

Institution: Goldsmiths, University of London
Unit of Assessment: Sociology
Title of case study: Noise of the Past
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)

Nirmal Puwar's project, **Noise of the Past**, has sought to transform the public imagination of war by bringing post-colonial stories into the UK's national memory of World War II. At the same time it has worked to re-imagine the research process and its relation to publics. It has shown how the 'noise' of the past, derived from narratives and situations that are usually excluded, can move cultural memory beyond a nationalistic, militaristic consensus. The research produced an award winning film, *'Unravelling,'* and a live musical performance, *'Post-colonial War Requiem'.* They were launched in 2008 at a large public event in Coventry Cathedral, opened by Martin Bell (OBE, UNICEF ambassador). On 14 November 2010, Noise of the Past was invited back to Coventry Cathedral to mark the 70th anniversary of the Blitz. The highly affective moving film (20 min) has won international awards and been screened at festivals, museums and public events and is submitted for viewing along with this ICS. Significantly the call-and-response methodology initiated by the project engaged artists and creative practitioners in music, poetry and film as active collaborators in the research process and also engaged publics not simply as audiences but as dialogic participants.

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)
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Puwar was appointed at Goldsmiths as Lecturer in September 2003 and is now Senior Lecturer. The primary research underpinning her project was funded by an AHRC grant but also supported by other organisations with an interest in its impact, including the Arts Council and Coventry Council Peace Festival.^[1] Through the project, Puwar as P-I and Sharma as Co-I aimed to bring the post-colonial to bear upon sensory studies by articulating questions of difference, alterity, migration, and belonging in relation to the senses. While postcolonial studies of war and memory have been replete with implicit accounts of the senses, they have lacked an explicit agenda of engagement within the developing field of sensory studies. The project has thus contributed to addressing this by demarcating the senses as a field within post-colonial studies. But it has uniquely done this through an innovative collaboration between academic researchers and artists working in the media of musical composition, poetry and film. This collaboration was organised in four interwoven stages of the research process.

First, researchers worked with the artists to locate archived military documents, maps, photographs and letters from the Imperial War Museum sound archive, the India Office Library and other archives. The second stage developed a poetic exchange in Urdu between Puwar's father, Sawarn Singh, a poet and veteran, and his grandson, Kuldip Powar, on the subject of Singh's wartime experience and his subsequent exclusion from public ceremonies of remembrance. In the third stage, the internationally acclaimed award winning composer and musician Nitin Sawhney composed music responding to the poetic exchange. In the fourth stage, Powar directed a film, *Unravelling*, precisely in response to Sawhney's composition, using his music as the soundtrack. In addition, an original musical composition inspired by the research, *Post-Colonial War Requiem* by Francis Silkstone (a researcher at Goldsmiths from July 2007 to June 2012), was also produced in response to the inter-generational poetic exchange. A conference, *'War, Sound and Post-Coloniality'*, exploring themes of war, memory and sound preceded the launch of the film and composition in Coventry Cathedral.^[2] As detailed in section 4, these works have been and continue to be performed in numerous venues thus engaging a variety of publics in re-imagining war.

These events and exchanges formed the basis of a special issue of *Senses and Society* as well as a Manifesto on 'Live Methods' and an article on 'Curating Sociology' in *Sociological Review*.^[3,4,5,6,7] Through these publications Puwar's work has contributed to advancing a 'live sociology' that is attuned to new strategies and methods for telling society through collaborative forms of curation, sharing, and respectful engagement. In this way, it offers a case study for how collaborations can move beyond traditional conceptions of knowledge transfer to embrace research as a process of interdisciplinary co-production and dialogic exchange. Through the media of film and music its

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curations have also offered a sensory method for engaging wider publics as dialogic participants rather than passive audiences.

The Noise of the Past project has also had an influential and field-defining impact on both new and established scholars in the growing field of Visual Sociology. To a large degree this impact has been realised through Puwar's directorship of the Methods Lab at Goldsmiths, which is committed to developing inventive ways of doing sociology and providing a laboratory for the practice of the sociological imagination. At the 2013 International Visual Sociology Association [IVSA] conference, the project was highly applauded in a plenary session delivered to a large audience of 300 for its ambition and scope.^[8] Douglas Harper (president of the IVSA) publicly endorsed the film for taking visual sociology into new and innovative territory.

