



Shaping an Ear for Climate Change

The Silarjuapomorphizing Music of Alaskan Composer John Luther Adams

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Abstract How does contemporary music cultivate ecological thinking and climate-change awareness in our era of global warming? This essay investigates how the music of Pulitzer Prize-winning Alaskan composer John Luther Adams incites ecological listening and shapes an ear for climate change. It examines Adams's evolving signature style of composing and/or performing with climatic elements and natural forces, and it further examines how this style effectively attunes audiences to ongoing environmental events that weather the world outside the concert hall. In other words, it investigates the idea and play of "Sila" in Adams's work, Sila being a concept that Adams derives from the Inuit to signify in the largest possible sense the weather, its cosmic and chaotic modalities, and the wisdom that attends to them.

Keywords ecology of music, climate change, ecological listening, Alaskan composer John Luther Adams, silarjuapomorphosis

S*ila: The Breath of the World* premiered on July 25, 2014, at Lincoln Center's Hearst Plaza, New York City, and for one wailing, swelling, shimmering hour, it turned and tuned the ears of two thousand listeners to the complexly intoning, engulfing, and evolving weather of the place. Composed by John Luther Adams to be performed outdoors, *Sila* draws out the clamor of climate change that is everywhere shaping a here and now. This particular performance filled the plaza with five rousing "choirs" of woodwinds, brass, strings, and percussion together with the ambient noise of 65th Street and Columbus Avenue and the larger cosmos beyond. Scored to sound the elements of extreme Arctic climes, *Sila*'s instruments called this midsummer evening's chaos of wailing sirens, bleating traffic, billowing breezes, and pulsating helicopter rotors into concerted dissonance.¹ Shaped by the outside of music as much as by the

1. For eyewitness reports, see Rebecca Lentjes, "John Luther Adams Breathes Life"; John Schaefer, "John Luther Adams' 'Sila'"; and Anastasia Tsioulcas, "Breath of Inspiration."

music itself, *Sila*'s experimental debut opened the cloister of musical appreciation to enlarged, ecological listening.

View the official video and you will find the outdoor presence of this performance as striking as the absence of a conductor.² Eighty-one musicians proceed to conduct themselves in response to the resounding interplay of their instruments across the vibrating surface of the Paul Milstein Pool (where the vocalists array themselves), off banking lawns, groves, and sidewalks (where the percussionists arrange their various stations), along ascending staircases (where the woodwinds, brass, and strings find a perch), and against the outer walls of Lincoln Center's various music halls. "Each musician chooses her or his own pacing through the score," NPR's Anastasia Tsioulcas reports, "as long as each sustained tone or rising phrase 'lasts the length of one full exhalation' according to Adams's notes."³ Sixteen floating "harmonic clouds," grounded on the first sixteen overtones of a low B-flat, envelop both performers and listeners in an atmosphere that thickens with ambient clouds of noise.⁴ In the video, Adams sits poolside among the audience, and he directs his attention to exploratory listening. Everyone is equally well placed to hear what might transpire between the musical performance and the surrounding turbulence.

By all accounts, *Sila* is a composition that, when performed, does not remain composed. The various choirs breathe, beat, blow, and intone overlapping crescendos of sound that myriad city breezes weave into a cacophonous rush of midtown traffic and an infinitely greater chaos of unpredictable, climatic unfolding. Through the conduit of presiding winds and weather, *Sila* conducts the collective ear of the composer, performers, and listeners outward, outside the plaza and off the urban grid, while sounding those resident yet unrefrainable forces that continuously shape our environments and our inhabiting selves.

Searching for what he calls "an ecology of music," Adams has long been thinking about *Sila*, a concept that he derives from the Inuit to signify in the largest possible sense the weather, its cosmic and chaotic modalities, and the wisdom that attends to them.⁵ If *Sila: The Breath of the World* premiered only recently, the idea of *Sila* is arguably the prime mover of Adams's musical trajectory. Whether as an inspiring source or a culminating effect, the presence of *Sila* in Adams's music inevitably, and affectingly, discomposes audiences. With *Sila* in mind, Adams composes music that compels us to listen to what is happening outside the composition and to become unusually aware of unsettling, noisy surrounds. He develops John Cage's experiment with composing for listening to the outside of music. But if Cage's 4'33"—four minutes, thirty-three seconds

2. "Sila: The Breath of the World," YouTube video, September 16, 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=rUDjOyacZoU.

