Eliciting Sound Memories

Anna Harris

Abstract: Sensory experiences are often considered triggers of memory, most famously a little French cake dipped in lime blossom tea. Sense memory can also be evoked in public history research through techniques of elicitation. In this article I reflect on different social science methods for eliciting sound memories such as the use of sonic prompts, emplaced interviewing, and sound walks. I include examples from my research on medical listening. The article considers the relevance of this work for the conduct of oral histories, arguing that such methods "break the frame," allowing room for collaborative research connections and insights into the otherwise unarticulatable.

Key words: oral history, elicitation techniques, sound, research methodology, memory

Introduction

ON A COOL MAY EVENING IN Bray, ENGLAND, in a tiny but very famous restaurant called The Fat Duck, a culinary experiment is about to take place which will move diners to tears. The restaurant’s head chef, Heston Blumenthal, has just invented a new dish called Sounds of the Sea. On a little

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glass box he has crafted a beach of tapioca, fried breadcrumbs, ground ice cream cones, and crushed fried baby eels. Upon this “sand” tumbles an ocean of abalone, razor clams, sea urchins, oysters, and edible seaweed, fringed by shellfish juice foam. The dish is served with a large conch shell, out of which trail the ear-buds of an iPod.

Diners are instructed to place the buds in their ears. In swim the sounds of waves lapping at a shore, overlaid with the odd squawk of a seagull. Blumenthal has constructed his own sonic spiral seashell to accentuate memories of the seaside and enrich the dish. He claims that the effect is extraordinary, with diners overcome with emotion, engaging in passionate discussions with one another about which beach they find themselves in, as they become immersed in the culinary experience:

The wonderful thing about this dish is that the sounds of the sea and the occasional seagull act as a fantastic memory trigger, being generic enough to enable everyone around the table to relate to it. Anything more specific, like say a photograph, would just not have the same effect.

In this article, I travel with Blumenthal’s sonic dining experiment into the realm of public history research, specifically, the conduct of oral histories. I give an overview of, and reflect upon, methodological ways in which sounds can be used as triggers, to elicit informants’ sound memories and open up oral histories in potentially surprising ways.

For some time now, social scientists have explored the potentialities of elicitation in research. Elicitation as a research method is a way in which to seek informants’ reflections through the use of a prompt rather than by asking direct questions. To date, however, this method is less frequently discussed in public history than in the social sciences, even if such methods may already be used implicitly in public history projects, such as in the making of documentaries, in exhibitions, or in walking tours. The public historian Perry Blatz, for instance, argues that in oral history interviews, information can only be elicited through the “rather mundane art of conversation.” I suggest in this article that this perspective neglects techniques of elicitation which may be very useful when conducting oral histories, and further, that elicitation, specifically sonic elicitation, offers public historians a potentially rich way in which to find entry into stories and memories which may be difficult to tell otherwise.

In those fields where researchers have reflected methodologically on elicitation techniques, such as sociology, anthropology, and psychology, much of
the literature focuses on elicitation with visual material, such as photographs and drawings, or elicitation with objects. As the anthropologist Lina Dib and colleagues point out in their wonderful study of sound souvenirs, much research has looked at the relationship between images, talk, and memory, but very little has focused on sounds, talk, and memory. With several exceptions, which I explore later, sound has on the whole been disregarded as a source of elicitation. I am concerning myself here with nonmusical sounds, for there has indeed been excellent work on the evocation of memory with music. In this article I suggest that nonmusical sounds, like images and objects, can trigger memories and stories from informants that might otherwise be difficult to describe or remember, including auditory memories. As Blumenthal alludes to above, sounds can offer something generic and unspecified that allows room for rich storytelling. On the other hand, sounds can also be very specific, alluding to particular places or occasions. It is this simultaneous specificity and nonspecificity that, I argue, makes sounds such rich resources in oral histories, for they facilitate the recalling of individual (and collective) memories, while allowing for an open-endedness in responses which is particularly productive when exploring memories.

