Nationalist Soundscapes: The Sonic Violence of the Far Right

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Sound's ability to impact the body and cross borders places it firmly within the remit of criminological concern. However, although sound continually emerges as a feature of far-right protests and riots—including through music, chants, singing, yelling and drumming—the role it fulfils for the far right has gone untheorized. To address this gap, this article introduces the concept of ‘nationalist soundscapes’, which describes the mechanisms through which far-right nationalists deploy sound to effectuate a politics of power, domination and nationalist superiority. Referencing a selection of events, I argue nationalists weaponize sound in a way that is unique to them, insofar as nationalist soundscapes are deployed to assert ownership over the nation, while simultaneously displacing racialized others through sonic violence.

KEY WORDS: protest, riots, the far right, racism, nationalism, sensory criminology, sound

INTRODUCTION

‘Non-racist, non-violent: No longer Silent!’, The English Defence League. [motto]

This article takes Hayward’s call to pay attention to sound seriously. Specifically, the article aims to turn the insights of sensory criminology towards an analysis of the specific way far-right
nationalist groups deploy sound, such as during protests, riots, marches and rallies. While the article does not claim that it is only far-right groups that deploy sound during such events, I nevertheless adopt this focus to articulate the specific means and ends towards which far-right groups utilize and indeed weaponize sound. This is vital because to date, how and why contemporary far-right actors deploy sound has gone unexamined.

In my own research on the far right, sound and sonic violence have continually emerged as a feature of nationalist protests and riots, be it through the use of music, chants, singing, yelling or drumming (among other things).1 For example, loud, repetitive chants, drumming and marching are often used by street-based ethnic nationalist groups, such as the English Defence League (EDL) in the United Kingdom and the United Patriots Front (UPF) in Australia. Such deployments of sound foreshadow the approach of these groups during protests and marches. More recently, sound was deployed during the series of protest ‘freedom convoys’ that emerged across the West to protest COVID-19 countermeasures. These included the Convoy to Canberra in Australia, the Convoy to Wellington in New Zealand, the Truckers’ Freedom Convoy in Canada and the People’s Freedom Convoy in the United States, each of which was organized by well-known far-right groups. As these convoys headed towards their respective destinations, nationalistic songs and political messages played loudly from the vehicles of which they were comprised, effectively expanding their size and reach as they moved.

Speakers, megaphones and ‘Portable Announcement’ (PA) systems are also used by far-right groups to share political messages and to play music with nationalist connotations. Indeed, members of several groups have formed bands and recorded songs to play at their events. Examples of this include the EDL’s band, Alex and the Bandits, and the J6 Prison Choir, which was formed by participants of the Capitol Hill riots of January 6, to protest their subsequent imprisonment. The J6 Prison Choir’s song ‘Justice For All’ has since become a rallying call for far-right nationalists across the United States, where it has been played at rallies and protests by Trump supporters who claim the election was stolen. Perhaps the most notable of these events was the Justice for J6 Rally, which was held in September 2021 at the site of the original riots and turned violent. On January 6, 2022, Justice For All was also played at over 35 candlelit vigils across the United States to mark the anniversary of the riots and to honour those they call ‘the J6’.

Although sound is almost ubiquitously deployed during far-right protests and riots, the specific function it fulfils for the far-right has nevertheless gone untheorized within criminology. To address this gap, this article introduces the concept of ‘nationalist soundscapes’, which I use to refer to the mechanisms through which far-right actors employ sound as an organizing technology during the events they organize.2 As I elucidate, nationalist soundscapes often serve several functions simultaneously, which stem largely from the affective atmospheres they help to generate. These atmospheres—which are conjured at least partly through sound—are typically conducive to the political and ideological aspirations of those that generate them. Indeed, as I discuss in reference to several examples, nationalist soundscapes can help to constitute and unify collective nationalist bodies by creating and/or allowing the expression of shared affects, such as a sense of outrage, grievance, injustice, (national) pride, empowerment or some combination thereof. Additionally, nationalist soundscapes can facilitate synchronized forms of

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1 These observations articulate with earlier work by Mark Hamm (1994), who explores the role music has traditionally played for American neo-Nazi groups, including its use to recruit new members and to strengthen the bond between existing ones.

2 While the material introduced so far suggests that sound is important to nationalists, my attempt to theorize it through the concept of nationalist soundscapes should not be read as an ontological claim about the priority of sound over other sensory forms. Nor should it be read as an implicit claim that sound operates in isolation from the other senses. As Bill McClanahan and Nigel South observe, the senses do not operate in isolation, but rather as a totality, such that one sensory modality can enhance or condition the others (2019: 4). As such, in forwarding this concept I am not attempting to theorize how the far-right uses sonic violence in isolation from other sensory modalities, but rather, am attempting to think through how and why they use it to deliberately augment those modalities and the spatial and symbolic relationships to the nation they support.
choreographed embodiment, allowing individuals to come together and comport themselves as a *collective* national body that moves in unison, such as when marching and chanting as one. As I elaborate, the synchronized embodiment of shared affects can be deployed to materialize the spatial and symbolic dominance of nationalists, thereby displacing the Other through (re)territorialization.

