Reaching out through listening: Co-creating participatory soundwalks for collaborative engagement in research findings

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This paper examines the distinct qualities and benefits of applying listening and sound-based methods to collaborative and creative engagement in the end stage of a qualitative research cycle. It shares empirical findings from a post-doctoral knowledge exchange project that investigated how participatory soundwalks can be co-created to engage a range of differently impacted people in PhD findings about urban seaside gentrification. Partnering with a community music organisation (Brighton & Hove Music for Connection), co-creation was made possible through the processes of co-design between the researcher and sonic artist (Bela Emerson) and consultation with residents, community groups, and local policy-related professionals. Consulting with people with lived experiences and professional expertise of the gentrifying English seaside generated insight into the significant potential that sonic methodologies, in this case Participatory Listening Research (Prosser, 2022), hold for research engagement. Findings show that the participatory soundwalks inspired learning and enabled meaningful exchange and dialogue through listening with others, creating a forum for "dialogical sensemaking" (Cunliffe & Scarratti, 2017) which is crucial part of "reaching out" beyond academia.

Keywords: Participatory; Methods; Listening; Engagement; Sound; Creative

Introduction

The participatory paradigm offers the definitive form of "reaching out" through its mission to maximise the participation of people with experience of the research subject and enable those most affected to have a say in the findings' outcomes (Heron & Reason, 1997; Vaugn & Jacquez, 2020). Participatory research methodologists have progressed expanded understandings of research and impact, intertwined in 'a gradual, porous and

diffuse series of changes undertaken collaboratively' (Pain et al., 2015). Creative methods are valued within collaborative approaches to impact for their ability to stimulate new connections and inspire action, yet the majority remain within the visual realm (Macpherson et al, 2014; Galabo & Cruickshank, 2022; Vervoot, et al., 2023). Contributing to these expanded understandings of impact and creative engagement, this paper shares the case of a post-doctoral dissemination and knowledge exchange project that used a sonic methodology to sustain engagement, reciprocity, and momentum in the "post-project" phase.

This project centred listening and sound-based methods to creatively engage a range of differently impacted stakeholders (residents, community groups and policy-related professionals) in doctoral research findings. In this paper, I examine the project's findings about "reaching out" collaboratively and creatively through analysis of the empirical material, guided by the question: how can participatory soundwalks be co-created to engage a range of differently impacted people in the PhD findings? Thematic findings are structured under two analytic questions. Firstly, how can participatory soundwalks about the PhD findings be co-created? Secondly, how do a range of differently impacted people experience participatory soundwalks as a research engagement tool?

Building on sonic methodologies (Drever, 2013; Järviluoma & Vikman, 2013; Waldock, 2015; Westerkemp, 2022), the post-doctoral project used listening to "reach out" and explore sound-based tools for public, community, and policy engagement in research findings. The previous PhD research investigated how listening with residents to their changing neighbourhoods could generate new knowledge about experiences of urban seaside gentrification on the English south coast – a process defined aptly by one resident as 'the poshing up of a place to the detriment of working folk' (Dr X[1], Worthing participant, cited in Prosser, 2022). Few urban scholars explore gentrification processes sonically (Waldock, 2015; Martin, 2025). Consequently, in the PhD I developed a creative, sensory methodology, Participatory Listening Research (Prosser, 2022). Participatory Listening Research (PLR) is a way of listening, with others, to the environment to generate new knowledge and discoveries whilst embracing different

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[1] All names are pseudonyms chosen by the participants.

listening experiences, practices, and positionalities (Prosser, 2024). Through the post-doctoral project I extended the PLR toolbox by partnering with a community music organisation, Brighton & Hove Music for Connection (BHMC), to co-create participatory soundwalks about the PhD findings. Together with BHMC sonic artist, Bela Emerson, we designed and piloted a type of participatory soundwalk, called Interactive Listening Walks, consulting with residents, community groups, and local policy-related professionals before delivering public events.

Based on the empirical findings from these pilots, I argue overall for embracing a participatory ethos to guide creative dissemination, joining with Bergold and Thomas (2012, p.3) in advocating for qualitative researchers to 'make greater use of participatory research elements' at any possible stage of the research cycle. "Reaching out" during the "post-project" stage can be strengthened through co-creation, which in this study is demonstrated through the findings on co-design and consultation. With regard to the first analytic question, we found that the participatory soundwalks were able to be effectively co-created through the processes of: co-design between researcher and the sonic artist; and consultation with people who have lived and professional knowledge of the topic. Methodologically, I advocate for the significant qualities and benefits offered by listening and sound-based methods as tools for collaborative engagement. In examining the second analytic question, we found that listening enriched engagement in complex research findings for participants in two ways: new discoveries and learning sparked by listening; and the enhanced meaningful exchange and dialogue enabled through listening together. Analysis indicates that listening-driven activities can create the conditions for "dialogical sensemaking", which is a critical element in striving for transformational change through research engagement (Cunliffe & Scarratti, 2017). Listening tools have the potential to play a significant role in community-university dialogue, contributing to practices of deliberative democracy that are at the heart of the participatory paradigm (Ledwith & Springett, 2022).

