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## Listening beyond the border: Self-representation, witnessing, and the white sonic field

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## Listening beyond the border: Self-representation, witnessing, and the white sonic field

### Abstract

A ruined hull of a wooden boat, held upright by rust-coloured metal supports, lay on the edge of a Venetian canal. The vessel was nested among industrial shipping equipment and operational boats in the complex of former shipyards and armories known as the Venetian Arsenal, the largest industrial enterprise of pre-industrialised Europe and a site crucial to the economic and military power of the Venetian Republic until its fall in 1797. The wrecked hull didn't seem out of place here – one might reasonably think that it was awaiting repair or perhaps was a forgotten relic of a bygone time. Only the presence of a temporary barrier erected around the boat marked it as something other than what it appeared to be, something other than a ruined ship sitting in a former shipyard.

# **Listening beyond the border: Self-representation, witnessing, and the white sonic field\***

**Andrew Brooks**

A border, like race, is a cruel fiction

Maintained by constant policing, violence

Always threatening a new map. It takes

Time, lots of people's time, to organise

The world this way. & violence.

— Wendy Trevino, 'Brazilian is Not a Race'

## **Spectacular suffering**

A ruined hull of a wooden boat, held upright by rust-coloured metal supports, lay on the edge of a Venetian canal. The vessel was nested among industrial shipping equipment and operational boats in the

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\* This essay is one of six pieces in this special issue dedicated to the work of the Manus Recording Project Collective, which you may therefore like to read together. For a general introduction and the curatorial history of the work, start with Parker and Stern (2020). The collection also includes essays by Emma Russell, Poppy de Souza and André Dao, along with a conversation between André Dao and Behrouz Boochani.

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complex of former shipyards and armories known as the Venetian Arsenal, the largest industrial enterprise of pre-industrialised Europe and a site crucial to the economic and military power of the Venetian Republic until its fall in 1797. The wrecked hull didn't seem out of place here – one might reasonably think that it was awaiting repair or perhaps was a forgotten relic of a bygone time. Only the presence of a temporary barrier erected around the boat marked it as something other than what it appeared to be, something other than a ruined ship sitting in a former shipyard.

The vessel in question was in Venice as part of the 58th Venice Biennale: *May You Live in Interesting Times*, a major event in the international contemporary art calendar. It was the Swiss-Icelandic artist Christoph Büchel's contribution to the exhibition, a readymade object that he titled *Barca Nostra* (which translates as Our Boat) and which the accompanying text produced by the Biennale described as 'a collective monument and memorial to contemporary migration' (La Biennale di Venezia 2019). This boat sank in the Mediterranean Sea between Libya and the Italian island of Lampedusa on April 18, 2015. Carrying migrants from Africa to Europe, most of whom were locked in the hold and machine room, the vessel collided with a Portuguese container ship and sank. Only 28 people survived while an estimated 700 to 1100 died in what was one of deadliest shipwrecks in living memory.

As the exhibition unfolded, migrants continued to attempt perilous Mediterranean crossings in search of refuge. As the boat sat there, migrant death rates climbed in a political climate that saw the criminalisation of refugees and rescue crews by Italian border patrols, while rising anti-immigrant sentiment espoused by far-right and fascist political parties circulated, often reproduced in the mainstream media. As the *Barca Nostra* stood on the edges of the Venetian canals as a spectacle for contemporary art audiences and tourists to consume, the European Parliament established a commission originally titled 'Protecting our European way of life', before being euphemistically rebranded as 'Promoting our European way of life' (European

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Parliament). The rhetoric of strong borders dominates the political and media landscapes.

Büchel's work was the subject of intense scrutiny. Far-right politicians, such as Italy's then-Deputy Prime Minister, Matteo Salvini, dismissed the work as 'political propaganda' (Tondo 2019). Some art critics lauded the work as a powerful monument to death and suffering, while others denounced it as a decontextualised spectacle (Ruiz 2019; Tondo 2019). In response, Büchel and the team that worked with him to produce the exhibition made the following statement:

public response—including press articles, critical essays, and social media posts—is integral to the overall concept. Büchel's work comprises process and unmediated interactions... Again, the fishing vessel is not the artwork; instead, the ongoing project and its journey are the artwork (Ruiz 2019).

