perfect chaos), and a particular mode of racialised sound production and audition, modulated and constrained by whiteness. White noise displaces and silences its Others. The white 'listening ear', to borrow Jennifer Stoeber-Ackerman's terminology, is either deaf to, or appalled by, the sounds those Others make.

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## Noisy heritage

In acoustic terms 'white noise' is defined as the 'sound of the sum-total of all possible frequencies' (Connor 2002). In this sense, it may be thought a representative sound and, arguably, a democratic one, too: all voices sounding simultaneously and with equal weight. Yet, the experience of listening to white noise is far from an edifying one. As Serres (1995, 30) has it, in noise '[there] is chaos by a superabundance of presence', thus, in order to convey a clear message, sound must be in some sense ordered or cleansed: the signal must be isolated from the noise. Writing from a position straddling Sound Studies and Critical Heritage Studies, my intention in this paper is to use noise as a framework to think through two developments in contemporary heritage practice: first a trend for increasing engagement with environmental sound; and, second, a recent embrace of crowdsourcing methodologies in the production of archives.

Heritage practice today finds itself bound by postmodern sensibility. Through concerted critiques of its Eurocentrism, its elitism, and its conservatism (see e.g. Wright 1985; Samuel 1994; Byrne 2004; Smith 2006; Harrison 2013a), its feet have been thoroughly burned on the coals of the 'crisis of representation'. Two important outcomes of this trial by fire have been the emergence in recent decades

of curatorial methods nominally more attuned to public experience, and a thoroughgoing scepticism regarding expert cultures. Schofield (2014, 3) suggests that, today, 'we are all heritage experts', and that as such, arguably, to each member of the crowd must be afforded an equal say in the inscription and interpretation of heritage. Radically enabled by the development of Web 2.0 technologies (with the digital augmentation of crowdsourcing methodologies), the autonomous subject has been notionally liberated to speak for his or herself.

Further, a point which Holtorf (2015) and Harrison (2013b) have raised, many heritage institutions find themselves today in the difficult position of not knowing what *not* to collect. Both responding to and promoting a series of inclusions within the framework provided by heritage (e.g. intangible heritage, and 'everyday' [Schofield 2014] and 'homeless' [Kiddey 2014] heritages), key commentators have come to assert that everything is heritage, or, at least, that anything may be treated as such. Holtorf describes a problem of 'loss aversion' within heritage practice, suggesting that:

the entire sector [...] has long seen itself, in terms of a constant fight to save the existing heritage [...] selflessly preserving for future generations what does not only belong to us today. (2015, 407, 408)

This picture is complicated by an 'everything is heritage' logic, and, for Harrison (2013b, 580), it leads to a 'crisis of accumulation', in which 'we risk being overwhelmed by memory, and in the process making all heritages ineffective and worthless'.

I want to argue here that the developments described above have created a 'noisy' heritage, in which the coherence of messages is lost amid a torrent of voices and objects. Further, I will suggest that this new noisiness exacerbates the marginalisation of certain groups in society, thus deferring engagement with key tensions and injustices in political life. One such tension in Britain is that surrounding migration, an issue, which has polarised the nation since the 'migrant crisis' that originated in the summer of 2015. This tension links to another concerning the marginalisation and even 'demonization' of the White British working class (cf. Jones 2012). Teasing out the potentials of my first term, white noise, I want to reflect on two (not the only two) different registers of whiteness at play in contemporary Britain: one middle class, cosmopolitan and leisurely; the other primarily working class, peripheral, and, sometimes, overtly nationalist.

As well as providing my metaphor in what follows, sound also provides my subject matter. I will proceed below by analysing a case study, *Sounds of our Shores* (SooS). A crowdsourcing project overseen jointly by the National Trust and the British Library, SooS aimed to generate a permanent archive of British coastal sounds, and is an example of a kind of crowd-based engagement with sonic culture increasingly common in heritage practice. Since it ran in parallel to the first months of the migrant crisis (from June to September 2015), SooS also affords an opportunity to consider the audibility of those two forms of whiteness described above at a key moment in British history. In reflecting on the ways in which, through the project, one set of 'white' sounds were privileged over the other, I will draw upon Stoeber-Ackerman's (2010) notion of the 'sonic color-line', affirming the importance of her work to audiences in heritage studies.

## Archive and actuality

On 21 June 2015 the British Library and the National Trust launched a new crowdsourcing project, *Sounds of our Shores*. The aim of the project was to build an archive and map of coastal sounds, comprising field recordings submitted by the general public (British Library 2015a).