To build these arguments, I first position the paper's contributions within the existing literature, briefly surveying participatory research approaches before introducing the sonic method of soundwalking and the PLR approach. Secondly, I present the empirical case study and examine the co-creation process, broken down into *co-design* with the sonic artist and *consultation* with a range of differently impacted people. Thirdly,

I discuss the methodological thematic findings of *learning through listening* and *listening together*, demonstrating that participatory listening methods can enhance "reaching out" in these later stages of the (post)research cycle.

Reaching out through listening

To build the argument for "reaching out" through listening, understandings of what it means to "reach out" as well as sound-based methods need to be situated. In this section, I contextualise different participatory approaches (Cunliffe & Scarratti, 2017; Banks et al., 2019; Galabo & Cruickshank 2022; Brown, 2022; Ledwith & Springett, 2022), as well as the contested impact agenda of HEI policy (Pain et al., 2015; Banks et al., 2017; Holliman & Warren, 2017). I then provide a brief overview of the methodological realm of listening and sound, focusing on soundwalking which has germinated from acoustic ecology and sound art (Schafer, 1977; Oliveros, 2005; Drever, 2013; Järviluoma & Vikman, 2013; Westerkamp, 2022; Smolicki, 2023). I introduce the scholarship from which I have developed the PLR methodology to build the foundations for examining how listening methods can aid engagement through their distinct capacity to foster learning, critical thinking, and meaningful exchange with others.

Reaching out

In the UK, policies and practices surrounding "reaching out" have amassed around demonstrating impact, with current sector-wide financial crises increasing scrutiny over the socio-economic value of academia (Millican & Bourner, 2014; Holliman & Warren, 2017; Wareing, 2024). Institutional models of impact and audit practices are heavily critiqued for a narrow, one-way conception of knowledge production, including expecting a clear project end that works against ongoing participant and partners' experiences of change (Pain et al., 2015). In contrast, participatory researchers call for an expanded multi-dimensional understanding of generating change through collaborators with different types of knowledge working together (Banks et al., 2017). Underpinned by the tenets of equality, democracy, and transformational change, meaningful exchange is central for supporting researchers, practitioners, and the people most impacted by the research topic to collaborate (Banks et al., 2019; Ledwith & Springett, 2022). Deliberative democracy studies advocate for attentive and careful listening practices within

meaningful exchange, especially giving voice to those made inaudible in socio-political systems (Bassel, 2017). Understanding how listening is a critical condition for productive dialogue became central to the development of this study.

Participatory approaches to research can be viewed as a continuum from minimal involvement of participants to fully egalitarian work between academics and participants as co-researchers, though the former mere "involvement" end falls short of most participatory research practice (Brown, 2022). Within the vast terminology and debates (Vaugn & Jacquez, 2020), co-production is often upheld as the fully egalitarian gold standard, despite its increasingly wide and varying usage (Banks et al., 2019). Co-production in all stages of the research cycle is not always possible with myriad barriers, such as lack of funding, appropriate infrastructures, and sustainable timescales (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Macpherson et al., 2015). In this paper, *co-creation* will instead be used to better describe the mix of participatory elements that span across the spectrum (and therefore fall short of co-production) as well as invoke the arts-based tools and creative practices deployed by the researcher and creative practitioner. Co-creation in this case is understood to be made up of the co-design process, where decision-making was equally distributed between the researcher and the sonic artist, as well as the consultation process, which involved a range of participants but sits further down the other side of the continuum.

Creative practices are increasingly popular, offering accessible tools that can promote meaningful exchange, express complexity and nuance as well as offer restorative and wellbeing benefits (Galabo & Cruickshank, 2022; Vervoot et al., 2023). Cunliffe and Scarratti (2017, p.29) argue "dialogical sense-making" is crucial for impactful research, providing:

> …a way of making the lived experience of research participants sensible in collaborative researcher–practitioner conversations by surfacing, questioning and exploring multiple meanings and imagining new possibilities for moving on.

They emphasise the need to create a dialogue between conceptual and practical forms of expertise and knowledge (ibid, p.30). This study argues for adopting creative engagement tools that are driven by a participatory ethos to enable this "dialogical sense-making". I next discuss the methodological argument for using listening and sound-based tools, which are commonly neglected in collaborative and creative engagement.

