

Border control: Performing aural blurring as testimony

Sometimes you are afraid to listen to this lady.

—Amiri Baraka¹

Blur comes and goes before the subject.

—Fred Moten²

How do the wayward testify? When their very existence is denied by the archives of history, what does it mean to listen to the testimonies of those deemed recalcitrant by structures of power? Saidiya Hartman defines ‘waywardness’ as:

the avid longing for a world not ruled by master, man or police. The errant path taken by the leaderless swarm in search of a place better than here. The social poesis that sustains the dispossessed. Wayward: the unregulated movement of drifting and wandering; sojourns without a fixed destination, ambulatory possibility, interminable migrations, rush and flight, black locomotion, the everyday struggle to live free. (2019: 227)

This chapter considers how this errancy can be testified—and heard—through the multi-medial device, or tool, of ‘blurring’ through two distinct art performances, both of which either utilise or gesture to the power of sound, or sound out power conversely, in deviant ways. Blurring refers here simply to the absence of a distinct visual or aural source, allowing for a multiplicity of textures and affects as beginning points of encounter. The lack of a singular immanent point of embodied access to the art work captures the way in which

power/lessness is fractal. This also means that the ‘ambulatory possibili[ties]’, as Hartman cites them, of a ‘place better than here’, are infinite.

In 2012, video-performance artist Carrie Mae Weems culminated her two-year long project, *Slow Fade to Black* (2009-11) with a multi-media performance in New York. The performance was a collaboration with the jazz composer Geri Allen and members of her trio: Weems’s video-work and images, including some from her original 2010 project consisting of blurred, soft-focus photographs of Black women performers such as Nina Simone, were installed on a screen as the musicians sang and played original compositions by Allen in tandem. The performance was playful in reiterating the question founding Weems’s 2010 images: how a (visual and now acoustic) fade (to, and away from black) can function as a border of visibility and erasure of Blackness and Black history.

In January 2018, John Luther Adams’s percussion piece *Inuksuit*—scored for between nine and ninety-nine percussionists, responding to the colonisation of the Inuit and their landscape traditions—was performed at the U.S./Mexican border by American musicians, including from the San Diego Symphony, and Mexican musicians. Musicians played across from each side of the border, the blurred sound re-inscribing racial and aural communities as audiences listened, witnessing an aural testimony of powerlessness.

In this chapter, I examine aural resonances shared by the two works, photographs and performance by Carrie Mae Weems and the performance by San Diego Symphony, asking: how does aural blurring function as a testimony of racial precarity? How is the control of such borders created by the collaborative nature of both performances? In what ways does the slow accruelement of the performances iterate an inventory of process? How are transnational and racial acts of power performed in the visual and auditory blurs underlying both performances?

Blurred testimonies in *Slow Fade to Black*

When I first laid eyes on the photograph of Billie Holiday in Carrie Mae Weems's photo-series *Slow Fade to Black*, as mediated through a screen, I kept waiting for a trick to occur—for the photograph to become something else. The image in question is in violet and black, a close-up of Holiday facing the camera from the neck-up. I want to think that she's looking at the camera but it's hard to tell: Holiday's face is blurred, like a watercolour painting of a flower. A part of her face is in darker, more purple shadows while the rest of her face is lilac, in the light. One of her eyes, in the shadows, is darker than the other. My eyes keep refocussing on their own like a camera lens trying to find a focal point, as though this next time, the photograph will *correct*.

The same sequence of events occurs when I look at another image from the series: Dinah Washington blurred in a sleeveless white dress, singing into a microphone. Her head is thrown back, her mouth is a big O, and her fist is tight, foregrounded to the right of the microphone which takes up the left vertical of the image. I'm certain Washington's eyes are closed. The photograph is awash in charcoal-silver. As I keep looking, I wait for the image to become sharp, focussed, defined, under my gaze. As though my looking, and the act of looking itself, will *subdue* the image.

