

Institution: : BRUNEL UNIVERSITY (H0113)
Unit of Assessment: 23 – Sociology
Title of case study: Noise of the Past: an intervention in public awareness
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words) A public event at Coventry Cathedral attracted over 450 people from diverse backgrounds, involving local minority groups and representatives from national arts organisations. The event was part of the research project <i>Noise of the Past</i> which intervened in narratives of national belonging by enhancing public awareness of the historical contestations of a multicultural Britain. Postcolonial histories of World Wars and popular rituals of remembrance in Britain are charged arenas for public representations of the nation. <i>Noise of the Past</i> encouraged collective representations of nationality and citizenship that accommodates minorities. It worked with ex-WII soldiers, poets, musicians and film-makers; and collaborated with organisations including the Coventry Cathedral, Peace Festival and Imperial War Museum to develop their capacity to attract diverse publics for exploring a multicultural Britain</p> <p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words) <i>Noise of the Past</i> was an AHRC-funded project [1] dedicated to enhance the public engagement with the resident narratives of consecrated sites of war and memory. Its key aim was to explore how a contested multicultural nation can be experienced otherwise, outside of racial exclusions. The project responded to how an inclusive nation can be imagined by productively engaging with the contested representations of Britain's imperial past.</p> <p>The project explored the problem of postcolonial representation. That is, how the differential inclusion of migrant memories and experiences in the collective history and identity of a multicultural nation can be collaboratively investigated with practitioners (film-makers, artists and musicians), through co-production of public art.</p> <p>The project highlighted the role of (post)colonial soldiers from the Indian-subcontinent in World Wars I & II, and how their contribution was integral to the democratic development of European societies. This focus, via the production of public art, brought together both ethnic minority and majority groups into a productive multicultural dialogue. The research made it possible for diverse publics to constructively explore together how a multicultural nation can be represented and experienced from an 'ethnic minority' perspective.</p> <p>One of the core achievements of the project was the development of innovative methodologies for collaboration between different academic and non-academic communities. Modes for 'dialogic exchange' - a process which mobilises knowledge transfer across intellectual and aesthetic formations between academics, artists and publics - were developed and successfully employed. This dialogic approach was realised as a 'call-and-response' method, which both investigates and reflexively intervenes in the very process of the production of knowledge and public art. The method facilitates engagement with the social world by creating the conditions for collaboration and interaction between academics, practitioners and publics. The call-and-response method enabled practitioners to transform complex academic ideas, contested histories and political issues, and engage the public sphere. The project developed an iterative research process, which generated a series of cultural artefacts – principally a film and a live musical performance - that responded to the problem of postcolonial remembrance and representation. The method activated a chain of reflexive responses between the researchers, the creative practitioners and their cultural productions. Call-and-response is premised upon a process of exchange that involves stages whereby research ideas, concepts, materials and artefacts are passed and returned, transformed, only to be carried over to the next practitioner involved in the relay of co-production. A key stage involved the researchers gathering and producing materials which mapped the terrain of national remembrance and postcolonial memory. These materials were generated from academic texts, colonial film and sound archives, migrant soldier documents, letters and photographs. The research process facilitated a critical space of investigation for producing the final aesthetic outputs.</p> <p>In addition to the cultural productions of the film and musical performance, outputs include a</p>

Impact case study (REF3b)

special edited collection for *The Senses & Society* journal, and an article developing a curatorial sociological practice has been published in *The Sociological Review*. [2] The text-based outputs enhance our understanding of how artistic practices can be deployed for intervening in how an inclusive multicultural nation can be re-imagined.

The achievements of the *Noise of the Past* are transferable to other projects; for example, the artists involved in the project have subsequently deployed the call-and-response method in their other work. The method encourages collaboration and crossing boundaries between the academy and different publics, and addresses the challenge of working with minority communities beyond merely as an 'add-on' to research.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

[1] Grant

Award: Dr Nirmal Puwar (Principal Investigator, Goldsmiths, Univ. of London); Dr Sanjay Sharma (Co-investigator, Brunel University); Title: Noise of the Past ; Sponsor: AHRC (AH/E009891/1); Period: 01/09/2007 - 28/02/2009; Value: £ 207,423 (FEC)

[2] Publications

- Puwar, N. & Sharma, S. (2012) 'Curating Sociology', *The Sociological Review Monographs*, 60: 40-63. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-954X.2012.02116.x
- Puwar, N. & Sharma, S. (eds) (2011) Special Issue: Noise of the Past - Sensing the Postcolonial, *The Senses & Society*, 6 (3): 261-345. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/174589311X13046098679990>
- Sharma, S. (2011) 'Unravelling Difference', *The Senses & Society*, 6(3): 284-305. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/174589311X13046098680079>

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Noise of the Past produced two principal artistic outputs: (i) a film *Unravelling* (2008, 17mins, DVD); and (ii) a Live musical performance *Post-Colonial War Requiem* (22mins, 2008).