This reframing of the work as the discursive material that surrounds its reception elides what the work does (or fails to do) in context of the exhibition, transferring ethical responsibility for the work from the artist to the public that encounters it. It is neither bold nor radical to claim the work of art produces meaning beyond that which the artist intends. But what are we to make of art that merely reproduces an object of trauma as critique? When does reproduction cease to function as critique and operate instead as a re-enforcement of that which it seeks to unsettle? Saidiya Hartman warns of this representational strategy when she refuses to reproduce the beating of Aunt Hester that Fredrick Douglass narrates in the opening chapter of his 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, an account of the horror and trauma of slavery in the US. Hartman writes:

I have chosen not to reproduce Douglass's account of the beating of Aunt Hester in order to call attention to the ease with which such scenes are usually reiterated, the casualness with which they are circulated, and the consequences of this routine display of the slave's ravaged body. Rather than inciting indignation, too often they immure us to pain by virtue of their familiarity—the oft-repeated or restored character of these accounts and our distance from them are

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signaled by the theatrical language usually resorted to in describing these instances—and especially because they reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering (Hartman 1997: 3).

For Hartman, the endless reproduction of this scene wears away at the power of Douglass's narrative. We are no longer shocked by the violence and brutality but rather have come to accept this spectacle as the only paradigm through which to understand Black experience. Something similar can be said for the representation of Büchel's monument to contemporary refugee experience – a spectacle of suffering divorced not only from the institutional and political processes that have contributed to the life-threatening criminalisation of asylum-seeking but from the refugee experience itself. The reproduction of this site of trauma casts the refugee as a subject with no voice and no agency, permanently relegated to a spatial imaginary that Denise Ferreira da Silva names 'the horizon of death' (2009: 234).

How do we move beyond the spectacle of suffering? In part, this is a question of the right to representation, of who is and is not able to account for refugee experience. But it is more than this, too. At issue is the way representation does or does not enable the disruption of what we might think of as the border industrial complex and the state violence that refugees increasingly find themselves subjected to. This then is also a question of how the work of art is received and what is transmitted through representation. To consider what representation does is to call into question the status of the one who receives the work and to interrogate, borrowing Hartman's (2009: 4) phrasing, 'the uncertain line between witness and spectator'.

### **where are you today?**

It's 7am on a Sunday morning and I'm still in bed, half asleep. I instinctively reach for my phone and see that I have a text from an unknown number. The message reads: 'Samad, waking up in his room on Gordon, Port Moresby' and includes a link, which I click. The website asks to access my location data and when I accept, it takes me to a minimally designed page that features simple purple text on an

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off-white background. The text reads: ‘Samad, waking up in his room in Gordon, Port Moresby. You are 2748km away from Samad, who recorded this yesterday.’ Beneath these spare sentences is the word ‘play’ in parentheses. I click the play button and an audio recording begins. An ambient hum of an enclosed space – perhaps it is the noise of an air conditioner or a distant road. The chirp of a bird from outside punctuates the relatively stable soundscape. Samad begins speaking, a direct address to imagined listeners far away from where he is located:

Hello everyone, this is Samad from Manus Island Detention Centre, and ah, currently I am staying in Port Moresby. I’m so happy... for a long time, I’m getting a chance to talk to you people, to just let you know about my current situation, about my current life. And the most important thing is: how am I feeling today? ... Um (sighs) I’m not really sure what to say here, because I think many and many people already know that we are staying in detention centre for a very very long time. It’s been years and years and years. We are just waiting for something that we really want, we deserve it – it’s our freedom.