On 23 June 2015, two days after that launch, strike action taken by staff at the Port of Calais caused delays at the border between France and the UK. Large numbers of migrants seeking refuge in Britain took advantage of slow-moving traffic to stow away in lorries queuing for the Channel crossing at Calais. Amid the resulting media storm, British public attention began to focus in earnest on what has since come to be termed 'the migrant crisis'. Weeks later Dover, a British port town adjoining Calais, played host to the first of many right-wing demonstrations to come. In early September 2015, and again in January and April 2016, the South East Alliance and the National Front descended on the coast to protest rising immigration. All three marches were marked by outbreaks of violence, all ended

in storms of chanting: ‘No more refugees!’, ‘There ain’t no black in the Union Jack!’ (Dover Express 2015) Faced with a volatile world beyond, the flames of their anger fanned by long-term economic austerity, Britons on the far right peered nervously towards the continent over Dover’s famous White Cliffs. Stung into action by incendiary coverage of European migration, yet disenfranchised by the political class, they had been reduced to screaming obscenities at a grey and indifferent sea.

It may come as no surprise that in the substantial catalogue of recordings compiled in the course of *SooS* no evidence was retained of the sonic turmoil wrought on the coast by migration and its discontents in the summer of 2015. There are good reasons for this, and my intention in this paper is not to criticise the project’s outcomes. From the beginning, *SooS* encouraged its participants to submit their ‘favourite’ sounds to its new archive (a category, one assumes, that for most people would not include the gruff *ostinato* of right-wing protest). Moreover, as I confirmed through a series of email exchanges with the project’s lead at the British Library, Cheryl Tipp, it was never intended to constitute a critical examination of coastal sound. The project’s primary objectives, instead, were to raise public interest in listening, to promote awareness of the Library’s Sound Archive, and, for the National Trust, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of its Neptune Coastal Campaign, which raises funds to enable the purchase and preservation of coastal territory for the enjoyment of the public. Already, then, it is clear that any blunt attempt to reprimand *SooS* for failing to engage with migrant narratives would be missing its point.

It would be ungenerous, too, to fail to acknowledge the success the project has enjoyed on its own terms, particularly as a champion for public engagement with sound. As well as inspiring hundreds of individuals to contribute directly to its archive, *SooS* also accumulated impressive amounts of media coverage: its launch was reported by newspapers across the country and online; it claimed a prime spot on the BBC’s popular magazine show *Countryfile* (2016), and, somewhat less conventionally, it secured permission to broadcast certain of the recordings in its archive over the loudspeaker system of the London Underground (n.a. 2015). All of this bears testament to the work *SooS* did in bringing sound to wide audiences, and, as such it also hints at what ‘heritage’ (as an array of institutions with privileged access to the media and certain sections of the public) can offer to researchers and practitioners working with sound. If critical listening is to become a staple of public engagement with the world around us, museums, libraries, and archives will surely play an important role in bringing about that change.

Perhaps, however, it is the very success of *SooS* in mobilising its public to listen that should give us pause for thought. Is this a model that heritage professionals elsewhere ought to look to replicate as sound grows in popularity? Can we crowdsource our way to a deeper understanding of the sonic realm? To my mind, a look at the content of the new archive raises concerns in this regard. Of some seven hundred recordings submitted by the public over the three months of *SooS*, nine fell along the Dover coastline where the protests I referred to earlier took place. Of those, five were produced on-site at National Trust properties, one features the sounds of a ferry disembarking, two are recordings of tides on the move, and the last is of footsteps trudging across a pebble beach. In terms of their content, this small assemblage maps closely to trends I identified in an analysis of 100 recordings drawn at random from the new archive. Of that larger pool, almost half had been produced at a National Trust or other official heritage site, a third focused on sounds made by water (waves, rainfall, rivers), and one in ten celebrated the sound of people walking on shingle (more than the number that featured the sounds of work of any kind). Nowhere in my sample could violence or anger be heard, and only once did a recording hint even vaguely at the kind of socio-political transformation that has seen far-right political parties gain support across Europe in the past decade.<sup>1</sup> Overall, then, the *SooS* archive is a thoroughly sanitised artefact. Meanwhile, for anyone willing to taint their Internet search history with traces of white supremacism, YouTube holds ample evidence of the sonic force brought to bear on the coast in 2015 by right-wing protest (Driver 2015; NationalFrontTV 2015).

Having noted the limitations of the new *SooS* archive as a reflection of the sounds of the UK coast, I want now to highlight certain inconsistencies in the internal logic and external framing of the project, to see what new directions these propose. Though conceived as a means of driving interest in sound (and, as such, as an *intervention*, or *provocation*, far more than as a *study*), *SooS* nevertheless aspires to the longevity by which heritage traditionally defines itself. Billed as the ‘first ever coastal

soundmap of the UK, it is intended to endure in the British Library Sound Archive as 'a permanent digital resource of UK coastal recordings'. Further, though it might appear to have eschewed a critical investigation of the soundscape, the project nonetheless claims to represent 'the diversity of the coastline' (British Library 2015b), and indeed, on its homepage on the British Library website, it is presented as providing an answer to the question: 'What did the UK coastline sound like during the summer of 2015?' (British Library 2015a) It is in flourishes such as these (a retreat to grand conceptualisations of nation; gestures to a process of comprehensive salvage and documentation) that problems begin to emerge, and where one might begin to identify a certain confusion of ends and means that is far from uncommon in heritage practice.