Oral history has long been an important tool in public history. Oral history connects public historians’ concepts of what the sounds of the past mean to the testimony of those who heard these sounds. The use of oral history in public history research has grown significantly since the 1960s. There have been several developments in the approach over the last few decades that, I suggest, lend themselves to the incorporation of sonic elicitation techniques. First, once viewed as “the voice of the past” uncovering history, oral histories are now considered more complex, with the acknowledgement that the historian plays an active role in the reconstitution of the past. This understanding, inspired by the work of sociologist Erving Goffman and other social scientists, views oral histories as “negotiated conversational accomplishments,” rather than clear recounting of interviewees’ ready-made stories. This article will show that, employing sonic elicitation, the interviewer and the interviewee actively participate in the live construction of stories. A second

6. For example, many of the essays in Sound Souvenirs: Audio Technologies, Memory and Cultural Practices, ed. Karin Bijsterveld and Josée van Dijck (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009).
development in oral history scholarship creating room for sonic elicitation is scholars’ changing views on the subjectivity of memory. Once viewed as a weakness of the oral history approach, the subjectivity of memory is considered now to be a strength, providing clues about the perceived meaning of historical experience. Finally, oral historians are beginning to engage more explicitly with the senses in their work, incorporating insights from the “sensory turn” in the social sciences.

Building upon these developments, in this article I argue that sonic elicitation offers a complement to existing oral history methods, as a way of facilitating active engagement in the interview process by both researcher and researched, and as a productive way of learning about sound memories in all their subjectivity. I argue that not only does the simultaneous specific and nonspecific nature of sounds allow for the elicitation of open-ended storytelling of memories, but that sonic elicitation also fosters bodily and material connections between researcher and researched. Through playing sounds using various technologies, by facilitating creative ways for participants to play with these recordings, and by engaging with surrounding sounds in the research environment, it may be possible to foster a closer sharing and deeper understanding of experience than is possible through a more traditional question-and-answer format.

In order to make these arguments, I review the work of anthropologists, sociologists, and geographers dealing explicitly with sensory methods, particularly concerning sound. In drawing from these disciplines my aim is to make connections between them, consider the relevance of the work of these researchers for oral history in public historical research, and promote methodological reflexivity. I also use examples from my anthropological study of sounds and listening techniques in medicine. In this study, part of a larger project on sonic skills in different professions, I was concerned with understanding the role of listening to sounds in contemporary medical education and practice as a form of knowing. In 2013 I conducted participant observation in hospitals and medical schools in Australia and The Netherlands, using techniques such as taking fieldnotes, making drawings, and recording sound. I carried out seventeen formal, semi-structured recorded interviews, and many more informal interviews, with doctors, nurses, medical students, and other hospital staff to discuss their listening practices.

During some interviews I used sonic elicitation in order to understand more about participants’ engagements with sound, and as a way of triggering sense memories to enrich interview discussions. For example, during my discussions

14. This Dutch-funded (NWO, Vici) research project, Sonic Skills: Sound and Listening in the Development of Science, Technology, Medicine (1920–now) is led by Karin Bijsterveld. It also includes other subprojects by Joeri Bruyninckx, Stefan Krebs, Alexandra Supper, and Melissa van Drie that empirically investigate the role of sound and listening in knowledge production.
with a nurse I played sound recordings I had made of machine alarms in the intensive care unit (ICU), and played professionally recorded heart and lung sounds to a group of second year medical students. I used other ways of eliciting sound memories from participants, for example posing sensory questions such as asking experienced teachers about how they remembered first hearing (or not hearing) heart sounds as novices, and asking students about their observations of the sounds of hospital life.\textsuperscript{15} I also utilized other methods such as prompting participants to mimic or draw sounds, as a way to understand more about how they shared sounds in the educational setting.\textsuperscript{16} In this article I discuss primarily the technique of playing sounds; elsewhere I have focused on methods of sensory interviewing and drawing or mimicking.\textsuperscript{17}

**Evoking Sense Memories**

Sensory experiences transform and are transformed through processes of memory. Sense memory refers to the ways that the senses can trigger memory, such as sounds of the sea evoking holidays at the beach.\textsuperscript{18} Besides a few sound-related exceptions reviewed later in the article, the most common sense memory triggers discussed in the literature are those of taste and smell. There is debate in this literature as to which sense “best” evokes memories. Some scholars such as art historian Jim Drobnick consider odors unmatched in catalyzing the evocation of distant memories and places, with smell bypassing language and directly connecting the material world to one’s inner state.\textsuperscript{19} The ability of odors to spontaneously trigger rich and vivid autobiographical memories is known as the “Proust phenomenon.”\textsuperscript{20}

The Proust phenomenon refers to the often discussed section of *A La Recherche du Temps* where the protagonist of Marcel Proust’s novel eats a madeleine cake dipped in lime blossom tea and is reconnected to a lost time.\textsuperscript{21} The memory actually is more tied to taste, rather than specifically to smell:

Mechanically, oppressed by the gloomy day and the prospect of a sad future, I carried to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had let soften a piece of

\textsuperscript{15} Anna Harris and Marilys Guillemin, “Developing Sensory Awareness in Qualitative Interviewing: A Portal into the Otherwise Unexplored,” *Qualitative Health Research* 22, no. 5 (May 2012): 689–99.


