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Duncan, D. (2020). Excavating hidden and forgotten pasts with sound. *The Conversation*.
<https://theconversation.com/excavating-hidden-and-forgotten-pasts-with-sound-140680>

Published in:
The Conversation

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

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Excavating hidden and forgotten pasts with sound

Published: August 27, 2020 11.53am BST

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For people and communities whose pasts have been erased or denied historical documentation, sound presents a rich potential for rediscovering them.

Sound has been used effectively in this regard for various experiences of the second world war.

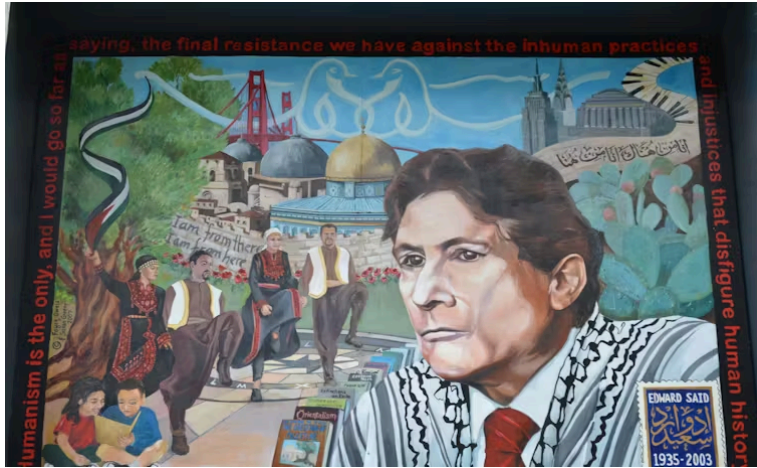
For example, in 1992, the Polish theatre company, Teatr NN, sought to resurrect the Jewish district of the Polish city Lublin, which was obliterated during the second world war, by using sound.

Printing the names of former inhabitants and streets of the disappeared quarter, they invited visitors to speak the names out loud. “By speaking a name, by vocalising that person’s most intimate identification,” says sound theorist Seán Street “their presence moves through time once again.”

Accessing forbidden pasts

Sound is also an effective way to access forbidden pasts, experiences and subjectivities that are problematic or complicated for us today. One such past is the experience of everyday Germans in Nazi-era Germany.

Through extensive archival research and oral history interviews, media academic Carolyn Birdsall has developed what she calls “[Nazi soundscapes](#)”. These are sonic remnants such as songs, sirens, allied plane engines and oral testimony from German civilians in the second world war. Combined, they create potent access points to a past experience.



Palestinian mural Honoring Edward Said. Briantrejo/Wikimedia, CC BY-SA

This notion of silence is of keen interest and importance to theorists of oppression, colonialism and racism, such as [Aimé Césaire](#) and [Edward Said](#).

Césaire’s [Discourse on Colonialism](#) quickly became seminal on its publication in 1950. It persuasively debunked contemporary arguments that the colonial project economically benefited the colonised. Edward Said [would later assert](#) that Césaire’s intention “was not so much to reveal the silence of these colonised people but to shatter their wall-to-wall description (by the oppressor), leaving new space to be filled by people who can speak for themselves at last”.

Inhabiting the past in the present

In parallel with the experience of the colonised, sound can also be an ally for other kinds of oppressed people whose pasts have been distorted, repressed, erased or silenced.

Sound theorist [Seán Street says that](#) “sound provides direct entry to a lost or forgotten experience”. In this vein, I used sound in various ways to access moments of my own silent past as a gay child in a conservative part of rural Ireland in the 1980s. Sound helped me excavate the specific contours and feeling of that experience and ultimately represent it on stage in a way that was emotionally understandable to others.

I performed my one-man show last year at the [HearSay International Audio Festival](#) in rural county Limerick, Ireland.

Sound, I discovered, offered me exciting possibilities to have the past intervene in the present, allowing me to create a dialogue between both timeframes. It also ultimately enabled me to re-contextualise personal and shared experience by using palimpsest-style inscriptions of the present moment on past moments. French Marxist philosopher Guy Debord calls the technique “deceptive détournement”.

For example, I used and combined certain sounds that were personally significant in my childhood – such as the soundtrack of the film ET – with sounds that were publicly significant – such as a montage of speeches by then British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher concerning Northern Ireland. By layering the audio in this way and combining it with spoken word performance I was able to evoke emotional states from my own childhood juxtaposed with moments of shared Irish anguish in the 80s. This allowed me to re-contextualise them in the present moment. This layering and recontextualisation led to new possibilities of meaning developing in real-time on stage.

Still from Don Duncan’s performance, All That is Solid Melts into Air: Gays, Unionists and the Irish language. Author provided

Sound can contain what Canadian composer and theorist R Murray Schafer would call “soundmarks” – evocative sounds that can be simultaneously meaningful to a marginalised minority as to a moral majority thus creating a common space for exchange and possible compassion.

Read more: Auschwitz 75 years on: preserving survivor's voices and listening to those of their children

There is political potential in using sound in such a way and this makes it a useful and important tool for various kinds of people and communities faced with the erasure, misrepresentation or silencing of their pasts.

As “official” memorial culture, in the form of national museums and archives, seeks to create a fuller record of the past, there’s a growing appreciation of sound and oral history as vital components of this project. The audio archive at the UK’s Imperial War Museums or the “Unlocking Our Sound Heritage” project from the British Library are two examples of this.

“Hearing is a way of touching at a distance,” said R Murray Schafer. With the specific human experiences such as those of the Windrush generation in the UK, or the victims of the Magdalene Laundries in Ireland still largely undocumented, perhaps sound can be a vital tool to access those hidden, denied pasts and bring them more to bear for a fuller, emotional understanding of them by us, in the present day.