Participatory listening research

Creative methods offer multi-perspectivity and multi-vocality but the predominant tools applied within creative research engagement are visually-driven, neglecting the valuable offerings of other sensory modes (Pink, 2009; Macpherson et al, 2015; Galabo & Cruickshan, 2022). Sound studies argue for the significant and distinct qualities of sound, acoustics, and listening in knowledge production, which can be generatively applied to ways of "reaching out" (LaBelle, 2021; Ruiz Arana, 2024). Increasingly accessible audio technology has helped stimulate interest in sound-based approaches, such as popularising the use of podcasts for research dissemination. Podcasts build on radio's public engagement history and widen the audience reach of research dissemination but, on the whole, can be considered one-way engagement (Lowe et al., 2021). This study explores how sound-based methods can offer more multi-dimensional tools that work towards an expanded understanding of impact (Banks et al., 2017).

Sound-based methods herald from an expanding, dynamic, and varied range of approaches, credited genealogically to sound art and acoustic ecology (Biserna, 2022). The movement that coined soundscape as 'any portion of the sonic environment regarded as a field of study' (Schafer, 1977, p.274) laid many foundations, including a method that artists and researchers continue to utilise: soundwalks (Smolicki, 2023). Soundwalking is a growing and varied "method in motion" that engages people in their acoustic environments (Järviluomo & Vikman, 2013; Smolicki, 2021; Ruiz Arana, 2024). In its classic format, a group is led on a silent walk by a "score" (pre-decided route), after which they are usually invited to discuss their listening observations (Drever, 2013). A traditional distinction has been made between listening and soundwalks based on the level of pre-planning, improvisation, and freedom in routes and activities (Järviluomo & Vikman, 2013, p.651). With the advent of new technologies, variants coming under the soundwalk rubric include those mediated by technology such as geolocative mobile phone apps (for examples see Walk Listen Create, 2025). All these variations are united by the common traits identified by Behrendt (2018, p.252) as 'a spatio-temporal, embodied, situated, multi-sensory and mobile practice'. Soundwalking forms the basis of my methodological developments, crucially supporting the participatory practices of 'acting together through a collaborative iterative process' and recognising our entanglement with others and our environments (Ledwith & Springett, 2022, p. 17).

Many place-based scholars, especially those concerned with widening engagement, incorporate sound within their co-explorations of localities, following in the sensory ethnography tradition (Pink, 2006) and a synergy with mobile methods (Biserna, 2022). Soundwalks offer a particular way of exploring place-change, opening up temporal reflections:

> Soundwalks map the present, but also juxtapose the recent and distant past, enabling us to navigate temporalities and to imaginatively and sonically travel through time, functioning as snapshots of forever-changing land and soundscapes. (Brown, 2017, p.6)

In the PhD and post-doctoral projects, I focused on listening experiences and practices as a way of generating knowledge about the specific place-based issue of urban seaside gentrification (Prosser, 2022). Within a growing body of sensory urbanism, gentrification processes encompass an 'emerging aesthetic regime that redefines what – and who – can be seen and heard, and consequently, who can and cannot act in urban space' (Abrahm & Bajiĉ, 2024, p. 90). Yet few scholars employ sound-based methods to research the processes of gentrification and regeneration, with a predominant US context focus on the racialisation of soundscapes and noise regulation (Sánchez, 2017; Ramirez, 2020; Blue V, 2021; Summers 2021; Martin, 2025).

Rather than analysing the sounds themselves, I position my work within approaches that value individual interpretations of sound, examining how a perceiving subject apprehends, connects, and responds to their surrounding acoustic environment (Waldock, 2015; Anderson & Rennie, 2016; Ouzounion, 2020). For example, starting with the question of "what does gentrification sound like?", Martin's (2025) research in Washington (U.S) developed a compelling intersectional listening method for understanding what it means to listen to Black people, intentionally, as their neighbourhoods shift around them. In the UK, Waldock (2015) has pioneered listening-focused research into the changing urban sonic-environment and engaged residents as "listening partners", thereby interconnecting the roles of artist, activist, and academic. My methodology embraces the diverse relationships people have to sounds, inspired by this growing body of scholarship that applies sound scholars and artists' understandings

of how listening generates knowledge about our changing environments (Oliveros, 2005; LaBelle, 2021). Guided by a participatory ethos, this includes embracing endeavours led by decolonial, Deaf and disability studies that pluralise listening and work against any universalising or exclusionary conceptions (Robinson, 2020; Drever & Hugill, 2022; Martin, 2025). Reflexivity and positionality become central to listening within these approaches, another dimension that supports participatory practice, raising questions about what influences and interacts with our different listening experiences (Robinson, 2020).