\textsuperscript{17} Harris and Guillemin, “Developing Sensory Awareness”; Harris and van Drie, “Sharing Sound.”


madeleine. But at the very instant when the mouthful of tea mixed with cake-crumbs touched my palate, I quivered, attentive to the extraordinary thing that was happening in me... Where could it have come to me from—this powerful joy? I sensed that it was connected to the taste of tea and cake, but that it went infinitely far beyond it, could not be of the same nature. Where did it come from? What did it mean? How could I grasp it?\(^{22}\)

Then, suddenly, “the memory appeared,” and out of the teacup emerged the dreamy gardens of the character’s youth.\(^{23}\) In her delightful compendium *The Art of Eating*, the food writer M.F.K. Fisher also speaks of the ultimate sensory memory, of remembering traces of the gastronomic sublime:

> Occasionally, in a moment of wide-flung inebriation or the taut introspection of search for things past, a person hits upon his peak of gastronomic emotion. He remembers it with shock, almost, and with a nostalgic clarity that calls tears to his inward-looking eyes. If you can surprise him at such quick times, and make him talk, you are more than fortunate. It is as tricky a business as to watch a bird of paradise at play.\(^{24}\)

Both Proust and Fisher talk of involuntary memory, something hard to grasp and difficult to find. The trick, Fisher supposes, is to make the gourmand talk at such times of introspection, definitely not to ask questions, because to do so only brings forth the pale shadow of shaking recollection. Although I take much inspiration from Fisher, I depart from her here, and argue that it is possible to at least attempt to elicit sensory memories in research. Although it may be difficult to ask the “right” questions, as Fisher proposes, other forms of elicitation may work. The aim is not to obtain perfect recollection, but rather to invite revealing stories and the retelling of sensory memories that may not be remembered using other techniques.

The anthropologist C. Nadia Seremetakis offers useful theoretical insights for thinking further about the elicitation of sensory memories.\(^{25}\) Seremetakis describes sense memory as a culturally mediated material practice that can be activated by an “artifact laden with perceptual recall” that becomes “a temporal conduit.”\(^{26}\) Artifacts, she argues, such as for example a peach, can provoke the reflexive emergence and awakening of layered memories, and the senses “contained” within that object. Seremetakis argues that sense memory is located in, and generated by, materials, and that material culture can become an apparatus for the production of historical reflexivity. Her work highlights the historical richness in materials as sensory prompts and the ways in which the senses are implicated in historical interpretation, as “witnesses or record-keepers of material experience.”\(^{27}\)


\(^{23}\) Proust, *Swann’s Way*, 49.


\(^{26}\) Seremetakis, *The Senses Still*, 11.

the relationship between senses, history, and memory, and the ways in which embodied acts and meaningful objects relate with memories, here I consider the material world of sounds. Although, like the novelist and food writer above, Seremetakis focuses predominantly on the involuntary dimension of memory, I extend her work into a more practical methodological discussion on how sense memories can be elicited purposefully in research.

Elicitation in Social Science and Humanities Research

Elicitation strategies are those which are used when the researcher does not ask questions directly of the respondent but instead seeks his or her thoughts on a given practice, event, or issue through the use of materials or places connected with it. Elicitation has a longer history in some disciplines than others. In psychology, for example, elicitation with images is a common technique, used in the administration of the Rorschach test, and has been developed in experimental studies of senses other than sight as discussed further below. The technique has also been used for some time in ethnographic research, as an interview method in which objects are used as a means of focusing discussion of a given topic. Here a physical object is considered to invite a degree of self-expression over and above what could normally be achieved in the interview context, as a way to elicit fuller and more detailed responses than might otherwise be possible. For example, in a study of a particular ritual, an anthropologist may use a ceremonial artifact. Anthropologist Richard Vokes also argues that the participant may be more relaxed if they do not feel themselves to be the object of the interview. Anthropologists Jason De Leon and Jeffrey Cohen discuss the use of material “probes” to encourage interviewees to reveal more information. They consider these probes, anything from keepsakes to buildings, as places or things that prompt informants to discuss their memories during interviews.