These impulses I have named here—to correct, to subdue—are embodied impulses that resist the waywardness underlying Weems's photo-works of twentieth-century Black American women performers. *Slow Fade to Black*, according to Daphne A. Brooks, 'archives and memorializes the onset of Black sonic women's vanishing' (319). The photographs in *Slow Fade to Black* are blurred, with the application of a tinted hue, 'suggestive of the many shades of discrimination based on skin tone' (Scotiabank 2019). Weems's photographs embrace anarchy in the soft-focus, semi-darkened form they take, and her visual frame

works against a very basic impulse of control: that the 'functional' human eye is trained to look at an image and focus it. As Maurice Berger registers, Weems's 'ethereal' images 'play on the concept of the cinematic fade, the transition of an image to or from a blank screen. The freeze-frame makes it impossible to tell whether the scenes are fading out or fading in — whether the women themselves are disappearing or materializing' (2014).

The blurring is part of this process of fading in or out. At any point of the event of the fade, a freeze-frame captures the ambiguity that Berger outlines, which quickly turns metaphorical. Are the women disappearing or materialising? Is this an annotation towards their forgotten past or a re-inscription of them being re-remembered? Weems herself captures this dialectic of 'fading/blossoming', articulating it as 'into—not *out of* but *into* a new space of production' (BRIC TV; emphasis mine). The device of the blur attends to this edge: Black history testifies to continual erasure and regeneration, and at any point, flights of freedom have always been both. The visual blur is a reminder of this, of what has been erased (because the women are fading into) but also what is possible (blossoming). Blurred also, however, are their voices: the women are often photographed mid-sound, the sound emanating and ending within the space of the blur of the photograph. What reaches us is silence, even as the photograph performs a historical event that is otherwise. 'Weems picks up the alterity of each woman's performed, public-sphere self in celebrity stills and concert publicity photos and presents them out of focus and without audio', notes Brooks. 'The silence is ominous, a portending note, a warning that this is the suggested precursor to vanishing altogether' (277). The women are not powerless but the tools of white supremacy that have worked towards an active erasure appear to render them so. The images in *Slow Fade to Black* on one level testify to this effort of making Black women performers

powerless. However, the blurring serves as a reminder of this failed attempt—that waywardness has always found another path to walk on, or in this case, sing on.

We should heed the photographs, their specific aural testimony. We should listen. In asking us to listen to images, rather than only ‘watch’ them (after the theorist Ariella Azoulay) or look at them, Tina M. Campt argues that listening ‘is an ensemble of seeing, feeling, being affected, contacted, and moved beyond the distance of sight and observer’ (2017: 42). The women resonate through what Campt calls the ‘quiet’, as singing *despite*, and singing *because*. The quiet is not a passive or accidental silence. Campt suggests that ‘quiet photography names a heuristic for attending to the lower range of intensities generated by images assumed to be mute’ (2017: 6). Much as the eye insists on sharpening the soft-focus, the ear is keen to hear the quiet, as the women in the photographs are operating at a different frequency, one that is only within listening range if we are attuned to the aural fabric of waywardness—or flight or errancy or survival or blossoming—that is in the music, in their singing despite. The ‘blur’ as a tool is, according to Jennifer Good in the context of documentary photography, not just a ‘formal flaw that impacts the aesthetic qualities of an image and therefore a viewer’s detached appreciation of it, but as a sensory phenomenon in itself, one that impacts more than our vision’ (2019: 417-18). In Weems’s art, the blur is not a flaw but a weapon: the amplification of the blur increments the loudness of history’s silence towards these women, and in doing so, augments the audience’s sensory response to the images too. In the voices of the women in the photographs, which we know to be voices of alterity, as while the original photographs evidence their refusal to be contained, to settle for being refused, the blur magnifies the conditions of their fugitivity. A refusal of (course) correction.

What do we hear when we listen to the quiet of Weems's photographs? We encounter a blur. The phenomenon I'm calling aural blurring is an intensification of the elision-abundance affect that resounds through the photographs. The Black women performers are distinct in their performances, but they share a sonorous history of fugitivity. They are not held captive by archival practices beholden to whiteness, serving white supremacy—but—and—they sing towards the axis of aliveness, after Kevin Quashie.³ The blur, as used by Weems, reckons with this hiatus. The aural blur is what takes place through and beyond the contours of Weems's images. The images are in themselves archives of waywardness, both in documenting women whom white performance history has erased, as well as in how the women are documented. The blur is a Black feminist gimmick, an archival trick to halt the process of historic and contemporary forgetting and shine it to the light. The photograph is a result of exposing that process. The women are not available for legibility in their Blackness, either visually or vocally; that legibility is not for white consumption. They sing as a chorus beyond the edges of each image, their voices unique but blurring into (fading into) a reclamation of freedom, the fact of not just having been alive, but having lived. 'In her haunting meditations on women and music, Weems often chooses instead to dwell on the problem of Black sonic disappearances from the public sphere and the ways that her own performance strategies as an artist manage and mediate the evanescence of those figures', writes Brooks (2020: 274).