I have drawn on these approaches to develop Participatory Listening Research during the PhD and post-doctorate. In the PhD, I generated distinct findings about seaside communities' experiences of gentrifying neighbourhoods on the UK south coast (Prosser, 2022). Responding to Covid-19 restricted research conditions in 2020, I remotely supported 22 residents to devise an individual listening walk or listening-at-home activity and capture their own observations (notes, audio/visual recordings, drawings etc), which formed the basis of an elicitation interview and initial co-analysis (via phone or online). With decisions given over to participants about the route and content and lacking a predetermined "score", I termed these activities listening walks, rather than soundwalks. I developed the PLR toolbox to include techniques for supporting individual listening walks and listening-at-home activities, listening-based participant capture, and sonic elicitation as well as creative listening analysis such as sound collage composition and layered soundmapping (Prosser, 2022). The PhD findings and material generated about the sonic experiences of gentrification created the opportunity to innovate "post-project" with dissemination. Having introduced sound methods and participatory approaches, the next section will detail how the post-doctoral knowledge exchange project has further extended the toolbox by adding participatory soundwalks as a creative dissemination and engagement tool.

Co-creating participatory soundwalks

Central to this case is both a commitment to a participatory ethos and a belief in the multi-dimensional offerings of listening within qualitative research and collaborative engagement. The PhD research demonstrated that listening practices can be utilised as creative tools within knowledge-production whilst simultaneously generate restorative

benefits for those taking part, findings which this post-doctoral project applied to dissemination and engagement. As expressed by one of the postdoctoral project participants after listening in one of the seaside neighbourhoods:

> It's such a great tool, isn't it? To take away that desire, to judge it, fix it…to just be in that moment and think 'how interesting, this is just what this is right now'. (Katrin, professionals' group 1)

The creative tool we added to the PLR toolbox was a specific type of participatory soundwalk, called Interactive Listening Walks (ILWs). Early in the development of this format and prior to this study, myself and the sonic artist, Bela Emerson, were given strong feedback from community groups that "soundwalk" felt inaccessible and off-putting. Guided by a participatory ethos, we decided on ILW as a clearer way of describing the activities to those outside of acoustic ecology and sound art, despite the format being more akin to a soundwalk in academic terminology (Prosser et al., 2023).

This section outlines the post-doctoral project as a case study and then examines the first analytic question: how can participatory soundwalks (in this case the specific ILW format) about the PhD findings be co-created? I share learning from the co-creation process by breaking this down into the co-design between researcher and sonic artist and consultation with groups of differently impacted people. I argue for a collaborative approach, guided by a participatory ethos, as a meaningful form of "reaching out" about complex findings on urban seaside gentrification. This combination of co-design alongside consultation with local neighbourhood expertise was crucial in being able to co-create activities that effectively engaged a range of differently impacted people: residents, community groups, and policy-related professionals.

Study overview

The study aimed to use participatory soundwalks for dissemination and engagement in complex research findings about a place-based policy issue. Framed as research (approved by University of Brighton Cross-School Ethics Committee), the study was guided by the overarching question: how can participatory soundwalks be co-created to engage a range of differently impacted people in the PhD findings? The ILW format was

chosen as a promising type of participatory soundwalk, providing a site-responsive group walk structured around three interwoven dimensions: listening, walking, and interacting. Activities include Deep Listening (drawn from Oliveros (2005)), static and mobile silent listening, Sound Foraging (finding sounding objects), facilitated group sharing, and playful sonic interactions and music-making.

There were three seasonally planned phases: co-design (winter 2023-24); consultation through six pilots and focus groups (spring/summer 2024); and final public events (autumn 2024). All the design and delivery were co-led by Bela Emerson in the creative practitioner role and myself in the researcher role within the community-university framing. We co-designed three ILW scores for the PhD fieldwork neighbourhood sites: Brighton, Worthing, and St Leonards-on-Sea. After the initial design, we consulted with three groups of people differently impacted by gentrification: residents, community group members, and local policy-related professionals. We recruited 50 participants (21 residents, 15 community group members, and 14 professionals) to take part in the six pilot ILWs with focus groups to capture their experiences. We delivered three public events with 25 additional participants plus two ILWs for academics and practitioners as part of symposiums.

Overall, we worked with 80 people and generated a wealth of material for understanding how ILWs can be co-created to engage a range of differently impacted people in the PhD findings. To examine the co-design phase, Bela Emerson and I analysed our practitioner and researcher reflective notes, site visit audio recordings, and planning materials together. For the consultation, I led on the analysis of the focus group transcripts and participant feedback forms, followed by a "sense-making" analysis session with Bela Emerson where we finalised the themes. The analysis was guided by the creative listening analysis approach that I developed during the PhD as part of the PLR methodology (Prosser, 2022). This included: creative reflection, listening-back, thematic coding of transcripts (using Nvivo software) applying an evaluative framework developed from the two analytic questions, and layered soundmapping technique, whereby the material for each site was plotted against the ILW route. We clustered our findings under four themes: for the first analytic question, *co-design* and *consultation,* which is presented in this section; and for the second analytic question, *learning through listening* and *listening together,* which is presented in the next section.

