

## REVIEW ESSAY

### The Space Between Shadows and Quiet

Amber Jamilla Musser, *Between Shadows and Noise: Sensation, Situatedness, and the Undisciplined* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2024), 208pp., ISBN: 9781478030096

Michael Richardson, *Nonhuman Witnessing: War, Data, and Ecology After the End of the World* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2024), 256pp., ISBN: 9781478025641

Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham and London, 2017), 152pp., ISBN: 9780822362708

What is the space between shadows and noise?<sup>1</sup> Musing on Amber Musser's title, I'd like to consider the way these three texts propose a kind of sonic looking – a 'listening to images' – as a means of defining alternate or unconventional readings of what constitutes human subjectivity and agency within, as Musser phrases it, 'a landscape of sensation and affect'.<sup>2</sup> Here there is a doubling, a blurring of boundaries between binaries, between senses – a synaesthetic mode of looking, and also one which 'produces a witnessing relation that is not dependent upon an investigative team, method, or apparatus'.<sup>3</sup> Michael Richardson's notion of 'nonhuman witnessing' includes the phenomenon of 'earwitnessing', a term he borrows from Susan Schuppli, in which he suggests that witnessing may 'also take place at this level of ears, sound, and material vibration'.<sup>4</sup> The practice of listening to images which 'is at once a description and a method',<sup>5</sup> as Campt defines it, is 'constituted as a practice of looking beyond

1 This article is based on research and postgraduate teaching that has been supported in full by the National Research Foundation of South Africa (Grant Number 98911).

2 A.J. Musser, *Between Shadows and Noise: Sensation, Situatedness, and the Undisciplined* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2024), 4.

3 M. Richardson, *Nonhuman Witnessing: War, Data, and Ecology After the End of the World* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2024), 23.

4 Richardson, *Nonhuman Witnessing*, 52.

5 T. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), 5.

what we see and attuning our senses to the other affective frequencies [vibrations] through which photographs register. It is a haptic encounter that foregrounds the frequencies of images and how they move, touch, and connect us to the *event* of the photo.<sup>6</sup> To listen then, is also concerned with movement and with feeling, and here ‘quiet must not be conflated with silence. Quiet registers sonically, as a level of intensity that requires focussed attention.’<sup>7</sup> Thus the space between shadows and noise is also a space between shadows and quiet. The shadow can be seen as a register of the light and dark spectrum, and sonically speaking, as the visual equivalent of loud and soft frequencies, between noise and quiet.

The shadow is a slippery entity – somehow both us and not-us, human and non-human, a transient version of ourselves that is in constant flux throughout the day, and depending on what light is projected onto us. It can fall behind us, carrying our past, or project ahead of us, offering possible futurities of self. Shadows show both more and less of the thing they are cast from. They are metaphorically full, the shadow of the face said to be the ‘soul’s true reflection,’<sup>8</sup> while also empty of corporeal or graspable form. The shadow is the ‘other’ of the body – the self’s powerful doppelgänger or double, often cast in a malevolent or mysterious role. As Musser says, the ‘term *shadow* is used to separate “light” from “dark”, offering language not only for an optic phenomenon, but a system of value that would prioritise light, equating it with transparency, rationality, and “enlightenment”, leaving the concept of the shadow to signify something that is either deliberately hidden from view (usually in a malevolent fashion), disavowed, or repressed; think of shadow terms, governments, processes, archives.’<sup>9</sup> To look with and perhaps *as* shadows is, as Musser puts it, to ‘move us away from assertions of aboutness to relation. Shadows allow us to ask: What are the conditions of possibility at work and how might we imagine otherwise?’<sup>10</sup> The darkness of the shadow is indicative of a lack of light, but it is also often read as a state which holds either something sinister or suspicious, slippery – that which is unseen – or as containing a *nothingness* or *no one* at all. In her thinking with the shadow, Musser is suggesting that this darkness in fact holds something productive and positive in its ambiguity. The shadow subverts the sense of sight as one can only partially see what is represented – we can only guess and cannot pin down a solid identity derived from looking. To ‘become shadow’, as it were, means to move ‘against the prioritisation of visibility, enclosure, and sovereignty, [and] conjures irrationality, unclarity, vulnerability, and enmeshment.’<sup>11</sup> This is to loosen the repressive hold of what Patricia Hayes, via Elizabeth Edwards, calls ‘strong’ or clear images which often come to define ‘memory and meaning’ and stand in for historical ‘truth.’<sup>12</sup> Hayes

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6 Campt, *Listening to Images*, 9.