To elucidate the concept and function of nationalist soundscapes, this article will first briefly examine how sound has thus far been theorized within criminology, highlighting Alison Young’s recent call for the importance of ‘listening criminologically’ (2023). I then contextualize nationalist deployments of sound by outlining the importance far-right groups place on the everyday national sensorium, including forms of both belonging and racism which they articulate in reference to sensory experience, including sound.

Following this, I articulate a criminological theory of sound that draws from recent work in sensory criminology (McClanahan and South 2019; Millie 2019; Wall 2019; Herrity et al. 2021; Young and Popovski 2023), as well as adjacent concepts such as acoustic territorialization (Labelle 2010), sonic ecologies (Atkinson 2007), affect (Ahmed 2014) and affective atmospheres (Anderson 2009; Hillary and Sumartojo 2014; Fraser and Matthews 2019; Wall 2019; Young 2019; 2021). I highlight that while some existing work in this realm hints at the political potential of sound (Rae et al. 2019; Russell and Carlton 2020; de Souza and Russell 2022), importantly, this has primarily focussed on the capacity for sound to be used as a tool of resistance, towards progressive ends. With respect to nationalist soundscapes, however, I am instead interested in sound’s capacity to be harnessed towards a politics of power, domination and ethnic nationalist superiority.

To properly unpack this sonic politics of power, domination and ethnic nationalist superiority, I first examine how nationalists use sound as they move. Here, I examine the relationship between sound and mobility in reference to several ‘literal’ nationalist movements—including an EDL march I attended in Dover, England; a UPF protest in Bendigo, Australia; and the series of ‘freedom convoys’ that emerged across the West to protest COVID-19 movement restrictions. As I elucidate, during events such as these, nationalists use sound both as they move, and *in order to move*, projecting sound over and across space, ahead of themselves and in advance of their arrival. This advancing sound—which can include chants that are rhythmically repeated or music that blares from vehicles or PA systems—not only foreshadows their approach (often threateningly), but so too, extends and expands the social body of nationalist organizations beyond themselves, breaching spatial, temporal and symbolic boundaries, and allowing them to fill and occupy spaces and places before they arrive. To this end, I explore how sound is used by nationalists to both assert ownership over space, while simultaneously demonstrating that their (supposed) ownership already exists.

I then shift from exploring sound and/or mobility, towards analysing how sound ‘works’ for nationalists when they arrive at their intended destination. Here, I discuss several examples of nationalist protests and occupations, including the Justice For J6 Rally, the series of candlelit vigils held to commemorate the Capitol Hill riots and the Australian Freedom Rally’s (AFR) creation of ‘Camp Freedom’ at Australia’s Parliament House as the culmination of the Convoy to Canberra. It is here that I focus in particular on the way far-right groups use nationalist soundscapes to (re)territorialize space through the production of affective atmospheres that allow participants to connect to one another through the embodiment of the shared affects.

In concluding, I emphasize the importance of theorizing sound and paying attention to the variety of ways it is deployed by the far right to effectuate tangible forms of sensory and symbolic violence. In concluding, I gesture towards other types of events and actors to which a sensory analysis of sonic violence might be applied, with the hope of providing some building blocks towards further analyses.
‘LISTENING CRIMINOLOGICALLY’

Criminology is currently undertaking a sensory turn (McClanahan and South 2019; Herrity et al. 2021). As a part of this, Alison Young argues criminologists need to cultivate the ability to ‘listen criminologically’ (2023). Some progress towards this has been made. In an earlier work, James Parker provided a sustained examination of the multifarious but often neglected relationship between sound and law, ultimately calling for the development of an ‘acoustic jurisprudence’ (2015). In more recent criminological theorizing, the way sound is deployed by a range of actors has come to attention. However, as Young observes, much of this has ‘focused substantially on institutional sound’ (2023: 147). For example, several researchers have ‘investigated sound in the context of carceral settings’, like prisons and courtrooms (Young 2023: 147). Among these important contributions can be included the work Rice (2016), Bens (2018), Russell and Carlton (2020), Flower (2021) and Herrity (2024). Outside of the prison and courtroom, others have explored the deployment of sound as a tactic of control and surveillance which is used by the state, the police and the military (Parker 2015; Merrill 2017; Wall 2019).

Young also observes that the criminogenic contours of sound have begun to be explored in less explicitly criminological contexts. For example, Young and Popovski (2023) have examined how sound is deployed during a range of different types of protests, including those related to climate change, for land rights, against the development of nuclear power and against vaccines. In some of my previous work, I explore how far-right groups have used sound during protest occupations (Gillespie 2021; 2023). In other contexts, Fatsis (2019), Scott (2020) and Lee (2022, 2023) have examined the criminalization of music sub-genres, such as drill and grime, which are constructed as signifiers for illicit criminogenic subcultures, the (racialized) policing and regulation of which is thereby legitimized. As Fatsis notes, however, such attempts to police music can transform listening to it into an act of cultural and political resistance, potentially increasing the pleasure of listening for some (2019).

These remarks highlight the importance of Young’s call for ‘listening criminologically’ (2023). They demonstrate sound’s relevance for criminology and its deployment by a variety of actors for a variety of reasons—many more of which will be discussed below. It is with this in mind that this article aims to further criminology’s attunement. As outlined above, I aim to do this by focussing specifically on the way far-right groups deploy sound during events such as protests, marches and riots. In adopting this focus, my argument is not that the deployment of politicized soundscapes is the sole preserve of far-right protesters. The above observations show that they clearly are not. Instead, my claim is that there are specificities to the way far-right groups deploy sound, including both in terms of their means and their ends.