Co-design with sonic artist

A critical part of this "reaching out" case is the community-university partnership between Brighton University and Brighton & Hove Music for Connection (BHMC) that began in 2019 through a PhD internship. *Sounds to Keep* piloted sound activities for a regional heritage centre's sound archive, through which Bela Emerson and I developed a shared practice, including ILWs. We have drawn on Bela Emerson's community music expertise and my academic research into sound-based methods to so far deliver over 30 ILWs for non-research purposes: heritage, community engagement, and wellbeing. This laid the foundations for both shared creative and working practices in this study, including a "defining in the doing" approach which we co-authored a paper about (Prosser et al., 2023).

These foundations allowed us to tackle the challenges encountered during co-design, undertaking seven joint visits across the three sites. We built in reflective practice and mutual exchange, starting with our first meeting sharing our desired outcomes. I wanted to stimulate people to think about listening to change through the ILWs as well as more deeply about gentrification and their own positionings. Bela Emerson sought to further develop this ILW practice through application to new urban and seaside spaces, as our previous ILWs had been in green spaces. This transparent beginning and ongoing shared reflexivity oriented us 'towards a collaborative researcher/practitioner elaboration of socially useful knowledge' as advocated by Cunliffe & Scarratti's (2017, p.32) approach to research impact.

Across each site, we grappled with how much to base the ILWs on the PhD participants' original listening walk routes and material. In 2020, the PhD participants had undertaken listening activities on their own and, as the remote researcher, I developed a particular type of knowledge about each site:

> I've had my head in 3-year-old material from 8 Kemptown [Brighton neighbourhood] residents remotely – what a strange way to know a place. (Notes 30/11/2023)

But Bela Emerson brought fresh ears and listened out for what was engaging in "the here and now". This created a 'a soup of different inspirations' (Pain et al., 2015, p.6) that

helped us weave together significant places for sonic interactions into a route that could take people on a listening journey.

Within this soup mixture, we prioritised the participatory elements of the ILW format. We brought in different voices about gentrification and incorporated the research materials through readings e.g. sonic observations captured by the PhD participants in that same site four years prior. But we kept the experience more open than a guided tour so that ILW participants could shape the experience and we could respond to the ever-changing soundscapes encountered. There were many challenges presented by the sites that we learnt from, expanding and refining the existing ILW techniques. Due to the dense layers of urban soundscapes, we sought out a mix of contrasting listening spots, which chimes with soundwalking practices (Järviluoma & Vikman, 2013). We also identified places for 'safe listening', to reduce the intensity and duration of urban sounds such as traffic (Ruiz Arana, 2024, p.50), which one participant called "sound oases".

Pushing this ILW format into the realm of research engagement required Bela Emerson and I to reflect more deeply on where our skills and expertise diverge and overlap, continuing our "defining in the doing" approach. By centring mutual exchange and reflective practice, this co-design process can be considered a form of "dialogical sensemaking" between researcher and practitioner, an ongoing conversation between conceptual and practical forms of knowledge (Cunliffe & Scarratti, 2017). Framed within an expanded understanding of impact, there have been unanticipated 'serendipity' impacts beyond the research parameters, such as Bela Emerson is embedding these listening tools into her sonic artistry and community musicianship (Pain et al., 2015, p.7).

Consultation with differently impacted people

As part of the co-creation process, we consulted with three differently impacted groups of stakeholders: residents, community group members, and local policy-related professionals. The six pilots captured feedback through individual written forms and a semi-structured focus group immediately following the walk. There was some blurring between the phases of co-design and consultation because some pilot participants offered input prior to the pilot delivery. As will be detailed, we therefore learnt about different ways of consulting and the significance of bringing more perspectives into the 'soup of inspirations' (Pain et al., 2015, p.6).

For the residents, we directly recruited people living in the Worthing and St Leonards sites through digital and physical flyers, social media videos, local newspaper articles, and BHMC's networks. This built directly on the PhD focus on residential, lived, everyday neighbourhood experiences of seaside gentrification. Three residents from the original study "re-engaged" and added their valuable insight into thinking about listening to changing neighbourhoods, from their 2020 individual explorations to the 2024 group experience. One St Leonards resident who re-engaged in the project additionally inputted into the co-design phase to make the route more accessible for people using mobility aids. This challenged our ableist assumptions; for example, we kept wanting to incorporate cut-through passages as "sound oases" but the majority included steps. Across all sites, we started to notice the lack of dropped curbs for crossing pavements and wide enough access to parks and community gardens. Recognising our lack of expertise, this resident checked the route prior to the pilot and shared their knowledge from navigating the neighbourhood everyday in their mobility scooter.