Two different versions of *Slow Fade to Black* exist (Brooks 2020). The first is the 2010-11 exhibit, which was showcased at the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York City from 22 April to 22 May 2010. On one of the white walls of the gallery, the images rose as sleek, blurry pops of colour, the white spacing accentuating alliances in diptychs and triptychs—on the very last row, Nina Simone performs at her piano, Shirley Bassey is mid-croon and Ethel

Waters is on her feet. The colours emboss the figures into a liveliness that resounds past their blurred outlines, and beyond the whiteness of the walls: they are all Black women sharing personal histories of effacement and yet their losses sing at different visual and aural frequencies. An adjacent wall carried larger images of a similar tone and hue: purplish-grey-white: Josephine Baker and Katherine Dunham, in profile, are seemingly turned towards Lena Horne, who is centre-stage in a black dress.⁴ In arranging the images so, the women appear to fall into concert.

As Robin Lydenberg writes, 'Weems has blurred these images so the singers are out of focus and out of reach—we can barely see them through the fog of history and the overlay of contrived identities', adding that music is one of Weems's main tools in articulating 'the art of making beauty out of loss' (2018: 13). *Slow Fade to Black* has morphed over the years, appearing across transnational contexts and varied forms in galleries as well as a public installation, as in the Toronto exhibition in 2019 (Brooks 2020: 277). The 2012 performance of *Slow Fade to Black* at Prospect Park in Brooklyn has on stage: singers Esperanza Spalding, Lizz Wright, and Patrice Rushen; the tap dancer Maurice Chestnut; the drummer Terri Lyne Carrington; and the vocal jazz group Afro Blue from Howard University. The blurred photographs of Black women performers form an archive to the repertoire of the performance, as 'projections spill across three large, overhead screens: profiles of women strutting or cogitating, inhabiting the fullness of their own lives' (Brooks 2020: 319). The program begins with Connaitre Miller from Afro Blue leading a Black spiritual song, 'Oh Freedom'. Lizz Wright eventually comes on to cover classics as well as 'I Remember, I Believe' from the Black feminist vocal group, Sweet Honey in the Rock. A more detailed account of the evening is offered by Brooks (2020) but my emphasis here is on the ways in which performance and image enact aural blurring through this simultaneous

engagement between screen and stage—through this precise blurring of formal borders of media and other binaries such as present/past, visible/invisible, moving/still, remembered/forgotten, where the Black women ‘hover’, according to Brooks, ‘like stirring apparitions approximating a ghostly duet with our live artists’ (320).

The images of the twentieth century Black performers were coordinated with the performance on stage, cutting between eight live cameras that fed footage of the band. The collaging enlivens Weems’s images, as they are smudged further by the sharpness of the stage performers and their sounds. The images in performance sound different as they vibrate alongside the live performers, offering a hum that is not distinct, but not missing either. In occurring so, they blur the borders of how sound on stage is perceived—their ‘apparition’-like quality stops just short of erasure, emerging each time as low-frequency waves, further dispersing and ‘duet’-ing with the ‘live’ on-stage sound through a displacement of time: through a smearing of history and memory.

Weems’s preoccupations with Black women, colour and the archive did not begin with *Slow Fade to Black*. Cherise Smith, nuancing a previous response by herself to works from Weems’s photo-series *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995), indicates Weems’s controlled textual collaging of song titles by Duke Ellington and Billie Holiday to signify a set of knowledge practices whilst encouraging viewers to respond to the specific order of words assembled by the artist. Smith notes that ‘Weems’s combination of a nineteenth-century image with references to musical artists from the not-so-distant past collapses time and space, suggest[s] an ancestral and experiential legacy that extends to present-day African American culture’ (2019: 48). Here too is a conceptual blurring of the very notion of power, albeit employed in a different aesthetic mode but still one that takes witnessing as an act seriously. The aural blur in the *Slow Fade to Black* images does not void

past or present power relations or rest it in the sensory experience of the viewer; the blur as a tactic does not allow for such illusions, visual or auditory. Instead, the images haze over the experience of what it means to be locked in a bordered struggle for power. Where the eyes do not settle, and the ear is just within reach of listening, powerlessness—the images seem to whisper—is merely an impression.