Writing on the construction of the new Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Butler (2012) set out to critique a tendency for governments and large-scale heritage institutions to confuse the *force* of heritage (for Butler, popular attachment and collective memory; tentatively, I would add educational potential) with its *form* (architectural grandiloquence, vast archives, massive infrastructure). All too often, she suggests, the latter stands in for the former. Thus in *SooS*, what began as a momentary experiment in listening becomes a statement-for-all-time on the sonic characteristics of nation, and, similarly, what originated as a novel attempt at mass audience engagement becomes a reflection of 'diversity'; one which under the banner of nation comes to stand for all Britons. It is in this moment of transformation that it becomes relevant to think critically about notions of 'the crowd' and 'diversity', and to challenge failures of representation. Hence, too, it is at this moment that my foregrounding of the sounds of the migrant crisis attains validity, and at which we might see why their absence from the archive matters. As an isolated exercise in promoting listening, *SooS* has some merit. As a means of documenting nation, however, or of embedding a form of critical listening attuned to the diversity and contested nature of the British soundscape, the project is clearly limited. Certainly, by embracing an unfettered crowdsourcing methodology, the project partners traded off insight for engagement. Rather than asking which sounds specifically resonated through 2015, and what they might be able to tell us about British culture, they instead bent to accommodate all comers, garnering data that is correspondingly weaker. This is the noise that obliterates signal, the mass murmuring of the many that drowns out the urgent calling of the few.

I will go on below to undertake a fuller analysis of *SooS*. First, however, I want to pause to consider what is at stake in the development of the new field of 'sound' or 'sonic' heritage, of which the project forms a part. In highlighting two examples of critical work emerging from Sound Studies, I will suggest a new direction for heritage organisations working with sound, placing an emphasis on understanding modes of listening, rather than focusing on preserving materials.

### Listening differently: beyond conservation in sonic heritage

Lawrence Abu Hamdan researches the status of the voice as an object of legal testimony. In the course of extensive work with asylum seekers, he has encountered instances of vocal discrimination, leading to deportations, which prompt careful consideration of the way sound operates at the borders between different peoples. So for example, Abu Hamdan recounts the story of:

Mohamed, a Palestinian asylum seeker who, after having the immigration authorities lose his Palestinian identity card, was forced to undergo an accent analysis to prove his origins. Subsequently he was told he was lying about his identity because of the way he pronounced the word for tomato. Instead of 'bandora' he said 'banadora'. [...] The fact that this syllable designates citizenship above an identity card that contradicts it forces us to rethink how borders are being made perceptible and how configurations of vowels and consonants are made legally accountable. (2014, 214)

Abu Hamdan's work is provocative as it pertains to issues surrounding migration, and suggestive of the potential that lies in a concerted appraisal of cultures of sound and listening. As well as underlining the way in which sounds can be understood as culturally coded, and, that such coding has real political consequences, his analysis also points toward a way of encountering sonic heritage that goes far beyond concerns with the production of recordings as documentation. Considering Mohamed's

story in terms of its historicity, one can see that the ultimate refusal of his application for asylum was predicated upon cultures of listening that have been socially and technologically formed through time, and which are densely interwoven with a contemporary geopolitics, itself the product of centuries of historical upheaval. I would term this an *auditory* inheritance or heritage, to denote the sense in which what is being transmitted through time is not sound itself, or not only sound, but also a received way of listening.

In emphasising a mode of listening as much as a manner of sound production, Abu Hamdan's work aligns with recent developments in Sound Studies. Jennifer Stoeve-Ackerman's research has been instrumental in forcing race onto the agendas of academics investigating sound. Writing on the experience and 'aural stereotyping' as 'noisy' of New York Puerto Ricans in the 1950s,<sup>2</sup> she posits the existence of a 'sonic color-line', which:

[...] forms a dominant sonic protocol that attempts to contain the sound of 'Others' and silence alternative listening practices as aberrant and dangerous, even inhuman. In effect, sounds from the past come to us already listened to; they are mediated through and by raced, gendered and historicized 'listening ears'. (2010, 64)

Importantly, these 'listening ears' are active as much in our engagement with present sounds as with those emerging from the past. Thus, Stoeve-Ackerman's notion of the sonic colour-line 'posits listening as an interpretive site where racial difference is coded, produced, and policed. In essence, we hear race in addition to seeing it' (2010, 65). Valuable in itself, Stoeve-Ackerman's research on race has prompted calls for further close engagement with culturally embedded modes of listening. In July 2015 (as *SooS* was in full-swing), critic Gus Stadler took to popular Sound Studies blog *Sounding Out!* to call for 'more avenues [to be] opened [...] for work acknowledging that our understanding of sound is always conducted, and has always been conducted, from within history, as lived through categories like race' (Stadler 2015).