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

Evidence of quality of the research: References 3, 4, and 7 are published by internationally recognised peer reviewed journals. References 5 and 6 were published by an international press as part of a prestigious Monograph Series that publishes collections of outstanding and original scholarly articles on issues of general sociological interest.

1. Noise of the Past. Nirmal Puwar (PI), Sanjay Sharma (Brunel, Co-I), Sept 2007 – February 2009, AHRC Report AH/E009891/1. £165,938. *Available on request from the Research Office.*
2. Information about all events organised as part of the project: [Methods Lab - Noise of the Past](#).
3. Puwar N, and Sharma S (eds) (2011) *Senses and Society*, 6(3). Special Issue on *Noise of the Past: Sensing the Post-Colonial*. Includes articles by Puwar, Sharma and Silkstone. SSN 1745-8927, Online ISSN: 1745-8935. *Journal; available on request from Goldsmiths Research Office.*
4. Puwar N (2011) [Noise of the Past: Spatial Interruptions of War, Nation, and Memory](#). *Senses and Society* 6(3): 325-345. [*Journal article; REF Output; available in REF 2b*].
5. Back L, Puwar N (eds) (2013) *Live Methods*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell. ISBN: 978-1-4443-3959-8. *Edited book; copy available on request from Goldsmiths Research Office.*
6. Back L, Puwar N (2013) 'A manifesto for live methods: provocations and capacities', in Back L and Puwar N (eds) *Live Methods*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell. ISBN 978-1-4443-3959-8 (*REF output*) DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-954X.2012.02114.x *Chapter in edited book.*
7. Puwar N, Sharma S (2012) 'Curating Sociology', *Sociological Review*, 60 (S1): 40-63. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-954X.2012.02116.x *Journal article.*

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)
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Impact beyond the academy was integral to this project from its inception, as its very purpose was to open up public dialogue about post-colonial narratives in institutionalised national remembrance. It sought to move between the biography of individual soldiers who participated in colonial armies and the wider enclosure of war memory in nationalistic and militaristic terms. By inserting erased stories and narratives into remembrance, it was intended to interrupt accepted forms of war and memory with the noise of the past.

At a time when the discipline of sociology is looking for methods of engagement with wider public audiences, *Noise of the Past* has set an example for doing this that is new and innovative. In the first instance, participants collaborated in the project through the novel technique of call-and-response, working across the media of poetry, historical documents, music and visual art, and between different specialisms and different generations in multi-lingual registers. In the second, through screenings and performances at numerous venues and events, it incited and opened up a broader dialogue and imagination about war and memory with numerous publics through sound, poetry, image and sensate experience.

The première launch of 'Unravelling' and 'Post-colonial War Requiem' in Coventry Cathedral, on 8 November 2008, was situated within the Coventry Peace Festival.^[12] The event was opened by war

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reporter Martin Bell (OBE, UNICEF ambassador) and compered by the renowned historian Carolyn Steedman. The audience of over 450 people was highly diverse and included many people new to the Cathedral, including members of minority groups, something which was commented on by the Cathedral organisation. A long-standing member of the Cathedral, who had as a child sung in Britten's War Requiem in the Cathedral, said:

"I would just like to say how moving I found this evening [applause]. I have been here since the 1960's, for over forty years. I have sung Britten's War Requiem at least twenty times. So I am extremely familiar with that whole background and ethos and reconciliation work promoted by the cathedral.

I think this is certainly the first time I have seen this interleaving of the English Anglican tradition with the Indian traditions, from the people who come to this city, been part of the colonial empire, fought the war from an Indian background and then came to Coventry. I thought that was tremendously moving, to see that interleaving of the history and experience of different communities. I would just like to say that I really do hope we can find ways to move that forward into the future."

The war historian Alessandro Portelli (Sapienza University, Rome) noted the transformative and affective nature of the public production put together by the Noise of the Past team:

"It was very moving...I thought the encounter between the local people [in the cathedral] was very promising for the future...The presence of the Grandfather...was very moving. It was just perfect."

The audience constituted a cross-section of the population including non-academics in influential positions in the cultural sector. The Senior Programme Manager of London' Royal Opera House in London said:

"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."