As I demonstrate below, my primary argument is that far-right nationalists weaponize sound in a way that is unique to them—qua nationalist soundscapes—which they use to claim ownership of key spaces within the nation for themselves, while simultaneously displacing racialized others. To this end, I argue nationalist soundscapes are a technique of sonic violence which nationalists use to ‘defend’ the nation by preserving and reproducing a national sensorium. My claim is that these specificities are worth paying attention to and documenting because if we are to listen criminologically, we must listen attentively. It is towards such careful listening that this article will now proceed.

NATIONALISM, RACISM AND THE SENSORIAL

In my own work on ethnic nationalist groups in Australia and the United Kingdom, I have frequently encountered examples of racist preoccupations with the sensory. In these contexts,
groups such as the UPF and EDL\(^3\) posit near comprehensive lists of sensory and bodily intrusions, which they interpret as intrusions upon the nation itself (Gillespie 2021: 17). The EDL’s Mission Statement (2016) provides several representative examples. It claims, for example, that Britain is being intruded upon and contaminated visually: ‘our landscapes are marred by hideous mosques and their minarets’. Aurally: ‘the so-called “call to prayer” is an audio intrusion inflicted on increasingly more communities’ (my emphasis). Gustatorily: ‘our food, often without our knowledge and consent, is subject to the incantations and animal brutality of the halal process’. And olfactorily: ‘I smell their fucking stinking food everywhere I turn’ (EDL member, cited in Treadwell and Garland 2011: 629–30). When completing fieldwork in Luton, where the EDL was formed, a member told me he could ‘tell’ which streets belong to which communities based ‘entirely on the smell of the food’ emanating from restaurants and homes (Gillespie 2021: 69).

The above examples articulate with Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein’s argument that racism is a ‘total social phenomenon’, that renders possible the racialized other’s intrusion upon all aspects of life (1991: 17). Accordingly, racism revolves around ‘deep-rooted fears of intrusion’ (Robinson and Gadd 2016: 197), leading to an obsessive monitoring for Otherness in everyday life (Hage 2004). It is, therefore, no surprise that racist hypervigilance frequently extends to the sensorial, where it is directed towards questions of ‘food, size, shape, skin colour, even smell’, often interpreted as proxies for, or evidence of, ‘miscegenation’ and ‘the dilution of racial purity’ (Robinson and Gadd 2016: 197). The examples above highlight the scope of nationalist and racist anxieties about sensory intrusions upon the body, be they related to taste, touch, sight, smell or sound. It also highlights the elision nationalists sometimes effectuate between perceived intrusions of the senses and the nation. This is evinced, for example, by the so-called visual marring of the nation’s landscapes, and the ‘audio-intrusion’ allegedly ‘inflicted on…communities’. If individual nationalists see, hear and importantly, feel these sensory experiences, then the nation itself sees, hears, and feels them as well (Ahmed 2014: 1–2).

The snapshot above also indicates the role the sensory plays in substantiating a perceived sense of belonging to, and possession of, the nation. From seemingly simple sensory encounters, the existence of entire territories can be inferred. This is illustrated, for example, by the notion one can ‘tell’ which streets belong to which communities based on the smell of particular food. It is also evinced by the EDL’s claim that ‘the stealthy incursion of halal meat into British supermarkets’ is a deliberate step towards ‘the creeping Islamisation of our country’ (EDL 2016). This idea was echoed by a prominent EDL member during a rally I observed in Aylesbury:

[Muslims] live under the land of the Umar. The Umar, the Islamic nation. Holds no borders. Islam is here, in our country, this Trojan horse is parked up. They’re in our politics. They’re in our food, they’re in our schools. They’re everywhere. (EDL 2015)

The above statement can be read as an expression of Sivamohan Valluvan’s (2019) assertion that nationalism is predicated on the idea of ‘the racialised outsider’, who, by definition, is placed outside the nation and ought to remain there, and yet, always wants to get in—indeed, such that it ‘holds no borders’ (to borrow the EDL’s words above). The sensory realm thus becomes another front to securing the nation’s cultural integrity from the polluting effects of the racialized other.

The understanding that nationalism places the Other outside the nation goes some way towards explaining why nationalists read the mere presence or proximity of the Other as an automatic intrusion upon the nation. Indeed, this may explain why nationalists can read sensory

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3 For a chronological account of these groups, and others related to them, see Gillespie (2021). For the UPF in particular, see Richards (2019), and for the EDL, see Treadwell and Garland (2011).
encounters with the Other not as ‘unpleasant’ isolated bodily experiences, but instead, as evidence of a much broader existential threat to the nation and its identity. The EDL’s Mission Statement once again provides a clear articulation of this function, lamenting not only the ‘audio intrusion’ the Other inflicts on increasingly more communities, but so too, the limitations they say are increasingly placed upon nationalists due to the Other’s proximity. As the statement elaborates: ‘our speech concerning Islam and its “perfect man” Mohammed, is stifled by constant threats of death’ (EDL 2016). Thus, while the Other allegedly inflicts its sound on the nation, nationalists themselves are silenced but need to be heard.4