The recording continues for exactly ten minutes, at which points it abruptly ends with a hard cut. We hear Samad talk about: the alienation and loneliness of his current detention in Port Moresby, juxtaposing his current situation with his experience of imprisonment on Manus Island (‘Sometimes I’m thinking: let’s compare Manus Island and Port Moresby. Of course, both are jails for us... But at least in Manus we were a group of friends.’); the feeling of hopelessness and the depression that indefinite detention induces (‘Sometimes I just feel so hopeless and helpless. I even cannot move myself.’; ‘It’s not easy to just stay positive all the time or just stay normal. There is not even a bit of happiness’); his attempt to construct some kind of routine for himself (‘I am still trying my best to wake up early in the morning to do some workout, to just maintain my physical and mental health.’); and the temporality of indefiniteness (‘I am just confused and I don’t know what to do – just lying down all the time on my bed just listening to music or watching a movie.’).

What I’m listening to is the first of a series of recordings that

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will be delivered to me via text message everyday over the coming month as part of a project called *where are you today*. The recordings have been produced by the Manus Recording Project Collective, a group of men (Farhad Bandesh, Farhad Rahmati, Samad Abdul, Shamindan Kanapathi, Thanush Selvraj, Yasin Abdallah) currently held in involuntary and indefinite detention after seeking asylum in Australia, and their Melbourne-based collaborators (André Dao, Jon Tjhia, and Michael Green)<sup>1</sup>. *where are you today* expands the collective's 2018 project called *how are you today*, which was commissioned by Liquid Architecture curators Joel Stern and James Parker for the exhibition *Eavesdropping* at the Ian Potter Museum of Art. The first iteration of the project involved six men detained on Manus Island (Abdul Aziz Muhamat, Farhad Bandesh, Behrouz Boochani, Samad Abdul, Shamindan Kanapathi and Kazem Kazemi) and the same three collaborators located within the borders of the Australian nation state. Over the course of the 14 week exhibition, the men on Manus – who had each been supplied with a portable Zoom audio recorder – took it in turns to make ten-minute sound recordings that were sent onshore to their collaborators via WhatsApp or Telegram, who would then upload the recordings for broadcast in the gallery space with minimal editing. The result is a fourteen-hour archive of recordings that indexes indefinite detention on Manus Island. In an essay responding to the archive of recordings that arose from *how are you today*, I noted how varied the recording were:

some take the form of a first-person address to an imagined audience, one that would attend an art exhibition in a capital city in Australia; some document daily interactions between refugees or between refugees and Manusians; some index the labour of political organising in its visible and less visible iterations – the work of collecting signatures for a petition or the work of addressing refugee forums and advocates 'onshore' in Australia; and some simply document daily life in detention – a walk into the town centre, the waves on the beach, the singing of songs, a soccer game... At times, the recordings are moving, at other times banal (Brooks 2019).

Part of what captured my attention about this collection of recordings



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is that they are decidedly *unspectacular*. The recordings refuse to cohere into a linear or stable narrative about what detention is or isn't. Rather, they document the everydayness of detention and the suspension of time that accompanies indefinite imprisonment. And they allowed the men in detention the right to their own representation. Listening to these recordings as a whole – the patient documentation of the quotidian, the ambient environmental sounds, the testimonies, the fragments of social life, and so on – produces an intensification of affect that works against the logic of the border which, in part, is designed to ensure some subjects are kept apart from others. This intensification of affect undermines the border itself, momentarily collapsing the space between the listener and the one making the recording and enabling the intimate act of listening.

*where are you today* has many resonances with the earlier project: the structure of the ten-minute audio recording is retained; the men in detention again have complete control over the content of the recordings; and the project responds directly to the indefinite detention of refugees by the Australian government. Much has also changed since the first collection of recordings was produced. On March 2, 2019, the Migration Amendment (Urgent Medical Treatment) Bill 2018, more commonly known as the 'Medevac Bill', became law. The bill was designed to provide critically ill refugees held in offshore detention the right to be transferred onshore to Australia for urgent, life-saving treatment. The bill marked a crucial step for the rights of refugees, granting them access to medical care unavailable in the offshore locations. The bill faced strong opposition from the sitting Liberal Government who argued that bringing refugees onshore could lead to weakened borders and national security breaches. The re-election of the Liberal Government in May 2019 sparked a wave of suicide attempts and self-harm among those detained offshore in Papua New Guinea and Nauru. In the wake of the election, Behrouz Boochani, the Kurdish-Iranian journalist and refugee advocate who was detained on Manus from 2013 until November 2019, reported that refugees had 'completely lost hope' (Robertson 2019).