If scholars within Sound Studies are attuned to the inheritance we all mobilise or struggle against as socially formed listeners, the same cannot be said of many of their counterparts working in Heritage Studies. For Johannes Mücke, making an early attempt in 2011 to conceptualise the field, sonic heritage 'does not exist per se', but rather it forms through processes of inscription in entities such as the UNESCO Memory of the World archive (2011, 37). This rather reductive formulation is mirrored in a more recent article, in which Pinar Yelmi called for the sounds of Istanbul to be preserved as 'intangible heritage' (2016). Having set out a thin, if valid, argument for her position (that sounds are cultural, ergo sounds are heritage) she proceeds to follow a trail of sites and sounds proposed by tourists and local residents, recording as she goes. Her position is not so much that sounds are interesting and therefore should be paid attention to, as that sounds also exist and therefore should also be preserved.<sup>3</sup> One finds the same progression (from recognition of an untapped sonic reality, to preservation of recorded sounds as documentary heritage) in another recent project, *The Next Station*, billed as the 'first ever soundmap of the London Underground' (2016). And so it continues: with sound enjoying newfound critical and popular attention, we have unwittingly entered into a race for firsts: field recordists are competitively staking out territory, defining sites in need of sonic preservation, and concocting projects that self-consciously perform a self-ascribed, long-term documentary value. The corollary of this is that the simplistic notion that 'sonic heritage' means an archive of (typically, place-specific) sounds has been quickly naturalised.

There are, of course, exceptions to this widespread *production* of sound heritage within the field that evidence a deeper engagement with matters sonic. Notably, Lobley (2015) has conducted important work in the Central African Republic, circulating recordings from the Pitt Rivers Museum's collection of BaAka music among the descendants of 'source communities', in an attempt to share and revive knowledge of forgotten songs and practices. Elsewhere, archaeologist Benjamin (2014) has advanced the concept of 'sonic artefacts' or 'heirloom sounds' in the course of his listening to the ruins of abandoned industrial sites. What is notable in both these cases, however, is that each derives its 'heritage' value largely from engagement with antique materials. While Lobley demonstrates an interest in the emotional and intellectual responses triggered by exposure to things from the past, and Benjamin grounds his listening (to absence, to decay) in terms of an analysis of the wasteful anthropocene, each



nevertheless takes as his starting point, in framing sound as heritage, the deployment of material traces of the past, already separated out from everyday life.

Material endurance appears, then, to date, to have been a fundamental ingredient for individuals working with sonic heritage. And that seems also to have been the case in *SooS*. In establishing the project as an archive, the National Trust and the British Library reaffirmed a deep-seated attachment to materials as the proper subject and product of heritage engagement. They thus traded an opportunity to intervene critically in the present for the promise of thingly transcendence: the assumption that at some unspecified point in the future, someone will want to hear us, that we ought to provide for that someone, and that this specific form of immortality is of greater value than a concerted effort to change conditions now.

Even if one disagrees with the notion that heritage should strive to intervene in political life, surely it is clear that an approach to the sonic environment predicated primarily on recording materials will end by fostering a dramatically reduced form of listening. A recorder cannot capture the memories associated with sound; it cannot convey the emotional responses that make listening meaningful. More pragmatically, sound is a fluid phenomenon, and by the time one decides to record something exceptional, it has usually vanished into the ether. This means that for most participants in *SooS*, recordings would have to have focused on sounds they could reasonably expect to stay 'still' for a while (the sea churning away), or on things they could control or predict (regularly chiming bells, craft performances, foghorns). Lastly, the act of recording is not always a comfortable one: there are times (perhaps standing in the middle of a neo-Fascist protest is one of them) at which it feels decidedly risky to withdraw a recorder from one's pocket to start harvesting materials. Taking these points together, one can appreciate the extent to which the eventual content of the *SooS* archive was dictated by the assumption that material conservation matters. Conceiving of 'sonic heritage' as something to be explored through recording(s) alone necessarily reduces the complexity of our engagement with sound, placing tangible limits on our listening.

I want to conclude this section by channelling the arguments I have made back through the frame of noise. In the work of Jennifer Stoeve-Ackerman, one finds a form of sonic enquiry dedicated primarily to the task of decoding. Beneath the apparent innocence of practices of listening, a close analysis of auditory culture divines certain perceptual biases that complicate our understanding of social relations, shedding light on issues of race and discrimination. By contrast, work with sound in heritage practice has tended to foreground notions of documentation and conservation. Viewing 'cultural transmission' as a primary goal, it directs its energies towards those sounds that may change or disappear in time, seeking to fix these in a spirit of historical transcendence and self-mythologisation. Since all environments, and thus all sounds, are in constant flux, this affords collecting institutions the security of knowing that whatever sounds they preserve, they are, on their own terms, doing something worthwhile. My argument would be that, where Stoeve-Ackerman, Abu Hamdan, and others within Sound Studies are striving to recognise and understand *signals*, heritage, by contrast, is cultivating and amplifying *noise*.