In a similar example, Ralph Cerminara, the founding member of the white supremacist Australian Defence League (ADL), shared an informative anecdote. Responding to a question as to why he founded the ADL, Cerminara recalled an experience he alleges he had while shopping ‘around Christmas time’ in Sydney, Australia. He said that as he made his way through a department store, he noticed Christmas carols were not being played. He said that when he asked about this, he was told: ‘You’re not in Australia any more here—Christmas carols upset Muslims’ (Collins 2014). This recounting highlights several important features of the function sound can fulfil for nationalists. It illustrates that for nationalists, the Other’s presence and proximity can disrupt the nation by disrupting the sounds that signify it. It shows that the Other can be read as intruding upon the nation both by producing its own sounds (what the EDL calls ‘audio intrusions’) or, by causing the absence of specific sounds that carry national(ist) connotations, such as carols at ‘Christmas time’, which function as a signifier for a particular cultural way of life. The absence of such sounds not only disrupts the nation but much more: in their absence, the nation is said to no longer exist: hence, ‘You’re not in Australia any more here’.

The brief examples above provide an initial indication of the importance far-right nationalists place on the sensorial. Some sensory experiences work to sustain the nation, while others can be read as intrusions or contaminations upon it. Indeed, without the desired sights, sounds, smells, tastes or tactile sensations, the idealized nation and perhaps the nation itself, can evaporate. Given the importance nationalists place on the sensorial, in the remainder of this article, I shift to focus on the way nationalists deploy soundscapes to defend the nation against the Other’s perceived intrusion, proximity and presence.

THEORIZING A CRIMINOLOGY OF SOUND

To theorize nationalist soundscapes—and attend to the generative capacity of sound more broadly—in the “Introduction” section articulate something akin to a ‘sonic criminology’ that entails thinking through the impact sound can have on the body. This is important because, as Rogers elaborates, ‘sound is felt physiologically and psychologically’ (2020: 455). Indeed, the body itself contorts around…sound such that it comes to be shaped by it (Rogers 2020: 455). That is to say: how we experience sound can impact how we experience the body.

Bill McClanahan and Nigel South observe that ‘there is no paucity of innovative research that deals with or employs the image’ (2019: 1). Until recently however, the other senses, including sound, have been comparatively neglected as sites of critical inquiry, based largely on the occularcentric nature of Western ontology and epistemology (McClanahan and South 2019: 4). This is problematic because the senses do not operate in isolation from one another, but rather, are ‘inextricably linked’ such that input from one sensory modality can condition that of another (McClanahan and South 2019: 14). What we hear or smell in a given moment, for

4 Noting that beneath this perceived need sits a very particular, aggressive conceptualization of masculinity: one that frequently manifests in, for example, yelling.
example, may affect what we see in that moment. So too, it might affect how we interpret what we see.

Sensory modalities not only influence one another but so too can influence our emotions and how we feel. As Rebecca Rago elaborates:

Our emotions and senses are very tightly intertwined. What we hear, see, taste, smell, and touch can provide us with information on how to feel. In the other direction, what we feel can be heavily influenced by what our senses are taking in. (2014: no pagination)

From this, McClanahan and South conclude that:

Olfactory, tactile, auditory, gustatory and visual data, as they arrive in our internal affective spaces, are creations of an incalculable range of factors that include the conditions of their production, the historical context of that production and dissemination, and the cultural dynamics of their intake or consumption. Put simply, sensory information is given meaning through a complex system of interpretations, encounters and relations. (2019: 8)

While the social and criminogenic aspects of the senses require attention, it is important that they are not conceptualized as mere phenomena that occur within a given frame, which can be isolated and about which knowledge can be produced (Young 2014). As Young reminds us with respect to visual criminology, ‘images are frequently constructed as objects of analysis’, rather than ‘constitutive elements of the discursive field’ (2014: 159). By the same token, I argue sound should not be conceptualized as a passive element that merely occurs as an effect of, or within, an already-established context, as a by-product of other, more primary processes. Instead, like the image, so too sound can be constitutive of the very spaces and places with/in which it seems to reverberate.

Emma Russell and Bree Carlton note that ‘sound is a particularly powerful boundary-crossover’, capable not only of filling existing spaces but of challenging extant spatial orderings (Russell and Carlton 2020: 296; see also Labelle 2010). This is because sound travels over and through (carceral) architectures, such that new ‘spatial boundaries and impressions’ can be ‘created, reinstated and broken apart’ (Russell and Carlton 2020: 300). As they elucidate through their concept of ‘counter-carceral acoustemologies’, sound’s ability to cross and challenge borders can be harnessed as a progressive tool of social justice and anti-carceral resistance. This is because ‘sound can breach the carceral boundary and displace carceral-spatial control through forms of political dialogue and creative exchange between imprisoned and non-imprisoned actors’ (Russell and Carlton 2020: 297; see also Rae et al. 2019). Put simply, sound can challenge borders, which often struggle to contain it. Indeed, by forging connections and solidarity between people separated by established borders, the spaces those borders define can themselves be (re)territorialized and constituted anew.