Although elicitation techniques have a long history in psychological and anthropological research, it was not until the 1950s that they began to gain widespread appeal in other disciplines. Anthropological elicitation also further developed at this time through the use of photographs, a practice that has grown most significantly in fields such as sociology, which now has large body of literature on the use of images as forms of elicitation in interviews. Sociologists Marilys Guillemin and Sarah Drew categorize visual elicitation

28. Vokes, “(Re)constructing the Field through Sound,” 403.
29. Vokes, “(Re)constructing the Field through Sound,” 404.
30. Ibid.
32. Vokes, “(Re)constructing the Field through Sound,” 404.
into three types: the use of researcher-generated images, found images, and participant-generated images.\textsuperscript{33} In a highly referenced article on this topic, another sociologist, Douglas Harper, defines photo elicitation, still the most common form of visual elicitation, as inserting a photograph into a research interview, with the goal of eliciting not more information, but a different kind of information. Harper describes this as “breaking the frame,” demonstrating that photographs may lead an individual to a new view of their social existence. He shows, for example, how talking with a mechanic, Willie, about photographs taken at unusual angles or up-close of him working, led Willie to see his labor from a new perspective. It also revealed to Willie how little the sociologist understood of his work and led to suggestions as to how Harper could study this better.\textsuperscript{34}

Elicitation has also been used in conjunction with the sense of smell. In 1987 National Geographic magazine conducted an odor-elicitation study, where they sent out scratch-and-sniff cards to readers to see if they evoked vivid memories.\textsuperscript{35} Psychologists have also attempted to re-create the Proustian effect, studying odor-evoked memories through experiments that involve participants recalling personal memories with and without visual or olfactory cues. Researchers found that odor was particularly effective in evoking autobiographical and aversive memories.\textsuperscript{36}

Researchers across disciplines, then, have found multiple uses for the technique, whether as a way to encourage self-expression and encourage “fuller” responses, to put informants at ease by talking about something other than themselves, to enable a more active dialogic form of engagement in research, or to “break the frame.” Elicitation methods may also allow for a more collaborative form of engagement than other research methods.\textsuperscript{37}

Although a technique used predominantly with objects, photographs, and other visual media, and on occasion, smells, researchers have also used sounds to elicit sensory memories in interviews. In the next section I elaborate on several of these studies, including my own study of listening in medicine. I use the classification system of Guillemin and Drew in order to structure this discussion, distinguishing between researcher-generated, found, and participant-generated sounds.

\textsuperscript{35} Chu and Downes, “Odour-Evoked Autobiographical Memories,” 111–16.
Eliciting Sound Memories with Sonic Prompts

It is of course very hard to define separate sensory categories—sensory memory is an intertwined knot of experiences. The effect of sonic elicitation is in fact multisensory; sounds evoking visual, tactile, and olfactory memories in addition to auditory ones. Conversely, objects, smells, and photographs may also elicit sound memories. In keeping with the aural history theme of this special issue, however, the focus of this article is on the elicitation of sound memories, through elicitation with sound, or sonic elicitation.

To date, sonic elicitation is a technique found mostly in anthropology. One of the first anthropologists to write about the use of sonic prompts was Steven Feld. Feld pointed out that during the crisis-of-representation debate in his field, there was little reflection about using sound to produce narratives. He addressed this in his seminal study of sound and listening amongst the Kaluli people of the Bosavi forests in Papua New Guinea, where he studied what he termed “acoustemology,” or acoustic knowing; that is, how the experience of sound is a special kind of knowledge about forest life. In this research Feld experimented with innovative sonic elicitation techniques such as listening and talking about his own forest recordings with participants as a way to gain a better sense of their ways of sonic knowing, as well as “how to be an ethnographic listener.” He describes a method where he would:

Sit with people and listen to the cassettes and invite [his] listeners to scroll the knobs on the cassettes. It was an ethnoaesthetic negotiation, trying to work with the Bosavi people to understand how they listened, how they heard the dimensionality of forest sound, how they would balance a mix of birds, water, cicadas, voices, and so forth.

The research material Feld gathers is, as he writes, a negotiation, enacted in the relationship created between participants, their listening experiences, and the environment they live in, as well as with Feld the researcher, sitting on the forest floor, recording his observations while scrolling the knobs of a cassette player. Using researcher-generated sounds, his elicitation techniques allowed him to understand something about not only about how the Bosavi people listened, but also to find out more about the sounds that are important to them. He learned that the Kaluli’s acoustemologies were part of their own embodied sense of place.