## The crowd in *SooS*

Thus far, I have attempted to show how a preoccupation with the perceived need to materially fix ephemeral sounds for the future has worked to generate a particular kind of object-noise in sonic heritage practice, and to preclude a close analysis of cultures of listening. In this second half of my discussion, I will turn to look at the way in which crowdsourcing generates a different but no less problematic noise of its own. When I introduced the notion of 'noisiness' above, I sketched an image of the heritage industry now, in a moment of profound expansion and reorientation. I also pointed to the pressure that these developments have placed on heritage professionals to be more inclusive with regard to their various audiences. Interestingly, it was just this sense of expanded and diversified responsibility that Cheryl Tipp of the British Library articulated when I asked her on what basis it was that *SooS* had settled on a crowdsourcing methodology:

It is more the case of us trying to fulfil the varied roles that are now expected of heritage institutions – to educate, to entertain and, increasingly, to engage. Interactive engagement with our regular users as well as general members of the public is becoming increasingly important as institutions try to move away from traditional ideas of what heritage organisations should be – places where people can come and use collections but normally not contribute. Following the crowdsourcing road on this occasion [reflected] a real desire to involve the public and get them thinking about the coast from a sonic point of view. (Personal communication, September 12, 2016)

Crowdsourcing, then, is imagined as a way of diversifying representation and transcending structural imbalances in heritage practice. In order to suggest that this is a promise that the method alone simply cannot deliver on, I want to look now at how crowdsourcing worked in *SooS*, and, in particular, at the way that it served to conceal and even promulgate certain perceptual biases.

For Bennett, Dibley, and Harrison (2014, 142), examining colonial collecting practices, ‘depending on how “data” are defined, determine[s] how they are collected and processed’. Adopting Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar’s terminology in an analysis of the British sociological movement ‘Mass-Observation’, Harrison (2014, cf. Latour and Woolgar 1979) further highlights the part played by ‘inscription devices’ (standardised measurements, forms-to-be-filled, instruction manuals, technological apparatus, etc.) in determining the limits of what can emerge as ‘knowledge’ from processes of mass-consultation. These are both points that historian of science Lorraine Daston has illustrated in her work on nineteenth-century cloud classification, and which she links directly to the problem of the crowd. Daston describes the manner in which, in pan-European attempts to crowdsource data about cloud distribution, professional meteorologists strived to train the perceptual habits of amateur observers, making use of classificatory schemes, cloud atlases, and standardised terminologies, such that lay contributors would learn:

to see things and to see the same things, a world held in common. But it is not the common world that they learn to see. By ordinary standards, these are strange objects, strangely seen, often by strange people. (2008, 107)

In drawing attention to the material, technological and discursive underpinnings of crowd-based knowledge production, Bennett et al., and Daston encourage us to recognise how certain forms of knowledge come to be deposited in records and archives, and, by extension, to be sensitive to the alternative kinds of knowledge these may exclude. I want to continue with my analysis of *SooS*, bearing precisely this materialist perspective on collecting and cataloguing cultures in mind. My first step, to this end, will be to consider the agency exerted upon the project by Web technologies.

The first observation to make regarding the use of the Internet and other digital apparatus in *SooS* is a simple one. By facilitating the rapid production and transfer of digital sound files, as well as their aggregation in remote databases, Web and digital recording technologies make mass-participation in the production of sound archives a realistic possibility for curators: vast distances, limited timeframes, and scarce resources need no longer be seen as barriers to the production of a collection. In this sense, those technologies also serve to constitute a crowd that previously lay out of the reach of researchers and heritage professionals (in effect, it never existed before). In certain respects, then, digital technologies are powerful enablers, and because of this they have prompted excitement within the heritage sector. For numerous commentators and researchers (e.g. Owens 2013; Ridge 2013), digitally facilitated crowdsourcing promises to democratise collecting, and to simplify the process of curating archives more representative of their publics.

A second affordance of new Web technology is the ability to render large volumes of information online in a variety of visual formats that can help to make them more digestible for users. The soundmap is one such format and has been widely taken up by sound practitioners over the past 15 years (see Tausig 2010; Waldock 2011). As I noted above, it was also the model chosen by the British Library and the National Trust to disseminate the contents of the *SooS* archive. Referring to this decision, Cheryl Tipp explained:

We thought a sound map would be the best way, visually, to present all the coastal sound recordings we expected to receive. We wanted to be able to easily see which areas of the coast were being visited and recorded, where potential gaps that could be filled were, and how the map was developing over time. (Personal communication, January 29, 2016)



Though popular among practitioners, soundmaps have drawn mixed appraisals from critics. While for Carlyle (2014, 150) the format offers the potential to disrupt traditional cartographies, promoting 'affective attentiveness [...] to the dangerous [...] and to the precarious', Waldo (2011) qualifies her own enthusiasm for soundmapping with considerable caution. Through an analysis of various soundmapping projects, she identifies several trends: a 'beauty bias', favouring rural/natural subject matter; an overrepresentation of male contributors that speculatively precludes an acknowledgement of female experiences of space; and a failure to engage with private and domestic space, since the public realm offers itself up more freely for recording. A further valuable observation Waldo makes is that for many would-be soundmappers, access to expensive recording equipment can make for a significant barrier to participation: thus far from challenging or countering hegemonic narratives about place, soundmapping can serve unwittingly to reinforce them.