3. Tsioulcas, "Breath of Inspiration."

4. *Ibid.*, citing Adams, *Inuksuit*.

5. Adams, *Place Where You Go to Listen*, 1.

of playful silence—turned attention away from the piano to the clamor of the concert hall, Adams's *Sila* and other *Sila*-inspired works provoke a far outer awareness of ecological, meteorologic, climatological, and even geophysical interaction and mutation.

This essay investigates the idea and play of *Sila* that, I argue, constitute the most original and compelling character of Adams's music. It focuses not exclusively on Adams's latest major composition but more generally on his signature style of composing and/or performing with climatic elements and natural forces and of exposing audiences to rarely perceived geomorphic realities. It explores how Adams's musical engagement and entanglement with *Sila* effectively attune his listeners to environmental processes that, with a music of their own, continuously weather the world outside the concert hall. Addressing the common reader rather than musical specialists, it further undertakes to explain what it means for this composer, or any composer, to score and assemble an ecology of music. If what is composed is not, as Adams insists, a representation or an impression of actual Arctic wilderness but a virtual Arctic of climatic unfolding, then how does it act on our sense of place? Is it possible that (Adams's) music can shape new sense organs for sounding and navigating climate change?

My point and primary premise is that Adams's music both shapes and is shaped by *Sila*. This essay henceforth sets out to explore, investigate, and explain how Adams's music virtually and effectively undergoes a *Sila*-inspired or induced morphogenesis over the course of the composer's career, though not simply chronologically; aligns with Inuit thinking; and further shapes an ear for climate change in this era of global warming.

Adams's *Silarjuapomorphizing* Music

Adams attained international attention by winning the 2014 Pulitzer Prize for Music for *Become Ocean*, an orchestral piece for performing indoors while sounding the sea outdoors as it rises precipitously with rising temperatures. Employed as an environmental activist for the first few of his forty-plus years of living in Alaska, Adams has since been occupied with composing and cultivating critical climate-change consciousness through his music. His search for a musical ecology now extends beyond his adopted Alaskan homeland. But wherever they are performed, *Sila* and *Become Ocean* always carry something of Alaska with them—namely, a virtual Arctic front of climatic havoc. Adams composes Arctic affects not only to discompose us but to place us where we might listen in extremis, and with accruing awareness, to the chaos that is currently undoing our world. To say this differently, he places our hearing at the forefront of climate change, where we find ourselves listening in spontaneous alliance with Arctic inhabitants who have long been attuning their senses to unsettling environments.

While living in Alaska, Adams sought exposure to indigenous Alaskan music as well as to the immanent musicality of Arctic wilderness. He notes especially the impact of the Arctic's extreme climate, its vast winter silences and seasonal discords, on his

idea of music and musical possibility. He first aspires to convey “the resonance of place,” by which he means not the evocation of an actual place but the orchestration of sounds that, in themselves, create a place of resonating duration.⁶ In time, he emphasizes the atmospheric flux or dissonance of tonality, pitch, and rhythm out of which and into which refrains of place-making resonance grow and decay. He calls this place making/unmaking noise “the breath of the world” or, more reverently, “Sila.” If his penchant for noise derives from training in American experimental music, Sila enters his thinking through his increasing exposure to Arctic weather and Inuit culture. “Sila” is not just another name for noise, but rather, it signifies a different physics, or metaphysics, of chaos. Unlike the static fuzz and detached sound masses of Edgard Varèse, a prolific explorer of electronic music and another major influence on Adams’s music, the noise of Sila literally breathes wind and binds weather into a sentient and dynamic medium of listening, at once animated and animating, enlivening as well as engulfing. Rethinking music in terms of Sila, Adams colors the abstract physics of noise with the concrete sensations of constitutive climate change.