Inspired by this approach, I listened to sound recordings I made during my fieldwork in the hospital with a nurse in an effort to understand more about

38. Megan Warin and Simone Dennis, “Threads of Memory: Reproducing the Cypress Tree through Sensual Consumption,” Journal of Intercultural Studies 26, no. 1–2 (February/May 2005): 159–70.
the ways that hospital staff used sound as a form of knowing in their medical environment. On one of the last days of my study in Melbourne, Australia, I sat with Sima, head nurse on the respiratory ward, in her office filled with teaching torsos and nurses’ stethoscopes. We first listened to sounds I had recorded in the ICU (Sima used to work as an ICU nurse) stored on my laptop, through the laptop speakers. Sima quickly switched to using her own headphones, plugging them into the computer, nodding to me to press pause as she talked about the machines she heard in the highly technological ICU soundscape. Although she turned the encounter from one of shared listening to one of individual listening, the sounds were useful in triggering discussions of what they meant to her, how she would “decipher” the sounds, such as telling me what each alarm corresponded to, or how many patients were being monitored in the room. The sound recordings—recordings which were both specific and nonspecific at the same time—enabled us to discuss what was for Sima rather mundane and taken for granted, giving me insights into the kinds of sonic skills needed to monitor a patient in the ICU.

Although these examples describe researchers using their own sound recordings in the field, Vokes used “found” sounds in order to elicit sound memories. In his study of radio listening practices in rural southwestern Uganda, Vokes developed a method of interviewing called radio elicitation. His technique involved first sitting with people as they listened to the radio, then gradually taking control over the listening situation himself, first making observations, then holding a focus group during which he would play clips from radio shows and ask the group prepared questions. He conducted this final stage at the end of fieldwork, after developing closer ties with the community. Vokes found that the radio sets generated an intense sociality in the way they were handled and passed around. The broadcasts also generated rich discussions and debate amongst listeners, for example about local politics during an interview with a local politician. Vokes’s study involved the use of clips he found on the radio. However, researchers could also use other ready-made sounds as prompts, such as those in sound archives, or online sources of uploaded sounds. For example, at the end of a focus group interview with medical students I played lung and heart sounds that I had found on a teaching CD in their medical school library, to explore further the ways they described sounds. At first this led to rather close-ended “answers,” as if a test, to what the sounds “represented,” but then, with my encouragement, they provided richer descriptions. The analogies they used helped me to understand what referents they drew on to make meaning of the sounds.

Unfortunately, the speakers were of poor quality and the sounds rather “computerized.” What first seemed to be a setback, however, revealed something further about what students were searching for in terms of fidelity of sound, as this experience reflected other comments students had made to me about the difficulties of learning sounds from poor quality recordings. The CDs I used were easily found in the hospital’s library. I could have used other sounds in my interviews as well, such as those obtained from sound sharing
websites such as SoundCloud and FreeSound, where I found recordings of hospital sounds.

Finally, one of the few participant-generated sonic elicitation studies in the literature was conducted by Lina Dib and her information studies colleagues, who asked holiday-makers in England to record sounds while on vacation, in an effort to understand more about sound as a medium for social reminiscing. These researchers found that their participants quickly appropriated the activity as their own, finding very creative ways of using the recording technology to make sound memories. When it came to discussing the recordings played in the interview, either via the sound recorders, or later with a specially designed sound memory machine, the anthropologists found that re-listening was a highly collaborative and interactive experience. I found a similar kind of interactivity with and between students in my research. As an example, one student shared with me and other students the recordings she had made of a patient’s heart murmur (mitral regurgitation) with a digital stethoscope. I was able to listen to a sound that this student had found perplexing because it didn’t match the textbook description of its usual physical location, and so she had recorded it to play back over again. I could hear a sound memory that she had herself captured in the stethoscope, and shared with her classmates. This experience also provided me with valuable insights into how the students “shared sounds” and the technologies they used to do so.

In Dib and her collaborators’ study of holiday memories, sounds triggered the excited retelling of vacation stories and events, one sound leading to the entire recounting of a family’s holiday. The technique of elicitation enabled the families to discuss different memories than would have been evoked by photographs, including more mundane memories, triggered by sounds of the boredom of waiting or family arguments. Their findings highlighted some of the paradoxes of sound, how the temporality of listening both expands remembering and constrains listeners to the pace of the sound, similar to the paradox that makes sound such a useful form of elicitation, of being simultaneously specific and nonspecific.

Although very productive in these anthropological studies, the use of participant-generated sounds highlights some of the limitations of travelling with these methods in public history, for the subjects of oral history interviews do not always have the same kind of access to sounds from the past to record. It may also be that some topics of study in public history have left few sonic traces to be used as readymade prompts. I would argue, however, that there are still creative ways in which oral historians may use sounds as prompts in their interviews, inspired by these anthropological approaches. According to the aims of the researcher, elicitation with sounds may be a way to encourage

recollection of how sounds from the past differ from today, and how they may have changed over time. The next section explores such possibilities further, by examining the eliciting of sounds in practical activity.