For the community groups, we advertised for two existing Brighton groups to work with us to create two bespoke sessions. One group was for young people with additional needs, including autism, ADHD, learning disabilities, sensory impairments, and physical disabilities. The other was a peer support and befriending group for people experiencing homelessness, specifically people living in temporary or emergency accommodation. Working with community practitioners was critical in the delivery of these pilots, requiring professional expertise to tailor the sessions to the specific needs of the participants. From the youth group, we gained insight into how the ILW format could be made adaptable for additional needs such as supporting the diversity of listening and sensory experiences, which brings in the field of aural diversity (Drever & Hugill, 2022). We found that the young people mainly engaged in the findings about what we can learn through listening, rather than the gentrification issues. In contrast, gentrification was a highly sensitive topic for the second group, who were the pilot group most directly impacted by the research. For example, one participant had been evicted from the neighbourhood we were exploring. She expressed apprehension about the ILW purpose at the beginning, but in the focus group shared how rewarding the experience had been:

I do feel myself personally, you know, quite, irritable for my own issues, you know?...But because this was more structured, and it was telling you something new to do, you know, that annoyance starts to go…You kind of become more accepting of the environment. (Narima, community group 2)

The support of staff and volunteer befrienders was vital for enabling engagement in issues that directly connected with personal traumas experienced by participants. These pilots required more resources to create safe consultation with people experiencing intersecting societal marginalisation. In exchange, the staff and participants stated that the ILW was beneficial and contributed to the group's wellbeing aims.

For the professionals, we used our existing professional networks and a snowball technique to recruit two groups in Brighton and Worthing made up of locally elected councillors, council officers, and voluntary sector leaders. The professional expertise offered by these groups allowed us to test out the potential of the ILW format for policy engagement. Their professional roles and responsibilities presented different sensitivities to navigate, as well as interesting power dynamics to analyse. For example, one listening spot included reading a research participant's quote that heavily criticised the council's decision-making on a redevelopment site. The ILW format and the framing of the session as a pilot allowed the councillors and council officers to engage productively in this critique and discuss the nuanced complexity of the site and planning process.

The pilot outcomes were positive, and few participants suggested any changes, which is testament to the co-design process. We made small improvements to timings, how we introduced the exercises, and framed the issues. We changed the public events to include a post-walk indoor discussion, which was not originally planned. Pilot participants valued the opportunity to discuss the whole experience and topics sparked through the focus group and suggested the need for a debrief discussion as part of the whole ILW event. Facilitating a "forum" for more detailed post-listening sharing and reflections aligns with Järviluoma & Vikman's (2013, p.652) soundwalking approach, transforming individual experiences into a 'new collective sphere of shared observations and meanings'. This amendment allowed us to gain additional feedback about how a mixed group of participants (residents, artists, students, councillors, council officers,

academics, and visitors), rather than the separated pilot groups, experienced this engagement tool, which is discussed in the next section.

Listening as a tool for engagement

Analysis of the pilots demonstrated the ILW format can effectively engage a range of differently impacted people in the PhD findings. Having discussed the co-creation process, I now turn to the second analytic question: how do a range of differently impacted people experience participatory soundwalks as a research engagement tool? Firstly, we found that listening to the environment enabled participants to make new discoveries about gentrification, the neighbourhoods, and different relationships to sound (*learning through listening*). Secondly, initial findings show the significance of *listening together* for supporting conditions for "dialogical sensemaking", which can benefit political forms of listening within participatory practice (Bassel, 2017; Cunliffe & Scarratti, 2017; Ledwith & Springett, 2022).

Learning through listening

Findings from this case demonstrate how listening methods can support the participatory practices of authentic embodied participation, critical and reflective thinking, and dissecting theory within the moment and context (Ledwith & Springett, 2002, p.30). At the very beginning of participants' involvement, the ILWs were regarded as a novelty due to listening's neglect within the sensory hierarchy (Howes, 2005). In the feedback forms, over half of the participants stated motivations around 'doing something new' or being curious about this 'intriguing methodology'. This initiated curiosity about how we listen, as expressed in one pilot:

> Because we just take it for granted, don't we? And you know, visually, that's what I feel is my primary… you were talking about how we spend most of our time shutting out noise, not embracing it and I think this has reminded me actually how important my hearing is and, and what it tells me. (Annie, professionals' group 1)

Across the pilots, the most common learning was around participants' relationships and responses to different types of sounds and the acoustic environment.

Because most were not accustomed to attentive environmental listening, participants valued being supported to tune into surrounding sounds through a Deep Listening exercise (Oliveros, 2005). Slowing down was frequently discussed as a significant part of the experience, connected to being given permission to listen and explore the neighbourhoods differently from everyday practices, which chimes with soundwalk techniques (Smolicki, 2023). Pace was discussed in each of the focus groups:

> There's various sorts of social pressures and pace pressures of time to get somewhere being the most important thing and the bit in-between is kind of wasted…so this soundwalk, I think it was really nice to be able to slow down and to appreciate the time spent on the journey. (Discobunny, professionals' group 2)

This speaks to the challenges found during the co-design phase of urban listening, which requires filtering out sounds to navigate everyday life. One participant described everyday listening as having 'a pair of blinkers on' (Trevor, residents' group 3). This was associated with the need to be productive, such as getting from A to B as a resident or being on tight professional timescales. Many participants explained how they use aids to avoid being overwhelmed, especially those experiencing aural diversity through neurodivergence or hearing impairments (Drever & Hugill, 2022). The intensity and plurality of listening required a mixture of activities for accessibility and inclusivity.