What can Adams’s music do—what can *any* music do—to raise our awareness of climate change, awareness that environmentalists and climate scientists do not already, and more effectively, raise? Why should we attend challenging musical performances for gaining environmental sense and not simply pay more attention to the news headlines or the weather channel or, better yet, the climatic events taking place outside our front door? Music is no alternative to environmental activism or climate science or direct exposure to melting ice caps, rising seas, and cataclysmic winds, but it can compose climate-change sensations that directly affect our listening, feeling, and thinking.⁷ It can even, I venture, redirect our attention outside ourselves, which is to say outside our ubiquitous, Muzak-saturated commercial environments and our global-local webs of news and social media that tend to be self-enclosing and all-absorbing. Adams’s *Sila* presents an exemplary case of music that turns us outward and reorients our anthropomorphic worldview to weather-forged, de/composing sound-worlds that alarm and escape our current comprehending.

Adams’s openness to using an Inuit concept in his musical thinking derives, I contend, from his background in American experimentalism.⁸ From Cage, he learns that

6. Adams, “Resonance of Place.”

7. “The musicologist Mitchell Morris (in his essay ‘Ecotopian Sounds: Strong Environmentalism and the Music of John Luther Adams’) refers to me as a ‘Green Composer,’” Adams writes. “I don’t object to this. After all, I have been active in the Green Party in Alaska. But the context of my work goes beyond environmental activism and Green politics to a larger sense of place and culture. So I interpret Morris’s use of the term ‘Green’ in relation to my music as cultural and philosophical rather than narrowly political.” Adams, *Winter Music*, 124.

8. Adams states that his “deepest musical roots” are with the “American experimentalist tradition from [Charles] Ives and [Henry] Cowell to [Harry] Partch, [Conlon] Nanarrow, Cage, [Morton] Feldman, [Lou] Harrison, [Pauline] Oliveros, and [James] Tenney” (*Winter Music*, 123).

“music depends on listening” and that “the center of music is no longer the omniscient composer. It’s the listener.” Further, Cage reveals “that music is Nature and Nature is music.”⁹ Like him, Adams aspires “to imitate Nature in her manner of operation”¹⁰—including and especially the operations of Sila—rather than to create original works of masterful self-expression. Adams also acknowledges the shift in contemporary music initiated by R. Murray Schafer and the burgeoning field of soundscape artists and acoustic ecologists.¹¹ Like Schafer, Adams would tune listening to whole other worlds of sound outside the Western confines of habituated, commodified, and stifled hearing. His early experiments with Sila set out to create what he calls “new indigenous music,” taking his cue from Schafer’s determination to “create a new culture” with his World Soundscape Project.¹² And, like Schafer, Adams regards silence as a “keynote” of Arctic environments. Many of Adams’s compositions feature silence as a constitutive agent of attunement to the world. Unlike Schafer, however, Adams regards noise as equally attuning. He owes more to Cage than to Schafer, who narrowly conceives of noise as “noise pollution” and whose World Soundscape Project aims to cultivate and mobilize appreciation for acoustic life that noise is progressively invading and destroying.¹³ Among other things, Adams’s noise experiments aspire to make perceptible the natural turbulence of climate change and the intensified volatility of Sila in an age of global warming.

We can trace Adams’s thinking on Sila in his composer’s notes and journals as well as in his music. In addition to doing this, this essay thinks about Adam’s thinking in relation to an Inuit understanding of Sila. It aims not to check the accuracy of Adams’s interpretation but to expand the Western context of musical appreciation that limits comprehension of what Adams is attempting.