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Between August and November 2019, the Federal Government transferred detainees formerly held on Manus and Nauru Islands to Port Moresby or onshore to various locations in Australia. Then, in December of the same year, a bill to repeal the Medevac legislation (Migration Amendment (Repairing Medical Transfers) Bill 2019) was passed by the federal government, removing vital access to medical care for those still detained in Port Moresby (Martin 2019). Many refugees evacuated under the Medevac bill now found themselves indefinitely detained onshore in Immigration Transit Accommodation or in ‘temporary’ accommodation such as the Mantra Hotel in Melbourne. As the COVID-19 pandemic spread through the world, more than 400 refugees remained in offshore detention and more than 200 remained in indefinite detention within Australia’s borders. Various held in Port Moresby, Nauru, Melbourne Immigration Transit Accommodation (MITA), Brisbane Immigration Transit Accommodation (BITA) and other federally managed detention centres, refugees now found themselves in cramped and crowded accommodation where the spread of the novel coronavirus was a very real possibility. The most recent chapter in the Federal Government’s attempt to isolate those in detention from the outside world was proposed legislation – Migration Amendment (Prohibiting Items in Immigration Detention Facilities) Bill 2020 – that would ban mobile phones in immigration detention centres, a move that would both reproduce the logics of separation so central to offshore detention policy onshore, as well as remove access to a technology that allows refugees to engage in sousveillance practices that have the capacity to curtail violence against detainees. It now appears that this proposed legislation will not pass the senate and will not be carried into law (Karp 2020).

*where are you today* finds the six contributors currently held in detention spread across a number of different sites of detention: Shamindan Kanapth and Samad Abdul document their detention in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, while Farhad Bandesh, Farhad Rahmati, Thanush Selvraj, and Yasin Abdallah, having been relocated ‘onshore’ under the Medevac legislation, were variously imprisoned in Melbourne Immigration Transit Accommodation, Brisbane

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Immigration Transit Accommodation, and the Mantra Hotel in Preston, Victoria. Taken as an archive, the collection of recordings documents the migration of offshore detention onshore and the imposition of a border logic within the boundaries of the nation state.

### **The (white) sonic field**

*where are you today* responds to political and media contexts in which the figure of the refugee has been systematically demonised and dehumanised. A direct line from the present can be drawn to the 2001 Australian federal election, which marked a decisive turning point in refugee discourse and saw the amplification of an affective politics of fear and panic. In August of 2001, the sitting Liberal government refused permission for the MV Tampa, a Norwegian freighter carrying 433 rescued refugees, to enter Australian waters. Then, in October of the same year, a wooden vessel that came to be known as SIEV 4 (Suspected Irregular Entry Vessel) was intercepted 190km north of Christmas Island by the Australian naval frigate, the HMAS Adelaide, which attempted to turn the boat back to Indonesia. The wooden boat, which was carrying 233 asylum seekers, began to sink. In the days following the event, senior Liberal party ministers, including then-Immigration minister, Philip Ruddock, falsely accused passengers of the SIEV 4 of throwing their children overboard and abandoning them to the ocean in order to protect themselves and force the hands of officials. Photographs released to the media that supposedly provided evidence that children had been sacrificed to the ocean were later revealed to have been taken after the SIEV 4 sank and during a coordinated rescue. The incident came to be known as the 'Children Overboard' affair and even though a subsequent senate inquiry found that no children were thrown overboard, the portrayal of refugees as callous and morally bankrupt by both politicians and mainstream media endures to this day (Parliament of Australia 2002; Macken-Horaick 2003). These events showed us that an image, when framed by an interpretation, can become a durable and reproducible representation.