Sarah Shalgosky (Curator of the Mead Gallery at Warwick University) said:

"We really enjoyed the evening - ultimately, the breaks in electricity provided a lovely moment to sit in the dark and reflect with the weight of the building and Coventry's history above us. The lighting of the ruins behind strongly evoked John Piper's image of Coventry..."

The project has been commented upon widely in the South Asian Diaspora. The affective qualities of the dialogue and the space it provides to deal with tension have been recognised as transformative:

"Congratulations, it is absolutely brilliant...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).

Press and news coverage of the inaugural launch event was featured across different media platforms.^[13] When *Unravelling* and the *Postcolonial War Requiem* were presented again in November 2010 during the Coventry Peace Festival and part of the Coventry Cathedral Blitz events, 500 members of the public were present.^[14]

The impact of the launch in the Cathedral was followed by further national and international invitations. It first moved to the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, located opposite the Cathedral, and later to the Imperial War Museum, the V&A, RIBA, the Southbank, and international film festivals.^[15] *Unravelling* has circulated at international arts events with audiences ranging from 50 – 200, such as, the *Re-Orient Festival*, Stockholm (Oct 2008; audience size 200) and international film festivals (e.g. USA and Germany). The film's cultural impact has been acknowledged by being awarded two 'best short film' international awards: *Sikh International Film Festival*, USA, (2009; audience size 100) and London Asian Film Festival, 2011 (audience size: 80).^[16]

Unravelling has been included in significant conferences involving third sector groups and cultural institutions, including galleries, museums and festivals. It was a central feature of the *Black Screen Heritage Conference* (31 July 2009) organised by the Imperial War Museum, in partnership with Yorkshire Film Archive and Skillset. The event influenced the strategy for creating accessible

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collections relating to Black British heritage and knowledge sharing for wider communities. The pool of influence included black cultural organisations, archivists, film curators, community arts workers and audience development managers.

Unravelling and *Post-Colonial War Requiem* formed a plenary session on 'Noise of the Past' in the *Taking Part* conference (29 – 30 Oct 2010), Southbank, London.^[17] This public event with over 100 audience members stimulated the creation of new contexts for debates in arts practice, and strengthened links between third sector organisations and academic institutions. A screening and panel discussion was held at the V&A conference 'From the Margins to the Core' in 2010.^[18] The audience consisted mainly of museum and gallery professionals. In the museum sector it is now becoming commonplace to display talking-head testimonies on video and text boards. *Unravelling* offers a more challenging, sensory and creatively engaged method of presenting these histories. It informs its audiences, but also affects them emotionally.

The legacy of the project continues to be multi-pronged; impacting on the academic field as well as broad publics located in established cultural institutions as well as more informal grassroots organisations. In the ESRC Festival of Social Science in November 2013, *Unravelling* was screened alongside a series of workshops with different voluntary and community organisations across the UK.^[19] This included ex-soldiers from the Commonwealth Countries, Asian Women's Groups, as well as informal poetry societies.

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

Electronic/hard copies of all the materials listed below are available on request from Goldsmiths Research Office.

12. A double DVD includes a film of the pre-launch conference, a film of the launch in Coventry Cathedral on 8 November 2008, including the Q&A session, as well as the film 'Unravelling'.
13. For example, it was reported in Coventry & Warwickshire BBC Radio ('Remembering the Blitz' in Urdu, 8/11/10), as well as the Coventry Telegraph Newspaper (17/08/08), and the national British-Asian *Eastern Eye* newspaper (19/04/11).
14. 'Unravelling' and 'Post-colonial War Requiem': see, e.g. [Coventry Cathedral programme](#). Additional material corroborating these performances (e.g. from representatives of the Peace Festival and Coventry City Council) can be provided on request by Goldsmiths Research Office.
15. Imperial War Museum: [Film Programme Dec 2009](#).
16. [Sikh international film festival](#). Corroboration of screening and award by a representative of the London Asian Film Festival can be provided on request to Goldsmiths Research Office.
17. Southbank centre: [Goldsmiths Sociology Calendar](#)
18. V&A conference '[From the Margins to the Core](#)'
19. [ESRC Festival of Science programme](#)