While counter-carceral acoustemologies highlight the progressive valence of sound, the concept of nationalist soundscapes seeks to articulate its capacity for the opposite: that is, for its use towards exclusionary ends. This potential articulates with Russell and Carlton’s analysis that although ‘space produces sound in all kinds of ways’, space itself can simultaneously be ‘configured and territorialised through sound’ (2020: 300). Thus, just as sound can disrupt extant power relations, so too it can be used to strengthen and (re)establish them. This is approximate to what Brandon LaBelle calls ‘acoustic territorialisation’, whereby sound galvanizes social

5 For further discussion on this point, see Atkinson (2007), LaBelle (2010), Hayward (2012), Gallagher (2015) and Gallagher et al. (2017).
bodies ‘into a collective force’, that can effectively expand the size, presence and demeanour of a crowd (2010: 115). Similarly, it articulates with Rowland Atkinson’s notion of ‘ecologies of sound’ (2007), whereby urban space is ‘ordered’ in part through the implementation of soundscapes.

One of the mechanisms through which sound can territorialize space and solidify social bodies is through the generation of affect (Ahmed 2014). As Young elaborates—through a definition that already implicates sound—‘affect marks the moment at which connection to something seen, heard, experienced or thought registers in the body and then demands that it be named or defined’ (2014: 162). This demand to name that which registers in the body—including that which is heard—does not leave the body unchanged, but rather, can constitute the very body that supposedly experiences it. For example, how sound is registered in a particular context can imply something about the subject who ‘hears’ sound in that way, including their relationship to the space and place in which the sound is heard, as well as with those around them. During a nationalist riot, for example, a racist chant may be ‘heard’ by a nationalist as empowering and emboldening, and as an affirmation of a particular positionality both within the nation and with respect to the riot and rioters themselves. The same chant, however, is unlikely to be heard in the same way by those to whom it is targeted. For them, the chant may instead induce anger or fear, among a plethora of other possibilities. This reading of the affective but contingent impact of sound on the body shows the extent of Rogers’ claim that sound is felt ‘physiologically and psychologically’ (2020: 455). Indeed, in this context, sound can be felt such that it violently constitutes who belongs to the nation and can feel safe there, and who cannot.

When affects circulate and are produced within a particular space, they generate ‘affective atmospheres’: environments that both produce and are produced by affects (Anderson 2009; Wall 2019; Young 2019; 2021). Consider, for example, the fervour that may seem to sustain a race riot (for now, understood in abstract, generic terms). Such a riot may be an expression of already-existing affects and emotions; however, it might simultaneously create and sustain those very affects and emotions as well, essentially reproducing itself by reproducing that which coheres to the subjects of which it is comprised. This co-production of affects, atmospheres and social bodies can be deliberately harnessed (Wall 2019; 2020). Illan rua Wall calls this as ‘atmotechnics’: the technologies and techniques through which affective atmospheres are deliberately created and manipulated towards specific ends (2019). Here, sound can play a vital role. Consider, for example, the use of sonic weapons to disperse crowds—that is, to break up social bodies—by creating an intolerable sonic atmosphere. Similarly, consider the way music is sometimes deployed as a form of hostile architecture, such as when classical music is played at train stations at night-time, with the intention of preventing ‘youths’ from gathering to socialize ‘anti-socially’.

As I elaborate below, the concept of nationalist soundscapes refers precisely to the techniques and technologies through which far-right nationalist groups deploy sound to deliberately create and sustain affective atmospheres. Such atmospheres work to galvanize the nationalist social body by (re)territorializing and (re)ordering the nation by displacing the Other and securing it for the nationalist. As I explain, the creation of affective atmospheres qua nationalist soundscapes is thus tantamount to sonic violence.

**SOUND AND MOVEMENT**

Far-right nationalist organizations frequently convey the idea they have a ‘right’ over the spatiality of the nation, and thus, should always be able to move freely within it (Gillespie 2020; 2021).

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6 See Russell and Carlton (2020: 304), where this passage is cited and discussed.
For example, during a protest, I observed in 2015, a prominent EDL member giving a speech via megaphone declared:

We’ve all come here today to prove a point. Our streets belong to us. We march them whenever we want, no matter what the Muslims say. No matter what the police say, no matter what the Lefties say: they are our streets! We control them! They are our streets!

Similarly, in the lead-up to a protest of the building of a Mosque in Bendigo, Australia, members of the UPF exclaimed: ‘The police have been instructed to minimize and inconvenience us. BUT THE LAND BELONGS TO US, AND WE’LL GO WHEREVER WE LIKE’ (United Patriots Front 2015). Similar sentiments have also been expressed recently by far-right groups protesting against COVID-19 countermeasures. For example, when movement restrictions and vaccine passports were imposed, a series of ‘freedom convoys’ and protest occupations emerged across the West to performatively defy such measures, converging on their respective political capitals. Many of these were explicitly far right in nature, including the Truckers’ Freedom Convoy, the Peoples’ Freedom Movement, the Convoy to Canberra and the Convoy to Wellington, all of which were organized and attended by well-known far-right groups and political figures (Gillespie 2023; Gillespie and Ghumkhor 2024). In each of these events, when faced with restrictions upon their movement, whether real or perceived, nationalists themselves have moved performatively by choosing forms of protest that are themselves constituted by movement—such as convoys, marches and rallies. What I will now elucidate is the extent to which sound can function as an important component of such literal and figurative movements.

