

The Unseen Heard: a history based geolocated audio trail for Ramsgate, Kent, UK

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Abstract

Unseen Heard was a ten-stop geolocated audio trail produced from archive sources for the Power of Women Festival, Thanet, UK, 2021. Celebrating the lives of extraordinary nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women in the coastal town of Ramsgate, Kent, the trail was produced as a response to the gender-biased histories of place still endemic across heritage and as a test case for co-creative community story telling. This paper questions unconscious bias in heritage 'production', looks at the background and production of the trail, and highlights the possibilities for creative, immersive and engaging ways of telling stories with community co-production.

Keywords

Locative, geolocated, audio trail, soundwalk, soundscape, history walk

Introduction

Following my collaboration on the interactive sound installation and exhibition *Echoes* at Ramsgate Festival of Sound (2020), I was invited to contribute to POW! (Power of Women) festival 2021. I was the (then) lead archaeologist for CITiZAN's East Kent Coast Discovery Programme (see <https://citizan.org.uk/discovery-programmes/east-kent-coast/>), which was also a MOLA project (see <https://www.mola.org.uk/>). I used this opportunity to create *The Unseen Heard* – not only for the festival but also to test potential for future CITiZAN and MOLA public archaeology offerings. The piece had to complement existing CITiZAN outputs and, COVID-wise, be delivered remotely.

Background

CITiZAN's Low Tide Trails highlight coastal archaeology and history but as a result of systemic societal sexism, foreground male experience (see e.g. CITiZAN, 2020). A feminist misguide (Hodge et al 2006) seemed in order, a/effectively disrupting received heritage and societal discourse by exposing new connections and stories. Building on *Here but Not Here: Fragments*, an aural misguide merging place and time (Band and Ogilvie, 2021), it would be an audio trail. There would be creative prompts along the way for playing with time, place and the senses e.g. drawing while

walking or stopping to draw sounds heard. Other prompts would specifically explore the theme: drawing negative space to highlight gendered gaps in the record, creating black out poetry from official documents that silenced women's voices. Participants would actively engage with the trail: 'map' as a creative, sensory, political, performative past-present-future verb rather than an opaque noun (Hacıgüzeller, 2017; Lee, 2019). Following best practice, trail tracks would be a maximum of two minutes/300 words in length (Nubart, 2017); short is also good, as lurking may be anxiety-inducing or dangerous, particularly for racialised and gendered bodies (WalkingLab, n.d.). Different voices are more engaging, offering multiple viewpoints and stories (see e.g. Genitote community, N.d.). The Soundtrails app offered the best mix of audio, text and image, considered from the perspective of accessibility.

Inspiration

It soon became clear that *The Unseen Heard* could focus on creative actions or on site-specific stories - but attempting both would make for a muddled experience, doing justice to neither. Catching sight of an artist's box on my bookshelf, an assemblage made by an old friend, I had a flash of inspiration. Papered with maps, tickets and wallpaper and filled with objects meaningful to both of us, it is an assemblage of stories, our shared past in the present.

In the same thought I saw Orhan Pamuk's *Museum of Innocence: A Novel* (2010): a museum, a para-fictive work of art. The collection and museum aren't real: the objects never belonged to Füsün and curator/protagonist Kemel didn't collect and display them. Yet they are real. In the 1980s, Pamuk began collecting objects from his neighbourhood, Beyoğlu, Istanbul. For him these rusty keys, hair grips, dog figurines and more, documented disappearing late twentieth-century Istanbul (Russell, 2017). Pamuk's works tell stories of life, love, politics, gender and class more immediately and e/affectively than any 'objective' study or report could with the same material culture; a story that 'powerfully reveals real communities in Istanbul and quietly disrupts attempts at totalizing, official narratives.' (McAttackney and Ryzewski, 2017, 14).

Tacita Dean's semi-fictive 1994 film, *Girl Stowaway* (see Foster, 2004), based on a found photograph, brought archival and place-based research to mind. The historiographical turn in contemporary art 'look(s) at the overlooked and conjure(s) the voices of the stifled and the unheard' (Roelstraete, 2013, 29). If *The Unseen Heard* couldn't be a walk for creative interventions, it could be a box of semi-fictional stories told by different women, unwrapped by the listeners' ears as they moved through the streets. It would challenge the trope of the extraordinary woman by telling stories of ordinary women, using archives and sound to reveal people largely written out of history, compelling us to remember them (ibid, 30).

Construction

Using POW!'s logo as the route referenced the misguide *Leaf* (Hodge et al, 2006, 40-41) and created a psychogeographical way of choosing women to feature. I started with census records: the UK census was underway as I worked, weaving past and present together. 'Objective' archaeological writing artificially removes people from the past (Mickel, 2018; Roussou et al, 2017): I saw the trail as counter to this passive voiced 'objectivity', which obscures human involvement in constructing history in the present. I re-positioned my interaction with the same archives I'd use in standard archaeological research and reporting and, seeing subjectivity as political action, used creative writing to fill in the gaps in the records (O'Sullivan, 2008).