7 Campt, *Listening to Images*, 6.

8 V.I. Stoichita, *A Short History of the Shadow* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 1.

9 Musser, *Between Shadows*, 4.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 P. Hayes, ‘The Blur of History: Student Protest and Photographic Clarity in South African Universities, 2015-2016,’ *Kronos* (43), 152.

argues for the significance of the ‘blur’ in the photographic image, which she says ‘appears to destabilise the normative boundaries and centredness of the subject. It is also a stain on the taken-for-granted reputation for visual exposition of the present that is then ostensibly immediately past.’ She says that ‘instead, questions keep piling up’.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, for Musser ‘shadows and noise invite us into a riot of modes of being and thinking so that we might move away from asking how something might be represented “better” or more clearly, and toward how we might make representation denser, overrun with contradictory information, so that signification can be multiple and promiscuous’.<sup>14</sup>

Richardson’s nonhuman witnessing, which describes how nonhuman entities (natural, material, technological) within the realms of violence, algorithms, ecologies and absence serve as ‘one means of building a communicative politics that begins with ecological relations and the inherent agencies of nonhuman things, animals, and places’,<sup>15</sup> promoting a ‘promiscuity’ of representation and agency. For example, Richardson describes how drones and drone warfare present us with aerial views of our familiar spaces which ‘enfold nonhuman vantages into the human sensorium’ alluding to ‘the malleability of our perception, but also to our cyborg existence, to the always more-than-human nature of human sensoria and knowledge-making’.<sup>16</sup> Drones are also marked predominantly by their sonic presence – their sound foretelling their arrival, in drone warfare a sound which instils fear and foreboding of what they might bring – and if, as Richardson poses, ‘the everyday disruptions and anxieties of life under drones is most present in their aural intrusion, then might witnessing not also take place at this level of ears, sound, and material vibration?’<sup>17</sup> For Richardson this ‘[a]ural witnessing entails bodily mediation in the now, yet what it mediates is the virtuality of future violence: not simply a warning of potential drone strikes, but an impingement of the future on the sensorium in the present’.<sup>18</sup>

Nonhuman witnessing offers a form of looking which, Richardson argues, ‘enables the communicative relations necessary for an alternative and pluriversal politics, founded on the capacity of nonhuman entities of all kinds to witness and through that witnessing compose new ethicopolitical forms’.<sup>19</sup> He finds hope at ‘the end of the world’ in the recognition ‘that *the world* has always been multiple, a pluriverse produced by the world-making power of countless knowledge systems’.<sup>20</sup> He goes on to suggest that it is sites of ‘human-nonhuman assemblages’ where a ‘relation of responsibility’ may be generated.<sup>21</sup> Here ‘seeing’ is not the act of a singular entity but rather something that takes place across a great many ... agents,’ eliminating a

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13 Hayes, *The Blur*, 164.

14 Musser, *Between Shadows*, 5–6.

15 Richardson, *Nonhuman Witnessing*, 20.

16 Richardson, *Nonhuman Witnessing*, 63.

17 Richardson, *Nonhuman Witnessing*, 52.

18 Ibid.

19 Richardson, *Nonhuman Witnessing*, 3–4.

20 Richardson, *Nonhuman Witnessing*, 19.

21 Richardson, *Nonhuman Witnessing*, 84.

‘witnessing ‘subject’ in the unitary humanist sense.’<sup>22</sup> Witnessing then, puts a different kind of seeing, and by extension agency, at play, one which invites multiple senses and agential forces into the equation. For Richardson the point is not to extend ‘rights that humans have to the nonhuman, [rather] the task at hand is to invite nonhumans subjectivities and agencies into the space of politics and, in doing so, seek to recompose what politics is for the human.’<sup>23</sup>