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The 2001 federal election would be shaped by these events, which would culminate in the re-election of John Howard's Liberal government and the subsequent implementation of the 'Pacific Solution', an alarmingly titled set of government policies that excised thousands of islands in the Pacific Ocean from Australia's migration zone and re-established mandatory and indefinite offshore detention. The political legacy of this moment was to conflate asylum seeking and forced migration with border security and sovereignty. This conflation, reproduced by successive governments and mainstream media outlets, has resulted in the calcification of representation of refugees as opportunistic queue jumpers, 'illegals' or proto-criminals.

Reflecting on these recordings has me thinking about the role that sound plays in the (re)production of this representation. Specifically, I have been thinking about the relationship between sound and the structural violence of whiteness in the context of the settler state. The sonic plays a central role in processes of demarcation, such as the claiming of possession or the construction of subjectivity. Recall, for example, Frantz Fanon's description of the racialising gaze of a white child on a train, who upon encountering Fanon speaks the words: 'Look, a Negro!', an utterance with a performative force that announces 'the fact of Blackness' as that which threatens whiteness. Or we might remember that Althusser's famous account of interpellation into state ideology is a sonic act, a moment of literally being called into being. He writes:

I shall then suggest that ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: "Hey, you there!" Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn around. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a subject. Why? Because he has recognised that the hail was 'really' addressed to him, and that 'it was really him who was hailed' (and not someone else)' (Althusser 1971: 174).

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We often focus our critical attention on the relationship between the image and representation – the way an image teaches us to see the world and be seen in the world. But what role does the sonic play in shaping representation and subjectivity? What role does the sonic play in the naturalisation of white possession and dehumanisation of the racialised, refugee other? The scene of interpellation or the construction of a shared national imaginary is not simply structured by sound but also mediated by it. Sound is a relational phenomenon that does not merely demarcate but shapes how we think and feel and relate to other bodies and ideas.

Put another way, the sonic has the capacity to position and reposition us within a social and political field; the settler-colonial context of Australia is a racially saturated sonic field. That is, the sonic field is structured by white perception which determines in advance what can and can't be heard within the white imaginary. Here I am drawing on Judith Butler's account of a visual field structured by racism, suggesting that a similar operation occurs in the realm of the sonic. Writing in the wake of the Rodney King case, Butler (1993: 17) argues that 'the visual field is not neutral to the question of race; it is itself a racial formation, an episteme, hegemonic and forceful'. As such, the act of seeing always involves an act of reading and interpretation, problematising the assumption that seeing is natural or neutral. Seeing, Butler observes, is not 'an act of direct perception, but the racial production of the visible' (1993: 16). For Butler, racism structures white perception, producing a white paranoia that renders in advance the Black subject as containing an impending threat of violence. Intention is inscribed phantasmatically upon the Black subject, producing a justification for any pre-emptive action to which a Black person is subjected. 'This is a seeing which is a reading', writes Butler, 'that is, a *contestable* construal, but one which nevertheless passes itself off as "seeing," a reading which became for that white community [Simi Valley in LA], and for countless others, the same as seeing' (1993: 16).

The sonic field is likewise a racial formation that passes itself off as neutral. Listening is often imagined as an act of direct perception

rather than a *contestable* construal, that is, as an act that involves interpretation and criticality. The refrain of ‘stop the boats’, which has saturated our political and media discourse in relation to refugees for almost two decades, is not merely a conservative political slogan aimed at mobilising voters; it is a soundbite that works to produce and uphold a sonic field that structures white perception itself. ‘Stop the boats’ is an utterance that contains a performative force that works both to exclude the racialised other from the horizon of white perception and naturalise whiteness itself. It is a performative declaration of who has the right to speak and who should be listened to. The refrain can be understood as what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2005: 75-85) referred to as ‘order-words’, a concept that describes the implicit presuppositions contained with language that carry an affective force and produce material and social relations. For Deleuze and Guattari, order-words do not simply refer to imperatives or communicate commands. They also produce, or uphold, an order. ‘Stop the Boats’ performs such an operation, reproducing and upholding a settler-colonial order. The utterance is an assertion of what Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015: xi) calls ‘the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty’, but its power emerges from a cumulative and historic coding of the sonic field that both inscribes and erases – erasing individual subjectivity while projecting generic and racialised conceptions of identity onto certain non-white subjects such as First Nations people and refugees. Taken as a racial formation, this sonic field renders the racialised other as either silent or as producing a form of noise that threatens whiteness itself, providing the necessary basis for the state’s deployment of racial violence.