Alongside this learning about listening, participants made myriad discoveries about each neighbourhood and the processes of gentrification. Many were continually surprised by how their listening experience did not match their expectations of specific sites. A central activity on the Worthing ILW was "sounding out Bayside", a luxury new-build on the seafront identified as a significant contested site in the PhD research (Prosser, 2022). This involved silently walking around the building, stopping to listen at contrasting points, and reading out different perspectives from the architectural award judges and previous research participants. A local councillor stated:

> Either side of Bayside was fascinating. I've walked past there 100 times, both sides and never noticed it until you actually mindfully notice what's actually happening. (Lewis, public event 1)

All Worthing participants were struck by the contrast of the acoustic segregation: the social housing located on the roadside with noisy traffic in contrast to the expensive private flats taking in the sound of waves on the beach side. As one participant expressed:

> I was really struck and saddened by the disruption, distortion, claiming of sound and soundscape through the processes of development slash gentrification. Like, I'm kind of speechless….The way that that building was structured to claim an acoustic, yeah to claim the seaside, the gentrifying sounds of the seaside and then disrupted it from spreading outwards in a more democratic way. (Billie, public event 1)

Discoveries about the acoustic consequences of redevelopment were experienced across the ILWs, linking sound and hearing to questions of acoustic justice (LaBelle, 2021). This enabled discussion about the complex issues of the financialization of housing and private/public space, 'interrogating those facets of spatial and sonic transformation that are typically overlooked and underrepresented' (Martin, 2025, p.15). Engagement with gentrification-related issues through listening was stronger for those most familiar with the neighbourhood, as a resident or through professional responsibilities. The public mixed events indicated that participants who were visitors to the neighbourhood found it harder to connect to and understand changes through listening. This limitation needs further exploration but indicates that those most impacted or with proximity to the topic gained more from this engagement tool.

Listening together

The group dynamics generated by listening together were significant in multiple ways for participants and is critical for understanding how participatory listening can aid, and potentially improve, "reaching out". Many discussed how it is unusual to be silent with others, especially with strangers as part of a group activity. Some reported struggling with this whilst others embraced it, and this exchange enabled participants to share plural listening experiences. For example, the resident who had helped us design the St Leonards route to be accessible, also explained how listening in a group created a degree of safety:

I was going to relate this to my own experience, because I travel round on my mobility scooter all the time. So I have to constantly listen to what's around me just to keep myself safe. But doing the walks around with other people meant that I wasn't concentrating just on dangers. I was actually opening up my hearing. For other things that were happening all around me. And for me, it's a less frightening experience going around. (Geoff, residents' group 3)

Alongside gaining understanding about each other's different neighbourhood experiences, several participants felt that the focus on listening created a "levelling" effect when discussing different power dynamics within a group and policy engagement. There was structured time for discussion during the walk, as a whole group and in pairs, which we designed for varied and supported opportunities to talk with each other.

The playful site interactive activities were a key part of listening together and contributed to group-building but generated the most mixed reactions. For example, we invited participants to play with pebbles on the beach and offered soft beaters to play a sculpture in a new-build redevelopment plot. The overwhelming majority of participants joined in these activities and some fed-back that they wanted more play in the ILW design, welcoming the opportunity for an activity 'unusual for just adults'. In contrast, others felt self-conscious, uncomfortable, or did not understand its purpose.

One of the professional participants described 'play as a great tool for disarming people' (Katrin, professionals' group 1); in another discussion, a participant raised the need for a degree of discomfort for learning. Overall, we found that play offered another way of exploring public spaces through group listening. It sparked rich discussion and discoveries about public space usage, its privatisation, and spatial inequalities as part of the PhD findings.

The careful curation of listening, walking, and interactions was designed for inclusive engagement in the topic of gentrification, however unexpectedly, we found that it also created positive conditions for dialogue. This was an unanticipated benefit of the tool, the "serendipity" of impact (Pain et al. 2015). As described by one participant:

It's really good to spend that amount of time, and to kind of come together, and I really liked the way that we did it with silent listening and then coming together and

having little conversations. I thought it was a really nice mixture of communal conversation about our experience and just listening. (Blossom, community group 2)

Initial analysis shows that structured listening and talking combined with practicing different ways of listening supported people to be able to listen to each other. Listening to the environment enabled 'shared attunement and capacities for understanding or care' (LaBelle, 2021, p.4). It also allowed people to take turns with listening and speaking, which is a significant element of the politics of listening within deliberative democracy studies (Bassel, 2017).