One of Camp’s central questions in *Listening to Images* asks how we might ‘build a radical visual archive of the African Diaspora that grapples with the recalcitrant and the disaffected, the unruly, and the dispossessed.’<sup>24</sup> Camp’s book deals with ‘images produced with the purpose of tracking, cataloguing, and constraining the movements of blacks in and out of diaspora,’ and asks how we contend with these ‘images intended not to figure black subjects, but to delineate instead differential or degraded forms of personhood or subjection.’<sup>25</sup> Camp looks at identity document photographs, convict photographs, ethnographic and colonial portraits and finds in them instances of difference, refusal, fugitivity – fugitivity defined not as a running away, but rather as ‘a practice of refusing the terms of negation and dispossession.’<sup>26</sup> This is to examine these photographs as a series of ‘refusals that mobilise the colonial portrait as a site of fugitivity through forms of self-fashioning that enunciate quiet but resonant claims to personhood and subjectivity in the face of dispossession.’<sup>27</sup> A photograph, particularly a sharply focussed one, is a seemingly concrete and clear definition of the subject, used to provide evidence, clarity, identity, and so on, but we often forget the mobility and movement that the photographic image is stilling or concealing – meaning that the flux of identity, ageing, change continues beyond that captured moment. In Kracauer’s words, the photograph, does ‘not make visible the knowledge of the original but rather the spatial configuration of a moment; it is not the person who appears in his or her photograph, but the sum of what can be deducted from him or her.’<sup>28</sup> In Chapter 2, ‘Striking Poses in a Tense Grammar: Stasis and the Frequency of Black Refusal,’ Camp offers an example of these refusals through the notion of ‘stasis,’ and an emphasis on movement and stillness in the image, and in so doing, draws attention to a kind of shadowed self which comes across in the photograph if we are to look at it through this lens. This aligns with Musser’s claim that ‘orienting perception towards shadows ... not only makes felt foreclosed entities and relations, but allows one to grapple with underlying processes of repression, disavowal, and denial and their embeddedness in ontological and epistemological systems of valuation.’<sup>29</sup>

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22 Richardson, *Nonhuman Witnessing*, 85.

23 Richardson, *Nonhuman Witnessing*, 181.

24 Camp, *Listening to Images*, 3.

25 Ibid.

26 Camp, *Listening to Images*, 96.

27 Camp, *Listening to Images*, 65.

28 S. Kracauer, ‘Photography,’ *Critical Inquiry* (19), 431.

29 Musser, *Between Shadows*, 4.

Campt uses the term stasis to focus on that which ‘appears to be motionlessness [which] is in fact an effortful placement that never arrives at a true state of stillness.’<sup>30</sup> Stasis expands the image to the realm of the sonic or affect, vibration. It ‘registers beyond what we see, like the vibrations that form the fundamental basis of sonic frequency ... Stasis requires us to listen to the infrasonic frequencies of images that register through feeling rather than vision or audible sound.’<sup>31</sup> For Campt, alternate understandings of agency within conditions of enslavement come in the form of stasis. She uses Darieck Scott’s metaphor of ‘muscular tension’, which expands on Fanon’s suggestion that we engage tensions around colonisation and black self-fashioning through the black body, particularly its muscles.<sup>32</sup> Scott uses this term to theorise ‘an alternate vision of black futurity and possibility.’<sup>33</sup> Campt says that, ‘for Scott muscular tension constitutes a state of black powerfulness in the midst of debility, a form of resistance expressed through a refusal to accept or acquiesce to defeat.’<sup>34</sup> Campt examines a series of portraits taken of South African women at Marianhill mission near Durban, South Africa, in 1894 for their initial ‘stillness’, which on closer inspection also holds within it a tension, a movement – ‘these are not poses or expressions of relaxation, comfort, or ease.’<sup>35</sup> She sees this stasis as representative of a ‘complex set of tensions – the tense grammar of photographically stilled presentations of vulnerability twinned with proud defiance.’<sup>36</sup>

Again, the subject is doubled, shadowed, and as such presents a ‘performance of stillness that holds the complex forces that surrounded and produced these images temporarily at bay or in equilibrium.’<sup>37</sup> Campt points out that ‘Scott’s insights encourage us to consider the embodied postures of the subjugated as visible manifestations of psychic and physical *responses* (rather than submission) to colonisation and the ethnographic gazes it initiated.’<sup>38</sup> This brings together a set of not necessarily reconcilable representational issues. Similarly, Musser uses the doppelgänger, a kind of shadow self, to speak to the ‘racialised shadow structures that underlie agency, desire, and liberal subjectivity.’<sup>39</sup> Musser highlights Saidiya Hartman’s argument that ‘conditions of enslavement freight both desire and consent in ways that illustrate the need for an alternate understanding of what constitutes agency.’<sup>40</sup> In the analysis of Jordan Peel’s thriller movie *Us* in Chapter 1, ‘*Us*, the Uncanny, and the Threat of Black Femininity’, Musser points to the uncanny doubled characters in the film and how these ‘two bodies tethered by a soul’ show that ‘bodily autonomy persists even in conditions of deep deprivation ... an overt commentary on the ways that history overburdens possibility.’<sup>41</sup> Here identity is affirmed in its ambiguity or ambivalence –

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30 Campt, *Listening to Images*, 51.