**Eliciting Sound Memories in Practical Activity**

So far in this article I have discussed sonic elicitation with sonic prompts. Following Seremetakis, these sounds can be thought of as rich and historically dense materials bound up with sound recording and playing technologies that trigger sound memories. I now extend this discussion by turning to focus on place and practices, to consider sonic elicitation in the midst of activity. Already I have mentioned the anthropologist Feld sitting on the forest floor with his informants, scrolling through recordings. For Feld, this emplaced listening with informants enabled him to get a better sense of the Kaluli’s engagements with forest sound. Here I suggest that there is also much to learn by closely attending to the places and practices important in our informants’ lives, and conducting interviews in the midst of them, something already occurring in public history projects such as documentaries, but a method that has not yet received sufficient study.

During my fieldwork in Australia I talked to nurses and doctors as they went about their work in noisy wards and departments, where sounds often triggered discussions. The ICU was particularly sonically rich. The cacophony of machine alarms and announcements led to reflections by doctors on the absence of alarms in the past and having instead to listen for the softer whoosh of the ventilator to know that their patients were breathing. A nurse remembered times of silence, prescribed rest periods for the patients and staff when the alarms were turned off and she had to sit at the end of the bed to look at the patient, watching their chest move in and out with inspiration and expiration. During a relatively calm moment during a busy morning, another ICU nurse went on to lament:

Now there is an alarm for everything and they are ever tightening the alarms. The noise is horrific now. The parents are coming and visiting at any time of day and the PA announcements! Oh, there is one now! [talks over announcement, I struggle to hear her] The alarm at the front door and the phone always ringing and if no one answers it then they page someone to answer the phone. The patients’ families are stressed and keep their finger on the buzzer because they don’t understand. It’s changed so much. There is no respite any more. [phone rings nearby] There is a sound for everything—to get in a door and another click when you leave. The [hand cleanser] dispenser makes a noise too! I remember the sound of billows in the ICU—it was quite peaceful, like white noise . . . I could go to sleep to that noise. Gone are the days of peaceful ICU.45

45. Author’s field notes, Melbourne, October 21, 2013.
This nostalgic recounting of a quiet past was prompted and interrupted by the sounds in the nurses’ environment. The nurses’ stories tell of their understandings of hospitals as having become noisier places, where abundant alarms and beeps signify tighter controls, closer monitoring, increasing anxieties, and practices of surveillance. The anthropologist Tom Rice, in his hospital ethnography of listening in England, documents how these constant warnings of danger impact negatively on patients as well. Rice’s ethnographic ear was also closely directed towards nonverbal, nonmusical sounds in the hospital and his interviews, either on or off the wards, were often directed towards reaching an understanding of the meaning that those sounds held for his interviewees. While interviewing informants in their homes, workplaces, or places of leisure, when spending time in the places they also spend time in, explicit attention to the sounds of these places can add richness to oral histories, by prompting conversations that might not start in other ways. Some practices taken for granted by informants—such as nurses “tightening alarms” for example (that is, setting the parameters of “abnormality” for heart rates or blood pressures, indicating when the alarm will sound), or as historian of technology Stefan Krebs shows in his work on papermaking, the tacit knowledge involved in working machines—may only be evoked through emplaced interviewing, where researcher and informant respond to their sonic environment. As the examples in hospitals further show, attention to sound can make underlying issues, such as surveillance in healthcare and the increasing anxieties evoked by technologies, more tangible.

I want to extend this approach now, of emplaced interviewing as a form of sonic elicitation, to consider the elicitation of sound memories while walking. By walking with informants, researchers can learn more about the places that people inhabit, and their bodily connections to these places. Oral histories have often been used in making sound walks or audio trails, but less common is the use of sound walks in the conduct of oral histories, as a way to elicit sound memories. Walking, or sound walking, however, can reveal something new about the ways in which people relate to the spaces around them, including their sonic memories of these places.

According to the scholar and composer Barry Truax, sound walking is active participation in a soundscape, during which listening takes places

46. Annelies Jacobs, Het geluid van gisteren: Waarom Amsterdam vroeger ook niet stil was (PhD thesis, Maastricht University, 2014).
48. Ibid.
outside of the walls of consecrated sites of otic practice. Although sound walking as a research method is not explicitly examined in Truax’s work, it has been explored by others interested in the sensory memories of places, as a way to prompt conversation and elicit the “unarticulatable.”