When writing on Sila, Adams refers to the legendary authority of Iglulik shamans, known to Westerners through the journals of famed Greenlandic-Danish explorer and ethnographer Knud Rasmussen. Adams also acknowledges Iñupiaq and Gwich’in Alaskans, on whose traditional music his own music draws directly. Alternatively, I refer to Jaypetee Arnakak, a contemporary Inuit philosopher and policy maker who plays a key role in decolonizing Inuit *Qaujimanituqangit*—Inuit traditional knowledge, or IQ—and in advising the Nunavut government on how to incorporate it into official thinking. Moreover, Arnakak has helped to initiate dialogue between Inuit and climate scientists on the crises of northern warming.

9. *Ibid.*, 79.

10. John Cage quoted in *ibid.*

11. Though he does not identify with this movement (see note 29).

12. Adams, *Winter Music*, 30; Schafer quoted in *ibid.*, 28. By “new indigenous music,” Adams means “a new kind of artistic regionalism” that draws on “the natural and cultural landscapes of the places that [artists] call home.” An alternative to “global monoculture” that is “anything but provincial,” it connects recent exploration in cosmopolitan music to traditions of musical creation already long in place (*ibid.*).

13. Schafer’s composition *North/White* (1979) figures noise pollution in sound recordings of snowmobiles.

Arnakak argues that an indigenous understanding of Sila is critical to understanding climate change and to creating a global, climate-wise culture. The most elemental meaning of Sila, he explains, is “an ever-moving and imminent force that surrounds and permeates Inuit life, and that is most often experienced with the weather.”¹⁴ As the semantic root of a vast conceptual ecology, Sila invites philosophical and cosmological expansion. For instance, *Silarjuaq* means “the being of Sila,” and *Silatuniq* means “a wisdom that can attend to It.”¹⁵ Vital, vast, and volatile, Sila billows everywhere and enlivens everything with a mindful air of atmospheric intensity. Moreover, Sila affects and is affected by all it inhabits and by those who inhabit it, be they dwellers of the Arctic or of more distant climes. Presently, northern warming is initiating both Inuit and Westerners in the need for a *Silatuniq* that, in Arnakak’s words, can “inquire into the context and consequence of applying knowledge and/or how our interacting with the surround affects that surround.”¹⁶

Arnakak criticizes Rasmussen’s influential, if misleading, translation of the term *Sila* as a deified and gendered “He” for deterring climate scientists from regarding *Silatuniq* or collaboration with Inuit elders as a credible approach to coping with egregiously accelerating climate change. If, as climate policy analyst Timothy Leduc believes, a rapprochement between Inuit and Western thinking is necessary for society to survive the crises and catastrophes of northern warming, then the first step must be to decolonize the idea of Sila. Arnakak outlines an alternative conceptualization:

Silarjuaq is without a creator. Beings—whether they be animal, human or spirit—become and pass away within it: *Silarjuaq* just is. *Silarjuaq* is also in a state of constant flux and change—reflecting the human mind. . . . To outsiders (e.g. Rasmussen), *Silarjuaq* would be said to be anthropomorphized, but some Inuit would say that it is we living beings that are *Silarjuapomorphized*. *Silarjuaq* has natural rhythms and cycles as seen in the changing seasons . . . everything is mutable—only sentience, order and change are constant.¹⁷

Adams elaborates a similar understanding of Sila. Reflecting on the making of his sound and light installation *The Place Where You Go to Listen*, he underscores the greater-than-human forces and awareness of Sila that his music might capture for our instructive immersion: “In Inuit tradition the force that animates all things is *sila*, the breath of the world. *Sila* is wind and weather, the forces of nature. But it’s something more. *Sila* is intelligence. It’s awareness and our own awareness of the world, and the world’s awareness of us. If we listen carefully to the breath of the world, perhaps our music can become filled with this awareness.”¹⁸

14. Quoted in Leduc, *Climate, Culture, Change*, 19.

15. *Ibid.*, 29.

16. *Ibid.*, 39.

17. *Ibid.*, 30.