When it was most active between 2009 and 2016, the EDL held marches and rallies on a near-weekly basis. During this time, the EDL was famous for its use of military-style chants and drumming as it marched down the road. These were usually chanted ‘live’ by those in attendance, although pre-recorded versions were also sometimes played and sung along to via PA systems. The most well-known chant—which is repeated in the EDL’s theme song—was the repetitive and rhythmic, ‘E—E—EDL! / E—E—EDL! / E—E—EDL! / We’re comin’ down the road!’ This chant emphasized the presumed spatial dominance and mobility of those ‘comin’ down the road’, describing literally what EDL members were doing as they chanted it.

Another prominent EDL chant assumed a military ‘ask/answer’ format, in which the highest-ranking officer asks the group a question, to which they respond in unison (Gillespie 2021: 44). The chant went as follows:

Officer: ‘Whose streets?’
Group: ‘Our streets!’
Officer: ‘Whose streets?’
Group: ‘Our streets!’
Officer: ‘Whose fucking streets?!’
Group: ‘Our fucking streets!’

Both of these chants make an explicit political claim through their content. Each articulates an image of the EDL’s professed relationship to the nation: one of ownership, mobility, dominance and freedom. However, the form these chants assume—that of sound—also contributes to their meaning, insofar as the medium of sound reifies the EDL’s claims of ownership and spatial dominance, literally filling the streets they claim they own with a violent declaration of that ownership, for all to hear in advance of their imminent arrival.

The sonic form of these chants, and others like them, can also serve several other ideological functions simultaneously. For example, the nationalist soundscape to which these chants
contribute can work to cohere members of the EDL together as a unified social body. As Young and Popovski note, ‘A sonic characteristic of call-and-response is that the response is far louder than the original call; contribution to the response acoustically sutures the bodies of individuals present into the mass event’ (2023: 9). In this context, EDL members can sing and respond in unison because they supposedly *already are in unison*, even if it is their response that retroactively makes them so. Similarly, the chant’s audible allusion to the military, via the ‘ask/answer’ format, further highlights the role sound can play in cohering members of groups such as the EDL together as ‘one’ (Gillespie 2021: 44–45). By alluding to the military, this chant contributes to the sense of legitimacy, organization and hierarchy the EDL seeks to establish for itself, while also working to substantiate the EDL’s depiction of itself as a national ‘defence league’, which not only acts on behalf of the nation but does so with the nation’s authority. The EDL strengthens such sonic associations through its practice of frequently employing military-style snare drums, which emulate those used by British foot soldiers when marching. Like the chants above, the sound of the snare drum adds to the symbolism of the soundscape the EDL generates as it moves. Rather than merely conveying such ideological connotations, however, the drumming itself also facilitates the EDL’s *embodiment* of this symbolism, allowing members to choreograph their bodies so that they all march in unison as one to the sound.

Nationalist soundscapes serve a function not only as far-right organizations mobilize by foot, such as when marching and rioting, but so too, when they traverse space in their vehicles, such as when en route to a protest. This is perhaps most evident when the protest itself *is a convoy*—as was the case with the series of freedom convoys described above. When nationalistic music is played from vehicles, occupants are surrounded by a mobile soundscape that is simultaneously projected outward, upon any who can hear it, as the vehicle moves. For example, when I observed EDL members gathering at an agreed location in preparation for a march, I noticed that as members arrived in their vehicles, almost all were playing loud music—often the EDL’s theme song or other songs by the EDL band, Alex and the Bandits. These sonic announcements could be heard before the vehicles rounded the corner to the meeting point, ensuring their arrival was anticipated and was met with cheers by those who had already gathered. In effect, the sound of these vehicles arrived before they did.

The projection of soundscapes from nationalist vehicles is not unique to the EDL. It is also a feature of many other ethnic nationalist organizations. For example, similar tactics were employed by the UPF in Australia. This occurred perhaps most notably during an infamous protest in Bendigo in 2015, which the UPF held to protest the building of a new mosque. During the event, many participants arrived in their ‘utes’ (an Australian slang term for ‘utility vehicles’, often called ‘pick-ups’ in the United States). Such vehicles hold a place in the Australian nationalist imaginary, where their ability to traverse rough terrain is imagined to convey something about the strength and resilience of white Australians. Their ability to easily transport surfboards also associates them with both an emblematic national pastime and spatiality: surfing and the beach (Fiske 1983). Throughout the protest, UPF members used their utes to continuously drive laps around the congregation (Tilley 2015). As they did, they played a range of ‘nationalist anthems’ from their sound systems, including ‘Waltzing Matilda’ (which is often described as Australia’s ‘unofficial’ national anthem); Jimmy Barnes’ anti-government song, ‘Khe Sanh’ (a symbol of Australian resistance) and John Farnham’s ‘You’re the Voice’ (which I discuss in the next section). Through this tactic, the UPF ensured its protest was not only surrounded physically by the vehicles encircling it but also by the sonic border of a nationalist soundscape. This soundscape performed a dual function. On the one hand, it helped to materialize the protest as a coherent social body, with defined boundaries and borders even as it moved. Paradoxically, it also worked to enlarge the social body beyond those borders, as its sound travelled ahead of and beyond the protest.
In the “Introduction” section have shown that nationalist soundscapes should not be conceptualized as merely incidental or coincidental phenomena that occur when nationalist groups come together. Rather, sound can be constitutive of that very togetherness and can play an important role in helping nationalist groups to unite and move as harmonious social bodies. While this section has focussed on the way nationalist groups deploy sound as they move, in the coming section, I considered how they deploy sound when that movement comes to a stop.