Thinking of walking as a method presupposes that being in motion is different to being stationary, in terms of the kind of engagement with the world it prompts and the kinds of knowledge it engenders.

A few scholars have explored walking as a method. For example, anthropologist Sarah Pink has written about the use of walking in sensory ethnographies. In her ethnographic study of how domestic spaces are imagined and experienced in England, Pink follows her informants around their gardens with a video camera, arguing that it is in the process of walking with them that she learns most about their practices. Similarly, Tim Ingold and Jo Lee Vergunst suggest that walking with participants encourages a sense of connection with the environment, allowing for a potential understanding of people’s relationship with and understanding of the places they move through.

In my fieldwork in hospitals I would (often somewhat breathlessly) talk with students and teachers about the sonic compositions of our environments as we sped through them on ward rounds and bedside tutorials. Some sounds, mostly machine alarms, were ignored, but others, such as a whistling patient or a radio emitting classical music, were commented upon, lending insights into which sounds belonged in this setting or took their notice and who had responsibility to attend to them. The paths that researchers explore with their informants may be those currently used, as is the case in ethnographic fieldwork, or could be a retracing of paths used in the past, as may be more often the case in public history research. Some of the few scholars to explore explicitly the role of sound and walking as a research method, geographers Tom Hall and colleagues, also argue for more attention to be given to noise and other everyday sounds in interviews. They consider sound a form of “innovative disturbance” which may take the interview in unexpected directions. This may lead not only to reflections on current noises and sounds but also, as in my ICU discussions, reflections on how noises and sounds of a place have changed over time, and what this means. Sounds can be both specific to a place, but also because of their unspecificity, can remind informants of other places as well.

56. Tim Ingold and Jo Lee Vergunst, eds., Ways of Walking: Ethnography and Practice on Foot (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2008).
Walking with participants means engaging with them in practical activity. There are also other ways of engaging in practical tasks of listening with informants, whether this may be through shared use of a tape recorder and player as Feld did in the forest, or other techniques, such as asking a participant to demonstrate how they use an instrument used for listening to, recording, or playing sounds. I know from my study that touching, holding, and demonstrating how to use the stethoscope evoked insightful discussions about sounds, such as the sounds which students found difficult to hear, or the first time they heard a murmur. Rice describes the stethoscope as “an autobiographical object,” an object around which memories or associations are concentrated or organized. Just like the seashell, which according to fantastical myths stores sound memories in its curves, so too may practically using sound objects with informants evoke memories of the past.

There are many ways in which public historians might incorporate these techniques in the conduct of oral histories. Emplaced interviewing, sound walks, and other means of sonic elicitation through the demonstration of techniques and practices can evoke sound memories and promote individuals’ engagement with their surroundings, past and present. Such techniques foster connections between the researcher and researched, with materials and places important to participants, and embodied practices of remembering. This has been evident in the shared listening experiences in my study and Feld’s, in the rich stories about papermaking from the factory floor in Kreb’s work or in the ICU, and in the autobiographical tales triggered by stethoscopes. The sound memories evoked may be quite emotional for the informant. It is therefore important to address the ethical dimension of using techniques such as sonic elicitation in oral history and other public history projects.

**Ethical Sensibilities**

Acting ethically has been a concern of public historians for some time. Techniques such as the use of sonic elicitation in the conduct of oral histories require researchers to remain vigilant as to the ethical consequences of opening up potentially sensitive areas. Although this is an issue for many research methods, there are particular ethical issues that arise when probing into sensory memories that might lead to stories otherwise concealed. Sound memories, like other sensory memories, may evoke flashbacks or traumatic experiences. They could unleash emotions for which the participant is unprepared that may have greater consequences for the individual than the tears shed by diners over a meal.

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62. Harris and Guillemin, “Developing Sensory Awareness,”
To date there has been very little written in relation to the ethical issues of working methodologically with sound in historical or ethnographic research. Ethical focus on aural material has tended to examine the repatriation of sound archives in indigenous communities. Although this is indeed important, and may relate to issues of privacy, ownership, and permission raised in the contexts I have described above for using “found” sounds, other ethical questions which may be raised in conducting research that elicits sound memories need to be considered.

Researchers examining other, related, methods raise issues that shed light here. For example, those who use memory work, a technique based in feminist and Marxist approaches, highlight important concerns relating to researching memory. Memory work is a method in which researchers as informants write personal memories and share them in a group setting, looking at instances of contradictions and silenced topics. Researchers using memory work acknowledge that revealing something in a group may be painful. Participants may feel vulnerable when discussing memories with others, which also can bring about tensions and frustrations. These are issues to particularly keep in mind if the techniques discussed in this article are used in group situations, but are also relevant to individual oral histories too.