18. Adams, *Place Where You Go to Listen*, 37–38.

For Adams as for Arnakak, Sila is a nexus of meteoric energies that fill and enliven all earthly beings with breath and sense. Adams stresses the “intelligence” that attends Sila when we listen to it carefully as it moves through and all around us. The more carefully we listen, he implies, the more wisely attuned and worldly we become. It is not our human music that inspires “this awareness.” Rather, this awareness fills our music if our listening is sufficiently careful. Sila generates this awareness by being simply what it is, *Silarjuaq*, which is to say forceful. With its immanent power to move us, Sila forces our mindful attending with mounting *Silatuniq*. We might infer that Adams sees his task as composer as one of filling his music with Sila for our greater listening and wisening to a world that we otherwise refrain from observing. It is not for Adams to compose Sila. Rather, the composer must become “*silaup inua*”—that is, one whom Sila “takes hold” of and inspires.¹⁹

Adams’s conception of Sila derives not only from “Inuit tradition” but also from his exposure to Alaskan climate, both at home near Fairbanks and on memorable treks across the far northern Brooks Range of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Many entries to “Winter Music: A Composer’s Journal (1998–99),” the lead piece of the eponymous collection of Adams’s writings, comprise meditative relays between the weather at present and the composition in progress. His constitutional walk from his house to his studio through the snow and cold primes his thinking and composing. “Winter Music” records subtle shifts in temperature and atmosphere that fine-tune his musical sensibilities. Conversely, his wilderness journals “Land of Constant Light” and “Farthest North Mountains” report “sparse elemental music of stone, wind, rain, water, ice” that sweep his breath and thought away.²⁰ To use Arnakak’s neologism, *Winter Music* attests to the “silarjuamorphization” of the composer and his music.

The *Inuktitut Living Dictionary* lists 217 usages of *sila*, many of which aptly denote the chromatic and/or dynamic character of Adams’s music. Words like *silaaqsiaq* (“darkening, changing outside air”), *silatsiaq* (“sunny weather”), or *silarqiqpuq* (“calm, without wind”) describe his atonal harmonies and temporal modalities, while *silarjuamiut* (“air breathing creatures, humans, animals”) suggests the animated, sonic sensations that populate and punctuate his musical environments.

Nunavlusilaqpavlu, or Earth, and the Great Weather: A Sonic Geography of the Arctic

A large-scaled, orchestral variation of Adams’s Sila-filled music is *Earth and the Great Weather*. It premiered in 1993 at the Charles W. Davis Concert Hall of the University of Alaska in Fairbanks. Sila figures centrally in the Iñupiaq title *Nunavlusilaqpavlu* that accompanies the English title along with the Gwich’in title *Kak Nats’aa Gweedhaa*. The score calls for both Western and traditional instruments to sound the physical and cultural landscapes of “the Iñupiaq and the Gwich’in Athabascan people [who] have lived

19. Arnakak, quoted in Leduc, *Culture, Climate, Change*, 29.

20. Adams, *Winter Music*, 47.

in the Arctic for centuries.”²¹ Voices, strings, drums, and the recording of an aeolian harp that strums with the “wind across tundra, ice melting, migratory birds calling, thunder rolling on mountaintops” of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge create a virtual Arctic wilderness of resounding turbulence. An experiment in “sonic geography,” the piece ventures “beyond landscape painting in sound toward a music which, in its own way, is landscape—a music which creates its own inherently sonic presence and sense of place.”²²

Earth and the Great Weather heralds a form of “new indigenous music” that brings Western and traditional music together in experimental syntheses. Deriving intricate, multilayered rhythmic elements from Iñupiat and Gwich’in dance music, combining orchestral weather sounds with tundra sound recordings, and mixing Iñupiat, Gwich’in, English, and/or Latin choruses, the piece generates original aboriginal sound-forms. As Sabine Feisst observes, it “goes beyond a mere evocation of an exotic locale” by immersing audiences in a “consciously multicultural” place.²³ Adams collaborated with four Iñupiat and Gwich’in vocalists, and Alaskan natives who attended performances in Fairbanks and Anchorage were reportedly stirred by its vision.²⁴ *Earth* provokes listeners to inhabit a world that transcends any actual geography and tradition. It transports the senses to a place that exists nowhere but in the present acoustic experience of *weathering*, of becoming ungrounded in *Earth*’s currently and tumultuously unfolding (and enfolding) musical climate. An experiment in radical listening, it eludes ethnomusicological analyses.²⁵