Blurred aural borders in *Inuksuit*

On 27 January 2018, when public political rhetoric about Donald Trump's projected wall between America and Mexico was heightened, conductor and percussionist Steven Schick and close to seventy Mexican and American percussionists spread themselves across both sides of the United States of America-Mexico border to perform John Luther Adams's piece, *Inuksuit*. The 'cross-border' performance, presented by the San Diego Symphony as part of a month-long percussion festival called 'It's About Time', was played on either side of the wall that marks out Tijuana from California. Scored for anywhere between nine and ninety-nine percussionists, the piece is, according to Adams, 'site determined but it is not site specific' (2009a). The term 'inuksuit' (singular: inuksuk) refers to the stone landmark structures built for use by the Inuit and other people of the Arctic regions. Adams's piece – his first intended specifically to be performed outdoors – comprises of 'manmade sounds derived from the natural world, formal structures derived from inuksuit' (Herzogenrath 2012: 10).

However, in the very same interview with Steven Schick, conducted around the first performance of *Inuksuit*, which took place at the Banff Centre for the Arts in June 2009, Adams adds that the piece has been leading him away 'from the specificity in Alaska to larger concerns about the whole planet': 'This piece is haunted by that, specifically by the image of the melting of the polar ice and the rising of the seas and the image behind

Inuksuit – from which this piece derives its title – those stone sentinels of the Arctic that the Inuit have constructed for centuries and translated literally’ (2009a).

This tension between the site-specificity of a performance work—as arising from and responding to a specific site—and its ‘site-determination’ is a perpetual feature of a piece such as *Inuksuit*, which was created and structured specifically in response to an eco-cultural feature of the Arctic landscapes but can be performed anywhere. However, notable is the fact that the piece itself has been composed in a manner as to allow for subsequent entanglements with sites that are not in the Arctic. For instance, the structure of *Inuksuit* matches different forms of Inuksuit with which Adams became acquainted in the Arctic: David Shimoni notes that the *Inuksuit* composition consists of sixty-six different portions based on ‘four different types [of Inuksuit]—stacks, windows, double windows, and pyramids’ (2012: 254). However, the piece also notates birdsong, with the Banff performance including the calls of specific species such as the song sparrow, hermit thrush, Lapland longspur, and others (260), even as Adams calls for each performance to navigate the specific topology and environment of the site in which it is being performed (2009b). This atmospheric blurring of the acoustic residue of the Alaskan landscape with the acoustic terrain of wherever the piece is performed, such as at the American-Mexican border for instance, impacts the cultural politics of the piece: not just how we read the origins of the piece, or even the aesthetics of its performance and the politics of its reception, but the very specific tenor of its architecture in terms of what is *done*—enacted, actioned—acoustically by the piece in the world when it is performed away from its cultural fountainhead, especially given that this fountainhead indexes operations of colonialism, land struggle and climate change.

Adams has been acknowledged to be an ‘ecological sound artist’ who ‘composes music which evokes the landscape and ecology of his Alaskan home’; works that are ‘largely orchestral but have also included electronic music and field recordings’ (Gilmurray 2016: 80). The forms his works take are sound-based, but in Adams’s own categorisation practice, are quirky: under ‘theatre’ work on his website, for instance, listed is his 1990-93, 90-minute piece *Earth and the Great Weather*, which is billed as ‘A Sonic Geography of the Arctic’ for violin, viola, cello, contrabass, ‘digital delay, four singers (SSAB), four percussion, four speaking voices and recorded natural sounds’ (Adams 2021). It is evident from this as well as from the impetus for some of his other works, such as *songbirdsongs* (1974-80), which is a post-Messiaenic translation of birdsong, that what we might call environmental—or ecological more specifically—concerns, structure much of Adams’s sound art in ways that centre the performance of the non-human. Non-human elements, in his compositions, are crucial to the composition of the pieces, and so the eventual eco-affective thrum that the performances of the work sound out, is layered with an interpretation of the context of the script. In *Inuksuit*, that amounts to a blurred echo of the politics of the waymarking Arctic structures.