This is not to suggest that the sonic field or the border that circumscribes it are stable and fixed. In reality, the border is a porous and leaky infrastructure that is underpinned by shifting systems of classification. As Angela Mitropoulos tells us, with the infrastructure of the border the ‘nation-state monopolized control over two things: the legitimate movements of people and money’ (O’Brien 2017: 85). In the context of the Australian settler colony, the border regulates the flow of people and capital in ways that must always uphold the sovereignty of

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the illegitimate nation state that is imposed on top of unbroken First Nations sovereignty. This porosity enables special visas to be granted to foreign investors who bring fresh flows of capital into the national economy. It also explains the issuing of student visas to largely non-white international students that has led to a multi-billion-dollar higher education export industry. Importantly, that which is allowed to leak through the border must never trouble the logic of white possession that underpins the nation and its collective psyche.

The sonic field structures and mediates the way we hear the world and shapes what we hear in the first place. This formation is not merely structured by the racial relation but more precisely by the racial capital relation. Ownership of the means of production or proximity to capital can produce moments of leakage and legislated exceptions from the publicly stated 'tough on borders' rhetoric and its thinly veiled appeal to the preservation of the integrity of the white nation. Those that lack capital and/or enter the country in makeshift ways encounter a closed border that appears to be rigid and unmoveable. The closure of listening that accompanies this version of border can manifest as both explicit and implicit forms of racism, structuring the silencing of racialised voices by both those who want to eliminate refugees and non-white migrants altogether, as well as liberals who speak on behalf of such subjects, announcing their desire to celebrate diversity and difference at the same time that they set the the conditions of national participation. The possessive protection of the integrity of the white nation, Ghassan Hage (2000: 17) tells us, is a defining feature of the 'ritualistic "immigration debates" that White Australians enjoy having so much.' He continues:

In those debates, the 'migrants' and the 'ethnics' are welcomed, abused, defended, made accountable, analysed and measured. Ultimately, the debates work to silence them and construct them into passive objects to be governed by those who have given themselves the national governmental right to 'worry' about the nation... Both the 'racists' and the 'multiculturalists' shared in the conviction that they were, in one way or another, masters of national space, and that it was up to them to decide who stayed in and who ought to be kept out of that space (17).

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The sonic field, which comprises both the sounds we hear and the forces that mediate our hearing, is crucial to the maintenance of whiteness in the settler state, structuring perception and naturalising settlement through the repetition of possessive speech acts and the selective silencing of non-white voices. But it should be noted that part of the power of the ‘Stop the Boats’ refrain has been its capacity to appeal to some non-white migrants who arrived by ‘official’ means. The reproduction of this refrain by non-white migrants might be taken as an expansion of the white sonic field or perhaps an expansion of the boundaries of whiteness itself (which we know to be a relational and socially determined status). But this belief in the multiculturalism of the national imaginary and the national sonic field is a fallacy that demands non-white migrants assimilate into white culture in ways that do not threaten whiteness itself. Here performative celebrations of ethnic culture such as food, dance, and other ‘superficial’ cultural markers stand in for a meaningful engagement with difference. Should the non-white migrant fail to maintain the fantasy of assimilation, they will find themselves again excluded from a national sonic field structured by ghosts of white settlement.

If we take the sonic field as a racially contested sphere then we must challenge the presumed neutrality of listening as an act, constructing instead a politics of listening that displaces the naturalisation of whiteness by attuning to those sonicities outside the horizon of white perception. A crucial first step might be to listen directly to those voices so often silenced within the white sonic field.