Adams’s accompanying “Composer’s Notes” feature a song by “Uvavnuk, an Iglulik shaman,” that captures the climatic—Silarjuapomorphic—essence of the work in words:

The great sea has set me adrift.
It moves me like a weed
in a great river.
Earth and the great weather move me.
have carried me away
and moved my inward parts with joy.²⁶

Originally composed in Inuktitut (the language of Iglulik Inuit) and translated by Rasmussen into Danish, the song figures here in English and Iñupiat as translated by

21. *Ibid.*, 25. In addition to the composer’s notes, the texts of “Arctic Litanies,” and the preface by Howard Klein, the CD booklet features a map of traditional Iñupiaq and Gwich’in territories along with a brief geographic description.

22. Adams, “Composer’s Notes,” *Earth and the Great Weather*, 6.

23. Feisst, “Music as Place, Place as Music,” 31.

24. Feisst reports that “one Iñupiaq who attended the latter performance remarked that he ‘kept going back and forth into the spirit world’” (*ibid.*).

25. “Borrowings from Alaska Native music in *Earth* appear in abstracted, fragmented form and remain a rarity within Adams’s oeuvre” (*ibid.*).

26. Uvavnuk, quoted in Adams, “Composer’s Notes,” *Earth and the Great Weather*, 8.

Iñupiaq elder James Mumigaałuk Naęeak in an epigram to the collaborative spirit of the composition.²⁷

The piece itself features ten movements of fluctuating tempos, rhythms, textures, and tonalities, collectively titled “Aeolian Dreams.” The aeolian harp recordings evoke a flow of sonic wind throughout. “A cycle of pieces for strings and digital delay” adds further amplifying flow, and together, this windy weave of noise forms the “musical ground” of the piece.²⁸ Bowed with “special performance techniques and notation, as well as minute nuances of intonation,” the strings and the harp recording form a propelling commotion of oscillating vibrations that conducts listening along the “aeolian plains.” Less terrestrial than aerial, Adams’s groundlessly grounded *Earth* is sensationally unsettling. What comprises the visionary dimension of “Aeolian Dreams” is its transformation of actual sounds into streams of continuous sense-shaping turbulence that flood the space and medium of listening, breathing, and becoming through speakers surrounding the audience. *Earth* is no mere soundscape. As Adams clarifies, he is “more interested in evoking the *feeling* of nature than the sound of nature.”²⁹

From aeolian plains spring sonic milieus and territories. Seven “Arctic Litanies” landmark these plains with myriad names of Arctic creatures, places, and seasons. Two to five different voices, speaking in two to four different languages, rise above the vibrating wind harp and oscillating strings to pronounce these names and to articulate breath into braided choral taxonomies. Each litany names species, the voicing of which sounds, as much as denotes, the nature and character of this *emerging* place. We could say that each litany composes a sonic territory and, vice versa, each territory resonates with the voicing of cohabiting species. The voicing of litanies of names calls a place into existence and to life with sonic landmarks and characters, or *Silarjuamiut*, beings born of and borne by Sila in vocal streams across aeolian plains. As such, they sound nothing like actual Arctic species. Rather, they sound the names of species in variegated vocal arrangements, or “territorial refrains.”³⁰

For instance, the arrangement of voices that name the different riparian plant species of “River with No Willows” demarcates a wetland refrain. An English voice-

27. Adams refers to Rasmussen’s *The Intellectual History of the Iglulik Eskimo*, which records Uvavnuł’s song as sung by Aua, another Iglulik shaman (*Winter Music*, 191).