These dynamics were appreciated by many participants. For some it was an antidote to everyday mobility practices:

Because the art of conversation has definitely got going. I'm not going to say it's definitely gone. We can come here. It's like everyone's trying to be silenced. Or here people walk past with their phones on or something like that. No one wants to engage with the environment around them. That's what we've tried to do today. (Crazy Pie, community group 2)

Others identified the tool as offering wider potential for community consultation and democratic processes:

I think the whole process of just doing an hour and a half of listening, with a varied group of people, finding out the experiences they have on it, is a tool that could be so crucial to helping shape and build sort of not just structures, but better communities as well. (Diamond, professionals' group 1)

This was especially the case for the professionals' group who discussed the perpetual challenges of meaningfully involving a range of people in planning processes within the restricted resources of local council cuts.

The experimentation with participatory listening therefore provided insight into listening practices and the distinct qualities of *reaching out through listening*. The dynamics of the discussions during and after the ILWs can be understood as a form of

"dialogical sense-making" (Cunliffe & Scarratti, 2017). The ILWs supported 'surfacing, questioning and exploring multiple meanings and imagining new possibilities for moving on' (ibid, p.29) with regard to gentrifying seaside neighbourhood changes. This creative engagement enabled participants to grapple with complexity whilst maintaining curiosity and openness to the issues through attentive, respectful, and careful listening. There were moments of disagreement during the walks and in the focus group discussions. But overall, participants agreed on the collective acoustic experience of the walk, and this created common ground from which to debate the reasons behind and consequences of these complex issues. Although the main project design was to consult with different stakeholders separately, the mixed groups allowed us to begin to explore this ILW tool for dialogue across different groups. This created a hopeful end to this cycle of the research, raising ideas for future research into listening for reaching between and beyond community-university-policy engagement:

> I think it's very interesting because the whole process apart from anything else brings everyone to the same level to some extent. So, I think it'd be really good to get a few policy makers…you know, a mixture…I think that people would be more able to kind of communicate with each other. (Vivian, residents' group 3)

Conclusion

Through sharing findings from a post-doctoral knowledge exchange project, I have explored the potential for meaningfully "reaching out" through listening. The careful and responsive co-creation of participatory soundwalks sparked curiosity, learning, and reflective discussion about urban seaside gentrification for residents, community group members, and local policy-related professionals. By examining the co-creation process, I advocate for embracing a participatory ethos, whilst acknowledging the barriers for co-production at all stages of research (Heron & Reason, 1997). I was able to adopt a collaborative approach through "post-project" stage funding: co-designing with a creative practitioner and consulting with people with lived and professional expertise. This collaboration has significantly enhanced the quality and depth of engagement in the PhD findings across a range of differently impacted stakeholders. Based on the findings about how participants experienced this engagement tool, I argue for the use of listening and

sound-based methods for research engagement. The ILWs inspired learning about the PhD findings on seaside gentrification, including grappling with social, spatial, and acoustic in/justices. Furthermore, this format of listening together created a forum for "dialogical sensemaking" (Cunliffe & Scarratti, 2017) around these complex processes, which opens up the potential for productive dialogue within the wider participatory practice of 'acting together through a collaborative iterative process' (Ledwith & Springett, 2002, p.17). As argued by Martin (2025, p.15) in the specific case of intersectional listening to Black people's gentrification experiences, the multidimensionality of aurality fosters a way to 'audibly gauge pasts, presents and speculate sonic future'.

By focusing on the acoustic possibilities for "reaching out" in this "post-project" stage, I have been confronted by different conceptions of impact that raise questions over what it means to "end" research. A participatory perspective values expanded timescales that allow the intertwining of research and impact to evolve, accompanied by diffuse and serendipitous ripples of change (Banks et al., 2017). Listening with others has provided a generative and restorative method in these endeavours and sparked micro impacts for those involved. For many participants, it has inspired future actions, such as continuing to use the listening tools in everyday life or within professional practice. As described by one professional intending on applying listening to a consultation activity:

> I'm going to use this sort of process at the beginning of it to get people to walk through the space and just listen to it. Listen to the space as a way of hopefully calming people a little bit and grounding people in the space and getting people to perhaps think a bit. (Discobunny, professionals' group 2)

This study has also opened up new research questions, such as, how can listening together to the environment support listening to each other? One limitation to further investigate is the difficulties of engaging with specific neighbourhood changes through listening for participants with less knowledge of an area or proximity to the topic. Also, involving those most impacted by the topic in decision-making and the co-design would further push the PLR approach in bringing a politics of listening together with acoustic ecology and sound art within a participatory paradigm. Consequently, "reaching out" through

listening in this case has enabled those outside of academia to shape future research ideas, thereby increasing the possibility for collaborative beginnings in the next cycle.

Acknowledgements

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