This challenge of access was one that the British Library and the National Trust worked hard to address, stressing that anyone who owned a smartphone could take part in *SooS* (British Library 2015c). Nevertheless Waldo's concerns are valid, and they point to broader issues with crowdsourcing. The semantic fallacy that underwrites many crowdsourcing projects is that 'the crowd' can be equated to the public. In theory, the Internet makes collecting projects accessible to all. In practice, however, it is clear that online audiences will always be self-selecting, and that they are therefore just as likely as any other to reflect certain demographic biases. Whole sections of society without interest in the National Trust or the British Library (and, moreover, the 11% of Britons without regular access to the Internet [ONS 2015]) go unrepresented in the *SooS* archive. Meanwhile, the material prop of the map introduces further problems. While on the one hand mapping sound files can add valuable geographical context to their contents, on the other, it proposes, visually, a problematic indexical relationship between archive and nation. That the project organisers valued the ability to refer to a map in order to see at a glance what areas had yet to be recorded implies that, where recordings had been submitted, these were taken as adequately representative of the region in question. Thus, the map as a means of re-presenting data generates a false confidence in the ability of an archive to capture diversity, and, more importantly, it reconfigures the very notion of diversity as a straightforward factor of geographical dispersion, eliding race, class, politics, and so on.

Returning to the point I raised above concerning the capacity of Internet technologies to get things done quickly and across great distance, one finds another significant problem. From one perspective, the acceleration of collecting processes is very attractive for heritage professionals: it produces results instantly and reflects back data to audiences with the minimum of delay. Yet one of the obvious effects of concentrating a collecting project into just a few weeks is that it ignores variation over time. In effect, the complexity of a project's findings is reduced in this way; meanwhile, the decision of when to stage a project takes on greater weight, risking the introduction of various biases into the collecting process. The deciding factor behind *SooS*' timing was a lack of resources. With only one member of staff available to manage the project, it was decided that a yearlong venture would be unfeasible, and that, given the need to focus the project on a shorter period of time, the summer was preferable since it is the peak period for visits to the coast. Importantly, the kind of restraints that previously may have prompted an institution to recognise the limits of its capacity to represent people (and, accordingly, to rein in its ambitions) are rendered irrelevant (or at least less visible) in the age of digital crowdsourcing, since Web technologies appear a reliable means of overcoming the challenges presented by time and space. Even in the context of *SooS*, which, again, was concerned more with capturing favourite sounds than with generating critical insight, this creates difficulties. For individuals whose favourite coastal sounds are those of winter storms, or of the last train of holidaymakers pulling away from the seaside, leaving peace and quiet in its wake, the temporal constraints of *SooS* (whose organisers had predetermined the most significant time of the year at which to record) might have prevented them from making a contribution to the archive.

Lighting on the curatorial decision to condense *SooS* into the window of the British summertime, I come to one final theme in my analysis; namely discourse, and the capacity crowdsourcing has to disguise its powerful effects. Underlying the decision to crowdsource *SooS* was, as Cheryl Tipp explained,

a desire for ‘the public to tell us what were the most interesting, evocative and beautiful coastal sounds during the summer of 2015, rather than the other way around’ (personal communication, January 29, 2016, original emphasis). In this sense, the project partners and team were imagined as neutral receivers, and the participating public conceived as a newly activated but thoroughly independent mass. Yet in reading the press release that lay behind the vast majority of media coverage of *SooS*, this view seems hard to sustain. Picking through that document one finds listed an assortment of sounds intended to inspire the public to go out and make recordings. Those are, in full:

[The] vibrant sounds of a working fishing village;  
gulls screaming on one of the wonderful seabird islands dotted around our coast;  
the kettle whistling from inside a much loved beach hut;  
someone wrestling with putting up a deck-chair,  
the sounds of a fish and chip shop or a busy port  
footsteps in the sand;  
the sound of people ordering and eating ice-creams;  
the waves crashing against the rocks;  
the seagulls calling ....

(Sewell 2015)

Factors that seem important to note here are: first, the predominance of sounds related to leisure in the list; second, the prominence of natural imagery; and, third, a determination to cast everything in a positive light (even a national fishing industry in a state of utter collapse) such that sounds are rendered as uncritically delightful objects of entertainment. What the list reproduces is a startlingly narrow, arguably middle-class, and undeniably tourist-eared account of the coast, which fails to account for any of the socio-political complexity that even the most fleeting study of coastal territories would reveal.

These observations lead me back to a consideration of the Neptune Coastal Campaign, the National Trust’s programme for purchasing coastal land, celebrated through *SooS*. At its launch in 1965, Neptune was conceived as a means of ‘saving’ Britain’s ‘vanishing’ coastline. From the very beginning of that project, however, the Trust had clear ideas about precisely which lands it hoped to acquire, and of what it meant by ‘vanishing’. Having completed a survey of the entire coastline shortly prior to the project’s launch, it laid out a plan to buy up only one third of Britain’s coastal territory; this the land its surveyors had identified as being ‘of great beauty and recreational value’. Of the remaining two thirds, one half simply could not be bought, and the other was deemed ‘spoilt beyond recall’, blighted by industry, developers, and, worst of all, caravaners (Rathbone 1966, 215).