In a cross-border performance such as the one that took place in January 2018 at the Border Field State Park, California, the western edge of Friendship Park—the sharply-named binational double-fenced/walled no-man’s land area separating the countries for which America allows partial access on weekends—and the Plaza Monumental de Tijuana, aural affinities of anti-colonial and indigenous solidarity were partly within listening reach between the original context of composition of *Inuksuit* and the performance context at the borders. I argue, however, that the actual blurring practice, where performance sound and performers were disparately spread across borders, created a performance that cannot be

easily read—or heard—as an artful instance of erased or disappeared borders, or, as with Carrie Mae Weems's *Slow Fade to Black*, a reversal of power. Methodologically, this section will employ a close listening of a 2013 recording of the percussion piece, but will largely focus on the material aesthetics of the performance at the American-Mexican border as documented in videos and images, and the discourse around the performance by way of media reception in order to parse the work of the aural blur.

David Shimoni outlines the progression of the score structure of *Inuksuit* as 'shifting and overlapping blocks of sound':

the performers are divided into three groups, and the piece is structurally divided into five sections. Each group of performers plays one of seven kinds of sounds within a section ... Specifically, the performers in Group 1 perform, in order, 'Breathing', 'Calls', 'Waves' (on a siren-like instrument), 'Clangs', and 'Wind' (on a triangle). Group 2 plays 'Wind' (with a friction instrument like rubbed stones); 'Inuksuit (rising)', 'Waves', and 'Inuksuit (falling)' (all on tom-toms and bass drum); and 'Wind' (on sizzle cymbal). Group 3 plays 'Wind' (on whirled tubes); 'Inuksuit (rising)', 'Waves', and 'Inuksuit (falling)' (all on suspended cymbals and tam-tam); and 'Birdsongs' (on orchestral bells) ... Adams suggests that Group 3 may be supplemented with piccolos for 'Birdsongs'. He gives options for instrumentation in other sections as well, and in the performance notes, he encourages 'varied and imaginative soundings of *Inuksuit*.' Although no group plays exactly the same music as any other, there is enough overlap between the music of the three groups to make them coherent. (2012: 253-254)

The expansions and contractions of the piece simulate the shape of a wave that is, as Shimoni acknowledges, at the heart of the piece for all three groups, for while the phrase

length is a constant of sixteen measures, the time dedicated to each 'figure' inside the phrase is in movement, so each group experiences and plays the 'wave' notation differently (258). From an eco-critical perspective, this attentivity to the structure of an ecological element moves the music away from a mode of 'authentic' representation (as with the birdsong). The waves in *Inuksuit*, for instance, do not sound *like* ocean waves as much as they interpret a human experience of one and in doing so, create an acoustic experience with ecological resonances. The sounds crescendo, and diminuendo. That ecological elements such as waves and birdsong may be a phenomenological part of the structure of the piece on the basis of where it is performed further contributes to this blurring, or what we might again term aural blurring in the sense of its sources being indistinct in origin but distinct in the evidence of their multiplicity, and indistinct in sound performing errancy by way of its resounding in places where its creators are unable to be, such as across the border, but able to sense through its weather. Christina Sharpe re-imagines the weather as 'the totality of our environments; the weather is the total climate; and that climate is anti-black' (2016: 104). The weather at the border is in this regard, unchanging. Anything material that makes its way past the boundary visibly has been cleared of its errancy, in a fashion, as it has been deemed to be free of transgressive capacities. But not everything that makes it past the border is visible, or allowed. Not everything is weathered when the weather polices, when it is anti-black. The sound that blurs its way across the two nations is indicative of this fissure: it testifies to it, whilst enabling it.