28. Adams, “Composer’s Notes,” *Earth and the Great Weather*, 6.

29. “My concept of ‘sonic geography’ sometimes seems to link me with an international community of soundscape artists and the acoustic ecology movement. I feel a certain philosophical affinity with R. Murray Schafer, Annea Lockwood, Hildegard Westerkamp, David Dunn, and other artists whose work is grounded in soundscape. Yet I don’t feel my work is part of that movement. I’ve only utilized recordings of environmental sounds in a single work (*Earth and the Great Weather*)” (Adams, *Winter Music*, 123). Yet Adams has had an influence on soundscape artists, notably composer and musician Derek Charke, whose works *Cercle du Nord III* (2005) and *Tundra Songs* (2007) evoke the various acoustic ecologies of Arctic Canada.

30. I loosely borrow the phrase “territorial refrain” from philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who think of Nature as a cosmic symphony that all, and not just human, territorial animals compose by refraining chaos into habitats of ecological resonance. See *A Thousand Plateaus*, 310–37.

stream chants “horsetail / meadow horsetail / northern horsetail / stiff clubmoss,” and quickly it becomes entangled in other English, Iñupiaq, Gwich’in, Latin voice-streams, creating in effect a polyphonic territory of reverberating ecological complexity.³¹ After reverberating for seven minutes and eight seconds, the five voice-streams lose their linguistic distinctiveness and gain a sonorous resonance. They shape an ear that becomes more adept at tracking interweaving and overlapping sound-currents than tracing singular taxonomic listings. If “River with No Willows” demarcates one territorial refrain, the seven litanies together map *Earth’s* entire sonic geography. Apart from these vocal assemblages of names, there are no territorial markers. The territories extend as far as their sonic variation and duration, which is far off the grids of music and geography.

Thus the “Arctic Litanies” refrain and express a complex *cultural*, as well as physical, ecology. Iñupiaq is the language of the Iñupiat who inhabit the coastal plain of the western Arctic and as far inland as the traditional territory of the Gwich’in, the Athabaskan people who inhabit the mountainous interior. The voicing of names in both Iñupiaq and Gwich’in crosses territories of historical enmity in trans-Arctic harmonies. The inclusion of English and Latin in *Earth’s* sonic weave complicates the idea of who speaks for this place. English-speaking Alaskans may hear place-names in Iñupiaq and Gwich’in as strangely *displacing*, whereas Iñupiat and Gwich’in listeners may feel oddly amiably at home. For every name spoken in Iñupiaq or Gwich’in six are spoken in Latin, thereby adding substantial sonic texture to the choral braid. The Iñupiaq and Gwich’in vocalists speak at slower intervals and more pronouncedly than the Latin vocalist, who rolls off litanies of scientific taxonomies in a constant murmuring rush. The two English vocalists speak in split-second intervals, alternating litanies of related categories so as to stress the phonetics of contrapuntal variation rather than delineate a particular species. Unlike their imperial and historical counterparts, these English and Latin vocalizations do not name to colonize. With the Iñupiaq and Gwich’in vocalizations they shape a polyphonic, indigenous environment for multicultural listening and inhabiting.

Drifting in and out of composition, the “Arctic Litanies” do not develop into harmonic melodies or leitmotifs. They rise above the wind to form only temporary territories before trailing off into the noisy atmosphere of harp, strings, and birdcalls. Sila, “the great weather,” sweeps away the refrains even as it sounds the ground of their becoming. *Nuna*, “earth,” adds to this de/territorializing drift with “three large pieces (for four drummers),” derived from traditional Iñupiaq and Gwich’in dance music.³² “The Drums of Winter,” “Deep and Different Thunder,” and “Drums of Fire, Drums of Stone” shake the ground in pounding waves of complex, overriding, and colliding

31. In his “Note on the Typography of *Arctic Litanies*,” Adams explains that “the number of voices varies from section to section, with each voice placed in its own column. The first, second, and final litanies contain only two voices and are read a page at a time. The other litanies contain four or five voices and are read two pages at a time” (“Composer’s Notes,” *Earth and the Great Weather*, 8).

32. *Ibid.*, 7.

rhythms.³³ Surging erratically between the first and third, fifth and seventh, and eighth and tenth litanies, they form the sonic-tectonic layers and volcanic intervals of *Earth's* generative chaos.