SONIC OCCUPATION AND AFFECT

As outlined above, far-right groups deploy nationalist soundscapes as they traverse space, be it via chants and PA systems when marching, from vehicles as they form convoys or by driving laps around protest gatherings. So too, they deploy nationalist soundscapes when their movement comes to a halt: such as when they arrive at their intended destination, and seek to occupy and colonize that space. Throughout this section, I will analyse how nationalists use sound to occupy and establish themselves in space and place. I argue nationalist soundscapes work to create affective atmospheres that help nationalists establish and demonstrate symbolic and spatial dominance. To explore these dynamics, I will refer to two events as primary case studies: the Justice for J6 Rally, which occurred in the United States in 2021 and the AFR’s creation of ‘Camp Freedom’ in 2022, in Canberra, Australia.

After the Capitol Hill riots of 6 January 2021—known also as the J6 riots—approximately 20 participants who were imprisoned for their involvement formed the J6 Prison Choir. Using prison teleconference technologies, they recorded ‘Justice For All’, which briefly rose to the top of the iTunes chart for the most downloaded new song, before it was removed. In Justice For All, the choir sings the United States’ national anthem, the Star-Spangled Banner, which is interspersed with an audio collage assembled from various snippets of speeches given by Donald Trump at various rallies and political events. Included are several lines where Trump recites the Pledge of Allegiance, such as when he ‘pledges allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America’, and declares, ‘We are one nation under God.’

Soon after it was recorded, Justice For All became a rallying call for Trump supporters. It is now frequently played at political events, rallies and protests across the United States. It has been played, for example, during protests against the outcome of the 2020 election, which Trump and many of his supporters claim was stolen. Most notable among these is perhaps the Justice for J6 Rally, which was held at the site of the original J6 riots and became violent. As explained above, Justice For All was also played at over 35 candlelit vigils across the United States on the anniversary of the J6 riots, where it was used as a symbol of solidarity for those imprisoned, as well as to lament lost freedom and the ‘theft’ of the election.

The playing of Justice For All during such events serves several functions. It links those who hear it—or at least, those who hear it a certain way—to those imprisoned for the J6 riots. To this end, Justice For All operates in a fashion akin to Russell and Carlton’s concept of ‘counter-carceral acoustemologies’ (2020), whereby the border-crossing capacity of sound is harnessed to create trans-spatial solidarity—albeit here, utilized towards reactionary ends. Through Justice For All, the members of the J6 Prison Choir reach beyond the carceral architectures that seek to contain them. Simultaneously, those who gather at vigils held in their name are able to connect to and honour those they call ‘the J6’. The soundscape created by these vigils is sustained not only by the song Justice For All but also through the recitation

7 The Capitol Hill riots, known also as the J6 Riots, occurred in the United States on 6 January 2021, whereby approximately 10,000 people converged on Capitol Hill, with at least 2000 of them storming the government building in an effort to overturn the result of the election Donald Trump claimed was stolen. Since then, at least 1000 people have been charged with a range of offences. At the time of writing, 277 people have been imprisoned for their involvement, though many of the cases are ongoing.
of the Pledge of Allegiance, various prayers and the holding of collective minutes of silence, which, as Young and Popovski note, can ‘paradoxically amplify the impact of protest’ by ‘[creating] a space of silence within the conventionally hyper-noisy metropolis’ (2023: 10). The soundscapes produced at these vigils do not merely link those who attend them to those who are imprisoned. They also work to establish affective links between those assembled. This is achieved through the coming together of bodies enveloped within a shared nationalist soundscape that quite literally sets the affective tone of that coming together. Indeed, the emotions generated by the affective atmosphere of the vigils are explicitly named in the words of Justice For All and its sampling of the Pledge of Allegiance. These lyrics articulate a particular image of the nation as a unified nation under God, which is ‘indivisible’ and provides ‘liberty and justice for all’. Like this image of the nation, so too, those who assemble in its name and in the name of justice itself, come together as a singular, indivisible body, united by a sense of justice and a shared lamentation of a gross injustice having occurred—that of the supposedly stolen election and the political imprisonment of the J6. This interpretation shows that the creation of nationalist soundscapes can facilitate with Alistair Fraser and Daniel Matthews call ‘spatialised feeling’ (2019: 2), which describes the processes through which affective orientations come to be reified within and via spatialities, such that those who bear a relation to them can experience and perform particular affects therein. With respect to the J6 vigils, those who participate assemble because the message of Justice For All ‘resonates’ with them. By assembling to listen, participants can experience the affects and emotions articulated by Justice For All together, as a collective body that occupies space.

Like Justice For All, the minutes of silence held at these vigils—which contribute to a nationalist soundscape through the manipulated absence of sound—also facilitate spatialized feeling by employing what Young and Popovski call a ‘vocal silence’ (2023: 10) that generates a shared sense of grief and solidarity in the face of the nation’s supposed loss. This demonstrates that nationalist soundscapes can facilitate connections between subjects in a variety of ways. Whether through sound or silence, soundscapes can facilitate the collective embodiment of the affects they sonically articulate. This is seen above, for example, with respect to shared performances of outrage and injustice through yelling, singing, chanting and listening together, and so too, through shared performances of grief conveyed through collective silence. Nationalist soundscapes can thus help to produce social bodies via the socialization of affect. Such bodies can experience certain affects and emotions because they are together, and they are together because they experience certain affects and emotions (Ahmed 2014).