Project Investigators: Dr Nirmal Puwar (Senior Lecturer, Goldsmiths, Univ. of London); Dr Sanjay Sharma (Senior Lecturer, Brunel University) – his role was central to innovating a call-and-response practice by developing a collaborative methodology.

Noise of the Past project enhanced the public understanding of war and memory by creating opportunities to imagine an inclusive multicultural nation. By engaging with diverse publics through the creative production of art and transformative multicultural dialogue, the project offered alternative representations of the nation outside of militaristic and exclusionary narratives of belonging. The established norms of national belonging was challenged by the project. Moreover, the project facilitated raising an awareness towards how public understanding and attitudes towards ethnic minority groups belonging to nation are formed, to able to question the political grounds upon which minorities are included. Creative artistic practice was deployed as a primary means to engage publics.

Noise of the Past has impacted on the public engagements with race, ethnicity and nationalism. Building on current debates in this area concerning inclusive multicultural societies, the project was significant for rethinking how we engage with complex and contested notions of belonging, identity, memory and war, by conversing with different groups through a series of public events and pedagogical engagements.

The challenge of postcolonial representation was investigated with practitioners through co-production of public art, innovating methods of collaboration using the dialogic mode of 'call-and-response'. *Noise of the Past* publicly conversed with multi-sensory modalities of poetry, histories, music and visual art through the two key outputs. Both cultural productions were premiered at an inaugural event in Coventry Cathedral on 8th November 2008, as a major public intervention in accepted codes of national remembrance. [Source A] This location was selected as a symbolic site for war and remembrance in the UK, and the Cathedral has an international reputation for its work in peace and reconciliation. The event also offered an example of how the Cathedral can do multicultural memory work and include minority audiences. The site offered a public arena to both

experience and discuss how we belong to a multicultural national.

The project researchers worked with the Cathedral organising committee and the Coventry Peace Festival, and launched the *Noise of the Past* project as part of the Peace Festival's activities during the time of national remembrance in November 2008. For the Cathedral, *Noise of the Past* was a free public event, opened by Martin Bell (OBE, UNICEF ambassador). Over 450 people were in attendance, and new visitors, including those from minority groups, were brought to the Cathedral. The inaugural event was a gathering of ethnically diverse communities from the Coventry region and beyond, consisting of members of the local community recruited from Libraries, places of worship, Coventry Council, community centres, poetry groups, former WWII soldiers and their families and the local media. In addition, Arts programmers and Curators from diverse locations attended the launch event in the Cathedral.

At the Cathedral launch event a Q&A session also enabled audience members to respond to the event, which demonstrated its public impact. It was evident that the film and musical performance brought together and promoted dialogue between different communities. For example, an audience member involved with the Cathedral stated:

...As a member of the cathedral community here, how moved I felt this evening was. I've been here...for over 40 years a member of several choirs... This is the first time I've seen this intermingling of the English...tradition with the Indian traditions from the people who have come to this City...I thought that's been tremendously moving to see that intermingling of the history and experience of difference communities...

Further oral responses were gathered on the evening as part of the project's research method. Ten feedback 'vox-pop' interviews evidenced how the multi-sensory experience of the event publicly engaged with the resident narratives of war and memory, and contributed to an inclusive multicultural imagination of the of the nation for both minority and majority groups. (Source B).

The film *Unravelling* moved to the Coventry Herbert Art Gallery and Museum (exhibited 11– 23 Nov 2008, Source C), attracting over 300 people, and bringing in new visitors especially from minority ethnic groups. The Gallery has a peace and reconciliation section, which the film was part of. One visitor responded :

Congratulations it is absolutely brilliant. I went to the museum yesterday, the filming the music... the language, I don't know the words to describe it was so heart wrenching ... the film was mesmerising... (Jitey Samra, Black & Minority Ethnic Community Mental Health Development Worker).

The inaugural launch event received press and news coverage. For example, it was featured on the Coventry & Warwickshire BBC Radio ('Remembering the Blitz' in Urdu, 8/11/10), the Coventry Telegraph Newspaper (17/08/08), and the national British-Asian *Eastern Eye* newspaper (19/04/11). In Nov 2011, *Unravelling* and the *Postcolonial War Requiem* was once again presented during the Coventry Peace Festival and part of the Coventry Cathedral Blitz events, which attracted over 500 members of the public.