Consider the sound as it emerges, and is heard, from the cross-border performance. Friendship Park exists at the boundary where the United States and Mexico meet the Pacific Ocean. In the opening moments of the performance footage filmed by writer Alex Ross from the Tijuana side, the fence cuts straight past the sands and into the ocean (2018). The whips

of the wind can be heard, as can chatter from the milling audience. The percussionists are spread out across the site of the Plaza Monumental drumming, crashing cymbals, not appearing immediately as a unit, which is in part the disparate nature of the piece. This impression is furthered by accounts of audience members, one of which notes that the perambulatory experience of the performance is cut short by the presence of the border:

We could see Schick through the bars, lifting up a megaphone, but what we heard was the crash of the Pacific surf and the exhausts of Border Patrol ATVs. Schick and his musicians ventured out from that area, where we were able to hear their breaths amplified through cardboard funnels and the wind-like rustling of maracas and sand blocks. On the Mexico side of the fence, an equal contingent of musicians played similar material, but except for moments of extreme loudness — the blowing of conch shells or the cranking of sirens — sounds rarely made it out past the road. In other performances of ‘Inuksuit’, you are free to explore the entire performance site, but here, half of the music sounding was tantalizingly inaccessible. (Hertzog 2018)

It is noteworthy that the *Inuksuit* piece itself employs a siren. The American side of the performance appears to experience an aural blur from its surroundings that is indistinct from some of the ecological weather elements, amidst which I would include, as per Christina Sharpe’s framing of weather as ‘total climate’ that is anti-black, the Border Patrol ATVs (All-Terrain Vehicles). Framing these acoustic wanderings as blurry allows us to listen more keenly for lower-frequencies of violence that in fact constitute and remain hidden through the blur, that might otherwise go unheard. Another instance of this is the fact of percussionists positioned alongside the mural-painted border on the Tijuana side, for instance, whose particular contributions become amplified the closer an audience member gets to them but do not carry all the way across the border unless, as testified above, for

moments of 'extreme loudness'. Lost too is the fact of their presence, as people producing the sound that may or may not carry across. Ross's video documentation as well as official documentation from the San Diego Symphony captured instances of gazing through the mesh of the fence, looking deep into the tiny squares and onto the musicians on the American side, who were playing in the strip, with the audience on the American side looking on from behind the second fence (2018). The scattering emphasised the blur, and the blur held in place the scattering.

However, the narrative emphasis in reception was placed on a particular affect of cohesion, independent of the structural cohesion of the piece, across all documentation of the performance. Take Ross:

I closed my eyes and found myself unaware of the wall's existence: the wire mesh did nothing to stop the flow of sound. In the final minutes, 'Inuksuit' grows quiet again. Thundering drums give way to shimmering triangles and cymbals. Samuel Peinado, one of the younger Mexican performers, executed elegant bird motifs on the glockenspiel. There was a faint rumble in the distance: I couldn't quite tell whether it was an American bass drum, a piece of machinery from somewhere, or the ocean. The crowd grew quiet, too. A sense of peacefulness descended – striking in a place charged by so much tension. For a few long moments, the wall seemed to disappear. (2018)

Others talked about the wall being exceeded too:

It was moving to see how music can transcend the wall that currently separates California from Tijuana. (Cooper 2018)

Or of being 'united' by sound (Dribble 2018). Ross, again, is illuminating in recording Schick's opening remarks:

[Schick] looked through the wire-mesh fence that separates San Diego, California, from Tijuana, Mexico, and said, '*Con la música nunca se puede dividirnos*': 'With music, we cannot be divided.' He was addressing a group of Mexican percussion players ... (2018)

And yet the music continued to divide. Despite the waywardness of their music in crossing over as notes, the musicians continued to play on divided sides. This errancy in itself though, is not fully Hartman's articulation of it—'the avid longing for a world not ruled by master, man or police'—even as it edges towards the horizon of what she outlines. The music demonstrates the longing for a world not ruled by man or police, but it remains unclear who is longing for this as the concert was performed with the co-operation of Border guards, who were also audiences:

[Martha Gilmer, C.E.O of the San Diego Symphony] quoted a message she had received from one of the Border Patrol agents: 'Events here at the border are always about our differences as two nations, and this one was all about our similarities—doing things together. As it is over, I miss it. I did not want it to end.' (Ross 2018)