In the 50 years leading up to Neptune’s anniversary and its re-marketing through *SooS*, there is some evidence that attitudes at the National Trust have changed, and that, at least as regards the role of industry in shaping the environment, the organisation is taking a less purist approach (see DeSilvey 2012). Nevertheless, it is ironic that, as a programme conceived in order to present loss, Neptune contrived (and arguably still contrives) to banish two thirds of the UK’s coast from discursive and imaginative view. Indeed, as its most recent publication on the subject makes clear, the National Trust’s conceptualisation of coast is still based on the idea that, rather than being a place where people live, work, struggle and so on, the seaside is a site for leisure and the consumption of natural beauty. ‘Where possible’, the document states, ‘we don’t want anything to get in the way of an amazing view’ (National Trust 2015).

Perhaps I needn’t state here that I affirm the right of the National Trust to hold its own views about nation. In any case, it may be that heritage audiences are immune to this kind of discursive persuasion, and that the recordings submitted to *SooS* reflect an unbiased engagement with the sonic environment presented by the coast. Yet if one reflects again on the contents of the archive as outlined earlier, it does not seem implausible to suggest that the images of coast deployed in the project’s marketing, and derived from a wider, thoroughly sanitised discourse on coast, did play some part in shaping

the listening that built the archive. Certainly, that discourse appears to have influenced the decision to stage the project in peak tourist season. Perhaps, too, it naturalised the targeting of the project at 'favourite' sounds alone. For, with the coast fixed imaginatively as a site of leisure and natural beauty, the existence of alternate, less savoury aspects of coastal life and politics was forgotten before the project had even started.

The crucial point here is that, all the while an appeal for crowd content may appear discursively to be a neutral way of assembling a collection, the terms in which that appeal is framed will always, to some extent, impact the way in which a given crowd engages with its subject matter; in this instance, the mode of listening it deployed. The image of the crowd as author of culture, and of a given place or nation as the origin and container of the archive, might serve to obscure the impact of other factors at work in the production of knowledge, but, sure enough, those factors exist. In *SooS* the spectacle of the crowd draws attention from the inner workings of a project that discursively privileged and materially preselected sounds that reproduce the coast as a site of leisure and natural beauty. Ultimately, the noise of mass-participation prevents us from decoding a powerfully reductive, culturally embedded way of listening.

### (White) noise

In my analysis above, I have used the example of the crowdsourcing project *SooS* to posit the existence of two different kinds of noise in contemporary heritage practice. The first is the product of unfettered material accumulation. The second is that of the crowd, increasingly courted by heritage organisations as a source of folk wisdom, whose collective voice serves to exclude figures at the margins of society, and to distract attention from the way in which private discourse influences public opinion.

To draw my discussion to a close I want to think now about why this matters. The premise for my analysis of *SooS* was that the project appears to exclude both migrant narratives and (literally) the voices of the white British nationalist movement from an archive where both would have been relevant additions. Importantly, however, I have not set out to attack the project's outcomes here, and neither do I consider the absence of those sounds from the archive (as an historical document) to be of particularly great social significance. A 100 years from now, historians investigating the past sounds of coastal Britain will be astute enough to hear through the holes in the archive. In 200 years, the Internet will likely be broken anyway and access to the soundmap will prove impossible for all but the most persistent Web archaeologists. What matters here, then, is not the afterlife of the archive, so much as the prevailing democratic-materialist logic of crowd-based accumulation and preservation that determined the form *SooS* ultimately took, and which, crucially, shaped the nature of the collective listening it proposed.

Disregarding the archival ambition behind the project, one can recognise that the moment when *SooS* was at its most potent and had its best chance to influence public consciousness was in the clamour surrounding its launch. In that instant of peak publicity, as the British Library recognised, there was an opportunity to produce a listening public newly attentive to the intrigues of the sonic environment. My concern is that, in pursuing this opportunity, the project partners arrived at a process that, firstly, cast the potential transformation or loss of that environment over time as its most interesting feature, and that, secondly, appeared deaf to, and thus unable to redress, its own discursive force in shaping modes of audition.

In outlining her notion of the sonic colour-line, Jennifer Stoeve-Ackerman notes that 'whiteness' is 'notorious for reproducing itself as "invisible" – or [...] inaudible', due in part to 'a general perception that white representations stand in for "people" in general, rather than "white people" in particular'. (2010, 66) In *SooS*, while it was not whiteness per se that dominated and came to reproduce itself in the archive (rather it was a particular form of middle-class leisurely whiteness) it is precisely this displacement of the general by the particular under the sign of nation that must be recognised as its most problematic feature. As the project unfolded, quite unaware of their own internal biases and the way these were hardwired into various marketing materials, the National Trust and the British