The impact of the public event at Coventry, led to other invitations both national and international. The film *Unravelling* has been included in significant conferences involving third sector groups, including Galleries, Museums and festivals. The film was part of the *Black Screen Heritage* Conference (31 July 2009, Source D) organised by the Imperial War Museum (in partnership with Yorkshire Film Archive and Skillset). The event influenced strategy for creating accessible collections relating to Black British heritage and knowledge sharing for wider communities. It involved black cultural organisations, archivists, film curators, community arts workers and audience development managers. *Unravelling* screenings with a Q&A were also featured in 'third sector' arts-based conferences including *Taking Part* (29 – 30 Oct 2010), Southbank, London (Source E), and *Visuality/Materiality* conference, Royal Institute of British Architects, London (July 2009) (Source F). These public events with over 100 audience members stimulated the creation of new contexts for debates in arts practice, and strengthened links between third sector organisations, diverse publics and academic institutions.

Unravelling has also circulated in international arts events with audiences ranging from 50 – 200.

Impact case study (REF3b)

For example, *Re-Orient festival*, Stockholm (Oct 2008; audience size 200, Source G) and international film festivals (e.g. USA and Germany). The film's cultural impact is been acknowledged via winning three 'best short film' international awards: Spinning Wheel Film Festival, USA (2008; audience size 200) and the *Sikh International Film Festival*, USA, (2009; audience size 100), and the London Asian Film Festival (2011; audience size: 80) (Source H). Additionally, it has won an Amsterdam Film Festival, Van Gough Award (2011), (Souce I) In addition, a series of workshops screening *Unravelling* featured as part of the ESRC Festival of Social Science (Nov 2013, Source J). Working from four different community based locations, the events offered a form of public sociology exploring with audiences how forms of remembrance can genuinely engage with multicultural diversity. For example, one workshop involved an elderly South Asian womens' group from Coventry that included a Q&A with the film director.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- **Public Events** Source A: *Unravelling* Screening & Post-Colonial War Requiem performance (with public Q&A), Coventry Cathedral, 8th Nov 2008; and Nov 2011. <http://www.gold.ac.uk/methods-lab/pastevents/noiseofthepast/>
- Source B: Cathedral selected audience responses:
 - *I'm quite impressed. The whole day...We were 60 people. We arrived here..... The last speaker, praised this as a new communication ...opening doors....* [9; Midlands resident]
 - *I think [film] it's wonderful...so much of the Cathedral was used and the surrounding area. Also the theme of reconciliation is very important to Coventry. I thought that was a lovely idea...it's been an education* [10; Coventry resident]
 - *It's really brilliant. I really liked the film. I liked the politics. I liked the way, the music was extended to the war in Iraq... It's high time the contribution of other people to the War was recognised and accepted, and the community came to terms with it, from both sides...* [Interviewee 6; London resident]
 - *The setting of course was fantastic...I am sure you have had a great deal of very positive feedback from the many people who attended - thank you for allowing me the opportunity to be part of it.* (Paula van Hagen; Senior Programme Manager, Royal Opera House)

Exhibition/Gallery

- Source C: *Unravelling*, Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry, 11 – 23 Nov 2008 Screenings
- Source D: *Unravelling* Screening and Q&A, *Black Screen Heritage Conference*, Imperial War Museum, 31 July 2009. http://www.gold.ac.uk/media/black_heritage_flyer.pdf
- Source E: *Unravelling* Screening & Q&A, Taking Part Conference, Southbank, 29 – 30 Oct 2010) and
- Source F: *Unravelling* Screening & Q&A, *Visuality/Materiality: Reviewing Theory, Method and Practice*, Royal Institute of British Architects, 9-11 July 2009. http://www.geography.dur.ac.uk/Conf/LinkClick.aspx?link=Conference_Programme.pdf&tabid=2944&mid=4871
- Source G: *Unravelling* Screening and Q&A, *Re-Orient* (European Arts Festival), Stockholm, Sweden, 5 Oct 2008

Film Festivals

- *Unravelling* Screening. *Bombay Mix Film Festival*, April 2010
- Source H: *Unravelling* Screening and Q&A, *Spinning Wheel Film Festival*, Beverley Hills, Los Angeles, USA. Sept 18-19, 2008 <http://thelangarhall.com/entertainment/a-look-at-the-spinning-wheel/>; *Sikh International Film Festival*, Asia Society & Museum, New York, USA. Sept 18-19, 2009 http://www.sikharts.com/ff2009_unravelling.html; and *Tongues of Fire* – 13th London Asian Film Festival, London, May 2011
- Source I: *Unravelling*, Amsterdam Film Festival, 2011 [Van Gough Award: World Cinema Directing] <http://www.amsterdamfilmfestival.com/Default.aspx?TabId=450&AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport=1>

Public Workshops

Source J: *Unravelling* Screening and Q&A with film director, ESRC Festival of Social Science (2 – 9 Nov 2013); four workshop events across UK.