### **Listening beyond the border**

It’s a Wednesday morning at 9:48am and I half-register that I’ve received a text message. I’m reading student assessments for a course I’ve been teaching on the politics of data and drinking a big pot of black coffee. At some point, I look at my phone properly and see that the message that came through earlier was from the Manus Recording Project Collective. The matter of fact, descriptive text message style is by now familiar – I’ve been receiving these recordings every day



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for the past 18 days. ‘Yasin, playing pool and listening to music’, the message reads. I click the link and am told that I am 698km away from Yasin, who, at the time, was being detained in the Mantra Hotel in the Melbourne suburb of Preston, on the traditional lands of the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation. I click the play button and immediately hear music: auto-tuned vocals bounce over the top of an upbeat afrobeat groove, layered synths, and nylon string guitar riffs. The song is ‘Yori Yori’ by the Nigerian duo Bracket. Muffled voices speak quietly over the top of the music in a language I do not recognise. The sound of billiard balls smashing together intermittently punctuates the track, as does the occasional eruption of laughter. ‘Yori Yori’ ends and an exaggerated voice announces the existence of Hungry Jacks burger featuring ‘flame grilled Aussie beef’. The game of pool continues as 50 Cent’s ‘In Da Club’ starts playing.

The scene I am listening to seems remarkably familiar, as if it could be a memory of my own. But it’s not my memory, and as I listen I remember the 698km between Yasin Abdallah and myself. I remember that Yasin, who is 24-years old, has spent over seven years in detention since arriving in Australia by boat from Darfur, Sudan. I try to imagine how the experience of indefinite detention shapes this game of pool, how imprisonment alters the experience of listening to 50 Cent’s party anthem. It’s impossible for me to comprehend but I’m not sure that the recording seeks to produce an empathetic identification. Indeed, the structure of empathy requires that one project oneself into the life of the other, unwittingly reducing the other to an object. While empathy purports to establish an emotional connection, the direction of this relation is unilateral and centres the transformative experience on the person empathising rather than on the experience of the other. As Saidiya Hartman (1997: 20) puts it, ‘empathy fails to expand the space of the other but merely places the self in its stead.’ This recording incites us to listen not for empathetic identification but to an experience of detention that is unknowable.

The recording of Yasin and his friends playing pool is powerful not because it reveals exceptional suffering but rather because, in many

ways, it is so ordinary and unremarkable: a game of pool, the chatter of friends, music on the radio. But what we hear in this recording, and in the archive of recordings produced by the Manus Recording Project Collective, is a reclamation of the right to representation. This archive of recordings rejects the representational regime we find in Büchel's *Barca Nostra*, one that mines trauma and suffering in order to produce a spectacle for consumption. These sonic portraits also refuse a representational paradigm that criminalises and demonises the refugee. Instead, we listen to portraits of quiet resistance, everyday acts of friendship and solidarity, expressions of grief and exhaustion, articulations of desire. We listen to Thanush give his friend Sinna a haircut, we listen to Farhad Bandesh listening to an old Kurdish folk song, we listen to Samad boxing in the gym, we listen to Farhad Rahmati listening to birdsong at dusk, we listen to Shamindan eating dinner alone as a radio plays Bryan Adams in the background. The sounds we hear are familiar and yet they remain beyond our grasp, made strange by a temporality that is beyond the grasp of anyone not subjected to indefinite detention.

*where are you today* refuses to transform the listener into a sonic spectator, insisting instead that the listener bear witness to ongoing acts of state violence. More specifically, listening to this archive is to witness acts of witnessing; we listen to these men witnessing the violence of the state. That we remain witnesses rather than spectators in this listening event is, as Michael Richardson and Kerstin Schankweiler (2019: 166) have noted, 'to be brought within the intersection of the political and the ethical and in doing so to be affectively entangled in a complex web of relations.' Richardson and Schankweiler stress the affective dimension of witnessing, arguing that if witnessing is to become responsible to the event in question, then it is always an affective and affecting experience. When we listen to the recordings produced by the Manus Recording Project Collective we witness the affective forces and intensities as they register on the men making the recordings and, in turn, there is an affectivity to this act of sonic witnessing. Crucially, these affective experiences are not identical but they establish a relationality between the one who made the recording and one who listens at a distance.