The cross-border does not void the presence and maintenance of the bordered site, and the only errant participants are the ecological rhythms and notes of the music, which includes the acoustic surveillance practices present and performed at the border. The border does not cease to be maintained or progressed. Once again, after Campt, we must listen to the unheard frequencies of the images. Thinking of the performance as aural blurring may aid in this regard. The political aesthetic of the shoal is one that informs the blur. Tiffany Lethabo King offers the shoal—the Black shoal—as a liminal space and 'location of suture between two hermeneutical frames that have conventionally been understood as sealed off from each other' (2019: 4). She theorises the shoal as both land and sea in order to expand the

relationship that Black thought has to water and Indigenous thought has to decoloniality and land. The shoal is simultaneously a coming together-apart, both and neither at once, seeking historical and methodological flux as future.

The blurred performance as a phenomenon draws attention to the porosity of the site as it testifies to the arbitrary violence of man-made borders. As Harsha Walia reminds us, 'Border imperialism is underwritten by, first, the free flow of capitalism and dictates of Western imperialism that create displacements, while simultaneously securing Western borders against the very people who capitalism and empire have displaced' (2013: 37). The further up as shoal the sound travels, the further it blurs with the environment, the more unclear it is why it has to travel from elsewhere, through restrictions, and why it is only heard as it arrives through them, altered, hazed, indistinct. That is to say, entanglement with transnational borders is not in itself liberation. It is also wayward. The aural blur allows for the wall to stay in sight, for its reality to act as physical space around and to which the music responds. The blur treats the acoustic blurring as both symptom and evidence of border imperialism. The blur shoals up the resounding matrix of white supremacy. The operations of colonial power are never out of sight, only blurred.

Coda

In the cross-border performance of *Inuksuit*, the border is rarely crossed but the attempts to do so are in constant sonic blur. In *Slow Fade to Black*, this hum manifests as the eternal struggle to archive and bring the twentieth century Black women performers to the limelight, and to keep them there. 'Weems work has always engaged the invisibility of black women and the ways in which their lived experiences are "simply denied"', argues LaCharles Ward. Speaking of another of her video-works *All the Boys*, he adds that 'Weems

consistently finds the “cracks” within the narrative to center the Black female and to recover and remember, even if only for a moment, those who have already been relegated to the “space of death” (2018: 97) Weems’s use of the blur, and what I hear as the aural blur in her work, centres and holds steady the blur and its accompanying tonal narrations of power and powerlessness. Huey Copeland observed in 2014 that ‘we have yet to receive a full accounting of [Weems’s] recursive and affecting practice, which embraces an ever-increasing array of lens-based media in order to reactivate historical memory’ (342-45). More accounting on this front, as Copeland suggests, particularly with a view to engaging with Weems’s performance repertoire, would not be unwelcome.

Both works of sound art considered in this chapter—and here perhaps it is useful to consider them under that genre—employ a practice of formal blurring that visibilises the exploitative power of white supremacy even as vectors of that very power hum through the performances. The aural blur does not resolve and it does not diminish, it inventorizes occurrences of waywardness. Serving sometimes as an additional axis of engagement, as in the visual blur in *Slow Fade to Black*, or as the prime aesthetic methodology employed, the aural blur structures an experience of power/lessness and its concomitant struggles. The blur is a testimony of that struggle of subjectivity, and its ongoingness.

¹ Baraka’s poem, ‘Dark Lady of the Sonnets’, about Billie Holiday, is quoted in Griffin (2003: 314).

² Moten from his work *Black and Blur* (2017: 237)

³ ‘In a black world, the case of our lives is aliveness; not death, not even death’s vitality, but aliveness’, Quashie posits in his beautiful work on black aliveness. ‘I believe that an aesthetic of aliveness makes possible an

encounter with the ethical question “how to be” (2021: 12). Racism does not completely foreclose black life, despite it being a condition of black life.

⁴ I was not myself present to see this exhibit – nor the performance – in person, and have based my analysis on virtual images and found testimonies of both. Similarly, in the instance of the cross-border performance of Inuksuit, I have worked with video material and footage found online. While the analysis would be significantly strengthened by an in-person account, my own situation as an immigrant in the UK does not allow me to travel internationally easily. This additional complication of access is reflected in the blur of how I read and encounter both Weems’s and Adams’s performance pieces.

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