31 Campt, *Listening to Images*, 52.

32 Campt, *Listening to Images*, 50.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Campt, *Listening to Images*, 51.

36 Campt, *Listening to Images*, 50.

37 Campt, *Listening to Images*, 52.

38 Campt, *Listening to Images*, 51.

39 Musser, *Between Shadows*, 23.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

to embrace a fluidity or freedom of identity and self. This may indicate the continual transience and flux of the self which cannot be pinned down or marked as one thing by another hand.

The kind of un-visible violence that exists in the type of photographs that Campt examines – and the repression of identity they come to stand for – one of myriad ‘instances of state and corporate violence that occur across a variety of scales, speeds, temporalities, and intensities’,<sup>42</sup> can be highlighted by Richardson’s nonhuman witnessing which he claims ‘brings more excessive and elusive violence into the frame of witnessing in ways that human witnessing cannot.’<sup>43</sup> For Richardson, the ‘explanatory force of nonhuman witnessing resides in part in its capacity to register and communicate those forms of violence that might otherwise be rendered invisible.’<sup>44</sup> Here I would argue that the ways that Musser and Campt seek to redefine subjectivities and also bring attention to ‘elusive’ violence offer means that propose a ‘seeing beyond sight’ (sight as witnessing) – a kind of invisible or un-visible sight based on affect rather than the ocular that is ‘nonhuman’ (or perhaps ‘more-than-human’, as Richardson phrases it) in its non-ocularcentric mode, perhaps more animal- or machine-like, registering sonic and haptic frequencies that typically lie under the radar of human perception.

Campt believes we should engage the Marianhill images not through the gaze of the ‘photographer who shot them nor of the ethnographer or collector who acquired them’, but instead in their relation to ‘self-fashioning’ and how this is seen in a ‘*tension* – a tense self-fashioning of/in stasis’. Campt says that the ‘muscular tension they display is an effortful balancing of compulsion, constraint, and refusal that vibrates unvisibly but resoundingly through these images.’<sup>45</sup> Here Campt calls for an uncoupling of ‘the notion of self-fashioning from the concept of agency.’<sup>46</sup> What self-fashioning perhaps allows more space for is the inclusion of *desire*, which for Musser, is ‘intrinsic to the maintenance of the bounded body [...] signals subjectivity’s reliance on both the fiction of agency *and* the idea that one is separate from (and can act upon) the world.’<sup>47</sup> Campt seeks to understand self-fashioning as ‘a tense response that is not always intentional or liberatory, but often constituted by miniscule or even futile attempts to exploit extremely limited possibilities for self-expression and futurity in/as an effort to shift the grammar of black futurity to a temporality that both embraces and exceeds their present circumstances – a practice of *living the future they want to see, now*’?<sup>48</sup> For Campt, the ‘tense grammar of these photos reminds us that photography and the portrait in particular are neither wholly liberatory vehicles of agency, transcendence, or performativity, nor unilateral instruments of objectification and abjection. They are always already both at once.’<sup>49</sup>

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42 Richardson, *Nonhuman Witnessing*, 5.

43 Ibid.

44 Richardson, *Nonhuman Witnessing*, 14.

45 Campt, *Listening to Images*, 57–58.

46 Campt, *Listening to Images*, 59.

47 Musser, *Between Shadows*, 25–26.

48 Campt, *Listening to Images*, 59.

49 Ibid.

In its relation to subjectivity, the sonic looking posed in these three texts frees us from fixity or certainty – from being framed or signed – productively refusing a stable way of knowing that is so central to historicist thought. Mixing histories with futurities, it opens up definitions of the subject that hold ambiguity or ambivalence – fluctuations of identity – the blurring of boundaries, borders and different economies of meaning.

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