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It is in this relation that we might locate the genesis of meaningful solidarity. Richardson and Schankweiler are instructive again: 'If we understand bearing witness as sharing ways of affecting and being affected, witnessing and testimony constitute a "we" that transforms a collective into a community, often against another community of "them" (for instance victims against perpetrators)' (170). The sonic witness strains to attune to the affects that circulate in and through these recordings.<sup>23</sup> The power of these recordings is their refusal to make the refugee experience into a spectacle for passive consumption, instead charging us to listen for the intensification of affect and to occupy the role of the witness and consider the responsibility this position entails.

The logic of the border is concerned with separation and control. The capacity to regulate the flows of both people and capital is central to maintenance and authority of nation states. In the case of the Australian nation state, the border is a juridico-political assemblage that has always functioned as a racialising technology, one that seeks to impose and maintain white supremacy. Listening to this archive is to listen beyond the white sonic field, which is, in part, maintained by the violence of the border. The recordings that make up *where are you today* produce relations and connections through the amplification of affect. 'The issue with borders', writes Angela Mitropoulos, 'is that they are conducive to ensuring that people on either side of a border *do not* feel affection toward one another, or are repelled, distanced from being affected. Breaking through this division is crucial' (O'Brien 2017: 86). These recordings encourage us to break down the divisions given in and by the logic of the border. That they are transmitted to us directly, via text message, rather than broadcast in the gallery space is further evidence of this affective intensification. The event of witnessing intrudes on our daily life: one morning, having just gotten out of the shower, I listen to Farhad Rahmati and others watching Discovery Turbo channel and talking about the cars they dream of having when they're out of detention; another day, I listen to Shamindan, in his room, doing nothing – the silence punctuated by occasional bodily noises. The recordings are quiet portraits of state-sanctioned violence that seek to silence and wear out a refugee population existing in a state

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of suspended animation. The recordings also puncture the white sonic field, asking us to attend to the intensification of affect and charging us to develop material responses to the inhumanity of mandatory detention.

The work of art that merely reproduces the object of trauma as critique transforms that object into a spectacle for passive consumption. This allows the audience to slip from the position of witness to spectator, a role that does not bear the same injunction to act. I do not mean to imply here that there is a direct correlation between the work of art and political action; the latter requires a commitment to organising a different world and a desire to produce material responses to specific ethical and political crises. But the work that demands we remain in the position of the witness rather than the spectator might lead to an intensification of affect in which the witness bears some kind of responsibility to act and respond. *where are you today* is an invitation to listen beyond the white sonic field to the sounds and voices that leak through the border and reveal its inherent fragility. One cannot unhear a recording once it has been listened to just as one cannot refuse the status of witness. To listen to these recordings is to be transformed into a witness and to confront the ethical and political responsibility of that position. This is not to suggest that any singular witness necessarily has the capacity to effect structural change but rather to stress that the project of dismantling modes of perception structured by whiteness and settler coloniality will be a collective endeavour, one that might bring about a change to material conditions. *where are you today* places a demand on the listener to attend to the ongoing violence perpetuated in the name of the sovereign border, calling on the listener to both listen beyond the border and, crucially, to join the struggle to end mandatory and indefinite detention.

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### **Endnotes**

- 1 On December 11, 2020, between the writing of this essay and its publication, Farhad Bandesh was granted a visa to remain in Australia and released from detention. His release came after eight years of detention both offshore and onshore.
- 2 The sonic witness might also be thought of as an earwitness. For more on earwitnessing, see: Krista Ratcliffe, K., (2005) *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press); Bassel, L. (2017) *The Politics of Listening: Possibilities and Challenges for Democratic Life* (London: Palgrave Macmillan); Rae, R., Russell, E. K., and Nethery, A., (2019) 'Earwitnessing Detention: Carceral Secrecy, Affecting Voices, and Political Listening in The Messenger Podcast', *International Journal of Communication* 13: 1036–55.

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