Through the census, stories emerged like that of Harriet Tomson ('Harriet Tomson', 1841, 1851, 1861, 1871). Online references to Tomson and Wotton, the oldest brewery in England until acquisition and closure by Whitbread & Co. Ltd. in 1968, give some details of family history (see for example Skelton, 2022). But they never mention Harriet's story, the part she played as Brewer and Maltster head-of-the-household after her husband's death, keeping the brewery going. Research for all the stops revealed interesting stories, or stories that could be linked to wider points of interest. Mary Barsham, head of the household and running a greengrocer in 1861 wasn't in such an unusual position ('Mary Barsham', 1861): the census also revealed half of the greengrocers in Ramsgate at the time were run by women. This isn't an occupation I'd ever seen referred to as one suitable for women before, such as dressmaker, companion, nurse or boarding housekeeper, but it seems that it was, at least in Ramsgate. The census of 1911 provided huge opportunity for civil disobedience by supporters of women's suffrage. Many women devised to be away from home on the night of the census: 'as women do not count, they refuse to be counted' (Princess Sophia Duleep Singh cited by Iglkowski-Broad, 2020). I found one possible protest return during research, a Miss Setterfield ('Miss Setterfield', 1911) who wrote only 'slept away' on her return. With literary licence and to highlight a place rarely noted in Ramsgate's history, however, I chose to feature Doris Tucker ('Doris Tucker', 1911) who was living with her parents and siblings next door to offices of the Ramsgate section of the Women's Social and Political Union: both houses were demolished in the mid-twentieth century and a Travelodge now occupies their footprint. To listen to these women's stories and more, visit the version of the sound trail embedded in CITIZAN's website (Band, 2021).

Though not participatory in the way I'd originally imagined, *The Unseen Heard* casts the listener as census enumerator, turning the walk into performance. Archive sound, foley and field recordings shore up the conversations. Keynotes give a baseline sense of place; signals foreground moments in time such as doorstep scrubbing or trains approaching and the women's voices give unique soundmarks to each stop (Murray Schafer, 1994, 9-10). Esquivel-esque playfulness (1999, [1960]) moves the interlocutor through space. Long gone house doors open, footsteps without bodies clip along, trams glide where only glimpses of rails in potholed roads persist. Through soundscapes and their own imagination, the listener/performer builds new architectures (Pearson, 2001, 159-162) and walking the same streets the women did, they map those women's lives with their feet (Elkin, 2016, 21).

Reflection

Soundtrails allowed for text as well as sound and images, though audio descriptions for people who are D/deaf or hard of hearing rather than just transcripts would have been better. To keep text to a minimum, I didn't include references for the sources that built the stories. This makes it harder for people to follow up on research if they wanted to; I would consider including these in future. Any similar trail in the future would also need more thought on accessibility for B/blind, partially-sighted and differently-sighted people (Asada, 2020). The option to embed content online did help to widen access, however, particularly taking into consideration that not everybody has a smartphone.

Despite these issues, and learning from them, *The Unseen Heard* shows real potential for community trails; for projects with groups researching and creating their own content. Except the British Newspaper Archive (unfortunately) all the resources I used to create it were free or low cost: the Genealogist and similar have free 14-day trials and I used open-source software, creative commons sounds and images and my own field recordings. Creating content on the Soundtrails app is no longer possible, however, as they have become content creators themselves. *The Unseen Heard* is still live on the app but I no longer have access to the back end. I have all the files, so the walk is reproduceable on other apps - but this is a good reminder of the challenges of legacy in digital heritage.

Conclusion

Though I've ordered archival fragments into a relatively coherent temporal structure *contra* Pettursdottir (2017, 193), the underlying soundscapes are an unruly mix of Ramsgatian seagulls, Polish trams, Israeli horses, South African restaurants and more. They create a strange and thickly meshed if not readily apparent collage of place and time. Returning to my conclusions in *Here but not Here: Fragments* (Band and Ogilvie, 2021), field recordings are uncanny impulses, ghosts moving through time and space. Archives persist too, multiple stories and voices fluttering around their edges, waiting to be reactivated, reinterpreted, heard. Implicating the listener/performer in the telling recognises the present as a site of contemporaneity with multiple pasts and futures (Pettursdottir, 2017, 194; Paphitis, 2020), it connects our experiences and helps us spin strands onwards (Ingold, 2011, 161).

While the *The Unseen Heard* isn't the misguide originally intended, it still disrupts dominant ideologies with an immersive drift through the past, in the present. As Lauren Elkin writes in *Flâneuse*: 'you don't need to crunch around in Gore-Tex to be subversive, if you're a woman. Just walk out your front door.' (2016, 21).

Thanks

Grace Conium, Ellie Williams, Tijana Cvetković, Nicky Shreeve, Marian, Louise Davison, Bridget Edgar, Ruth Clasper, Harriet Grey, Deryn Watts and Lawrence Northall for making unseen voices heard, and to Heritage.Dot 2023 dot for giving me the opportunity to share my work.

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