Researchers examining the ethical issues of using visual methods also raise important issues for using sensory material. They discuss issues of confidentiality, consent, and ownership (especially important if informants are recording their own sounds, or if the researcher is using found sounds or is contemplating using this material for museum display), as well as the ethical issues relating to the representation and dissemination of research material with other participants or audiences. In the holiday sound souvenirs research discussed above, participants mentioned the ethical issue of recording people and replaying these sounds to others. I noticed that the student who shared her digital stethoscope recording with me was very cognizant of the consent process she negotiated with patients when recording their sounds. These are issues to be sensitive of when conducting sonic elicitation techniques to study sound memories. Ethical research entails continual negotiation of these issues throughout a project and it may be, as both Vokes and I found, that some elicitation techniques are most appropriate once closer ties to communities have been formed.

66. Ibid.
Conclusion

This article examined different methodologies for eliciting sound memories, which I suggest have relevance for public historians, particularly those conducting oral histories. In the past, public historians have been criticized for being relatively inattentive to methodology. My aim here, as with the dining experiment in the opening section of the article, has been to open up an opportunity to explore interdisciplinary methods related to memory and sound, and to consider how they may have relevance and might be adapted for public history contexts. Unlike writers who discuss involuntary memories that cannot be deliberately evoked, I have shown that there are indeed creative elicitation techniques for triggering memories that may be valuable for the public historian. Elicitation can help, according to Harper, to “bridge the gap between the worlds of the researcher and the researched,” as they work out something together. I have argued that sharing sounds fosters bodily connections in the research encounter, to places, materials, and people, in the present and past. These are important connections for the public historian to make, especially those conducting oral histories, and this sensory method offers useful techniques by which to engage in embodied research of the past.

Sound memories are not replicas of what has come before, but rather change every time they are remembered; they are messy and fragmented, collages of impressions. It is, however, through traces and fragments that stories get told. Rather than focus on the challenges of replicating past sensory experiences I suggest researchers learn most from what seem to be limitations: the connections informants make to sounds distantely relevant, the delays in remembering, or the ways informants try and bring the researcher into a shared understanding. What is provoked in the elicitation is a perception of the sense memory, the traces brought about by the sensory stimuli helping to “break the frame” in interviews and oral histories, acting as “innovative disturbances.” As sources of elicitation, sounds potentially offer different insights than photographs, with different kinds of practices of focus and attention, collaborative imagination, and interpretation. Sounds evoke moods and feelings in different ways than do photographs. They are triggers which are specific and nonspecific at the same time, indicating particular objects, people, and places while also being general enough, such as the case of sounds of waves on a sandy shore, to evoke other times and events, leaving spaces

open for interpretation of the prompts, remembering, and more open-ended storytelling.

This article offers a number of methodological “triggers” for public historians that could be used in individual or group settings, particularly oral history. They may be techniques that are particularly useful, as visual researchers have pointed out, for conducting oral histories with vulnerable and less visible populations. Being aware of the vast toolkit of techniques used by social scientists to elicit sound memories is one step. Researchers need also be attentive to how their informants share their stories. Although sensory memories may be vividly recalled by “the faintest whiff,” they are notoriously difficult to describe verbally. Informants may not only use words to describe these impressions but also gestures, pictures, mimicking, or other ways of sharing their experiences. I have not had room in this article to consider the ways in which sound memories may be shared in the research context, but have alluded to, through various examples, the bodily ways in which participants may integrate sound memories into their stories. If adopting sonic elicitation techniques, I also suggest that public historians reflect on ways of disseminating their research that are congruent with the methods of elicitation used. Again, further discussion of the presentation of such research is beyond the scope of this article, but the possibilities of the technique could certainly extend beyond the oral history encounter, to the elicitation of visitors’ memories in museum exhibits, for example, and ways of communicating history to wider audiences. Inspiration may be taken from other sensory experiments in public history, such as “historical bake-offs” which connect publics to “food ghosts” by making recipes from cookbooks of the past, or food-based walking tours to tell stories of urban neighborhoods’ immigrant histories. There is indeed a rich and never-ending tapestry of sensory memories, individual and collective, for public historians, chefs, anthropologists, psychologists, and information scientists to tap into, explore and share in creative ways.

Anna Harris is an anthropologist of medical practices. Her prior involvement in the field of public history has been through her work in medical history museums and related publications.

76. Rice, *Hearing and the Hospital*, 108; Birdsall, Harris, and van Drie, “Sharing Sound.”