The way nationalist soundscapes can generate particular affects within particular spatialities speaks to LaBelle’s theory of ‘acoustic territories’ (2010), as discussed above. Examples of this are readily apparent in the selection of far-right events I have discussed, which include protests and marches held by the EDL and UPF, the ‘freedom convoy’ phenomenon that emerged across the West during the COVID-19 pandemic and the series of protests and vigils held following the imprisonment of those involved in the Capitol Hill riots. A further example occurred when the Convoy to Canberra arrived at Australia’s political capital to establish a protest occupation they called ‘Camp Freedom’. In doing so, the AFR deployed a range of sensory technologies, modifying the space visually, haptically and acoustically (Gillespie 2023). A core aspect of these modifications was the deployment of sound. The digital pamphlets disseminated widely online by the AFR asked participants to bring, among other things, ‘Speakers and Megaphones’, with the express intention of ensuring nationalistic songs and political messages could be played upon the convoy’s arrival. From the moment they formed Camp Freedom, these sound systems were used to play music with nationalist connotations, such as ‘You’re the Voice’, ‘Khe Sahn’ and ‘Waltzing Matilda’, as used by other Australian nationalist groups, such as the UPF.
Diverging somewhat from Labelle’s theory of acoustic territorialization, I maintain that the AFR did not first create Camp Freedom so it could then play the music it wanted within the space it occupied. Rather, it was the very playing of the music itself that constituted the occupation of the space—qua Camp Freedom—in the first instance. This reading suggests that the space onto and into which nationalist soundscapes are projected does not necessarily pre-exist that projection, but that rather, space itself—at least, as it comes to be understood and inhabited—can be constituted by the projection of (nationalist) soundscapes upon it. By extension, this implies that the collectivities that come to occupy space by projecting sound upon it need not pre-exist those processes of projection either. Instead, the production of sound itself can retroactively form and inform the collectivity through the generation of shared affects.

To this end, the lyrics of John Farnham’s well-known anthem You’re the Voice—as frequently appropriated by Australian nationalists—are informative. As the song proclaims: ‘You’re the voice, try and understand it / Make a noise and make it clear / We’re not gonna sit in silence / We’re not gonna live with fear / This time, we know we all can stand together’. For the many nationalists who have loudly sung these lyrics, sitting in silence is tantamount to living in fear. In contrast, contributing one’s voice to collective action is simultaneously the making of a collective that can overcome the stifling effects of fear and silence by allowing bodies to ‘stand together’ as one. To this end, the sonic violence of nationalist soundscapes works not only to displace the Other but to constitute the nationalist social body as well and the very spaces they seek to inhabit.

CONCLUSION

Far-right nationalist groups frequently conceptualize sensory encounters with the Other as intrusions and contaminations upon the body, which they read as intrusions and contaminations upon the nation itself. Throughout this article, I have analysed the way ethnic nationalist groups utilize sound to attempt to counteract such perceived intrusions. I have introduced the concept of nationalist soundscapes to refer to the sonic violence of the far-right and as a means of conceptualizing the function this sonic violence sometimes fulfils.

Elaine Scarry writes that ‘so long as one is speaking, the self extends out beyond the boundaries of the body, [and] occupies a space much larger than the body’ (1985: 33). This is precisely the role nationalist soundscapes fulfil for far-right groups during events such as protests, riots and marches. I have argued that in addition to displacing the Other, nationalist soundscapes effectuate both the production of collective nationalist bodies and the spaces they occupy. I have explored this contention in reference to a snapshot of far-right nationalist events, including protests, marches, riots, rallies, occupations and convoys held by groups like the EDL, UPF and AFR. So too, I have explored the phenomenon of far-right ‘freedom convoys’, which emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic and the series of protests and silent vigils that stemmed from the imprisonment of those involved in the Capitol Hill riots, including the formation of the J6 Prison Choir.

My analysis of these groups and events suggests that nationalist soundscapes not only play a role in allowing nationalists to colonize and (re)territorialize spaces but so too, in constituting the very nationalist groups that come to occupy those spaces. This is because nationalist soundscapes allow far-right groups to embody and perform affects that connect participants to one another, validating their shared status as nationalists. Such affects include those relating to a shared sense of ownership and mobility; injustice, outrage, righteousness or grief; and a sense of solidarity and unity. By constituting the collective nationalist body, nationalist soundscapes simultaneously work to ‘defend’ the nation by securing its cultural integrity from the
contaminating effects of the racialized others it displaces. This is one of the primary aspects of the sonic violence of nationalist soundscapes.

While this article has aimed to articulate the specific mechanisms through which far-right nationalists deploy and weaponize sound, and the ends to which they do so, far-right actors are not the only ones that deploy soundscapes toward political ends. A variety of other actors, events and circumstances also warrant examination. It is therefore hoped that in addition to providing a better understanding of the way contemporary far-right groups deploy sonic violence, the foregoing analysis might also provide a starting point from which such examinations can proceed so that the ability to listen criminologically might be further cultivated.

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