Library instructed their audiences in a mode of listening insensitive (among other things) to the experience of non-White migrants, and to the dissenting cries of the White nationalist Other. The archive, the crowd, the press release, broadcasts on the London Underground: all of these acted as inscription devices that deftly, if unintentionally, constructed and regulated the boundaries of acceptable listening, and of knowledge of the self and the Other. Even as *SooS* opened up the sonic environment to its audiences as a new field of experience, these devices worked to discipline public listening, aestheticising and domesticating the sonic, wresting from it the power to disrupt hegemonic narratives of nation. Importantly, while Stoever-Ackerman's concern with various racialised modes of listening informs and shapes my analysis here, the example of *SooS* reminds us of the need to pay careful attention, too, to the functioning of other perceptual frameworks, grounded in class, economic status, and political disposition. (Here one might think of the 'small-c' conservatism of mainstream heritage practice.) If there is noise in the archive, distorting our perception of social life, then it is not straightforwardly 'white' noise, and, further, the field cannot rest on the assumption that white experience is uniform.

In a final move before closing, having pursued the metaphor of noise faithfully thus far, I want now to interrogate more closely its suitability for the uses to which I have put it here. In the critiques of heritage materialism and crowdsourcing I presented above, noise figures as an overwhelmingly problematic phenomenon. Yet for numerous thinkers, notably Jacques Attali, it need not be conceived of in such negative terms. In his classic analysis of the political force of musical reproduction, Attali celebrates the potentially generative and profoundly meaningless nature of noise as an expression of pure disorder:

[The] very absence of meaning in pure noise [...], by unchanneling auditory sensations, frees the listener's imagination. The absence of meaning is in this case the presence of all meanings, absolute ambiguity [...] The presence of noise makes sense, makes meaning. It makes possible the creation of a new order on another level of organization, of a new code in another network. (1985, 33)

For Attali, then, rather than constituting an obstructive force that hinders access to knowledge, noise is the *precondition of all knowledge*. It exists *prior to*, and not merely as an *excess of* information. In this light, it is not noise that threatens social life; rather, attempts to order noise are viewed with suspicion as covert expressions of practices of domination. As such, Attali notes that 'power is incorporated into the very process of the selection of repeatable moulds' (90), and he encourages us to pursue critically any instance in which noise is subjected to order, made repeatable, archived, or reproduced, that we might better understand and resist our oppressors. Ultimately, the system described here is one in which the extent to which there is still noise eluding the ordering machinations of power, is also the extent to which we can yet hope to overcome the forces that dominate us (3).

Bearing Attali's reading of noise in mind, one might justifiably object that the noise I identify in the massed object deposits of contemporary heritage practice is not noisy at all. Perhaps, subjected to and expressing an archival logic, it is the only-superficially-chaotic order (and thus still reproducible mould) of a society intent on replicating itself through time with the minimum of change. There again, as seeming-chaos tamed, oppression cloaked in anarchy, this order might be doubly worthy of the suspicion habitually reserved for projects of mass-representation.

Turning to crowdsourcing, though I claim the crowd as form of noise that serves to defer critical engagement with the discursive and material underpinnings of the heritage industry, I have also suggested that it reproduces within itself an ordered kind of listening. Indeed, by consolidating and amplifying a narrow repertoire of sounds thought to be acceptable, the crowd marks as noisy, and works to silence, its Others. There thus appears to be a paradox in my analysis: that the crowd both constitutes noise in itself, and defines noise beyond itself.

It could be that at the root of this apparent contradiction lies a straightforward equivocation: as I proceed through my discussion, noise, as the other of signal, is all too casually interchanged with a second noise: the undesired, dirty, or inappropriate sound. Alternatively, this bleeding of meaning into meaning is a factor of the inbuilt ambiguity at the heart of noise, and a key part of its value for thinking through heritage. To my mind, it is well to leave that particular problem unresolved here,

with noise remaining an open question for the field of Critical Heritage Studies to discuss, debate and reuse. There is, however, one firm conclusion that I do wish to draw here, which concerns the prospects for the nascent field of sonic heritage I described above. What I have attempted to show here is that, for better or worse, consciously or unconsciously, heritage organisations working with sound have the potential to shape public modes of perception. Importantly, then, if the heritage sector is to deliver on its potential to bring sound to new audiences, it must begin by examining its own ears, and by recognising the biases brought to bear in its own listening.

## Notes

1. A recording of a once-busy Belfast dock lying silent (WillOHawkins 2015).
2. See Radovac (2011) for a comparable discussion of race as a factor in the 'War on Noise' in 1930s/1940s New York.
3. 'Soundscapes may also be in need of safeguarding in order to transmit cultural identity and traditions to following generations. For example, tea has been a very important cultural element in the everyday life of Turkey's people since the nineteenth century. Despite the fact that the implements for preparing and serving tea have changed [...], tea culture has been safeguarded within society for centuries. The sonic values of tea culture have also changed due to the usage of different objects, such as electric water kettles. These types of changes in the acoustic values of a certain cultural element need to be collected before they are lost as they are powerful symbols of sonic heritage and cultural identity'. (Yelmi 2016, 303)

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