The windy plains, drifting territories, and cataclysmic eruptions of *Nunavlusilaaq-pauvlu* destroy the Western habit of listening for progressively unfolding melodies and motifs. Instead, enfolding human voices and nonhuman breaths, punctuated by an explosive orogeny, produce a virtual force field of noise. Adams's scoring compels us to listen to the variations of change of musical climate that take place *between*, as well as within, the territorial refrains of place and species names. It foregrounds the "becoming-music" of this place or the continuous flux of sounds as they assemble into durations of pronounced resonance before noisily and energetically de-composing.³⁴ This becoming-music attunes our ear to forms and processes that flow naturally beyond our classical range of perception. As Adams explains, "our music can be enriched not only by natural sounds themselves, but also by the forms and processes of nature. . . . We have much to learn by imitating 'Nature in her manner of operation.'"³⁵

Though composed for performing in the classical concert hall, *Nunavlusilaaq-pauvlu* roars, rushes, and pounds to fill and expand the hall's bounded space with infinitely rebounding sound. An immersion in this space carries one's senses to where an entire cosmos resonates in chaos. There is no name for such a place in English, but there is an Iñupiaq name: "Naalagiaġvik." Literally meaning "the place where you go to listen," Naalagiaġvik is the first place-name to be voiced in the eponymous first litany and also the last place-name to be voiced in the last, tenth litany, titled "Where the Waves Splash, Hitting Again and Again." Between first and last voicing, there sounds a pan-Arctic world of places and species. Naalagiaġvik names "a place on the coast of the Arctic Ocean" where every earth- and sea-borne being and becoming might possibly, if stormily, meet.³⁶ A wave of place-names—"Naalagiaġvik, Nuvuġaq. / Tigutaaq. / Qayuutataq. / Qaaktuġvik"—rolls forth in Iñupiaq, and a slower, vaguer wave in English accompanies it with "The place where you go to listen. / You can see a long way."³⁷ After murmuring "where the waves splash, hitting again and again," and lastly, "Naalagiaġvik," the final litany echoes the start of the first litany and brings us full circle. Within this circle, two interim litanies pronounce the places and events that rotate

33. "'Drums of Winter' and 'Drums of Fire, Drums of Stone' make use of asymmetrical cells from Iñupiat music. In 'Drums of Winter,' for instance, the asymmetries are created through additive rhythms and divided rhythms (ever changing rhythmic combinations of two and three in groups of three, five, seven, and nine) and through constant tempo modulation. . . . In comparison, 'Deep and Distant Thunder' uses relentless steady drumbeats typically found in Gwich'in music" (Feisst, "Music as Place, Place as Music," 28–30).

34. I borrow the term "becoming-music" from Deleuze and Guattari, which they develop most elaborately in chap. 11, "Of the Refrain," in *Thousand Plateaus*, 310–50.

35. Adams, *Winter Music*, 28

36. *Ibid.*, 25.

37. Adams, "Arctic Litanies," in *Earth and the Great Weather*, 9.

seasonally within “The Circle of Suns and Moons” and “The Circle of Winds.”³⁸ *Earth and the Great Weather* circumscribes a cosmos of circulating sensations of climatic variation that flow in and out of chaos with rhythmic intelligence. One listens, awash with a sense of this place.

***Silam Inua*, or “The Place Where You Go to Listen” (a Lyrical Meditation)**

Another variation of “The Place Where You Go to Listen” appears in the opening pages of *Winter Music* in the form of a lyrical meditation or prose poem.³⁹ A coda to *Earth and the Great Weather*, it ponders the Silarjuapomorphizing passage of coming-to-awareness that the legendary journey to Naalagiagvik might involve. On this occasion, Adams uses verbal music to sound the forces of Sila for rethinking the source of thought itself. Inspired once again by the wisdom of the Inuit, he heads his mediation with a song by “Orpingalik, a Netsilik elder”:

Songs are thoughts which are sung out with the breath when
people let themselves be moved by a great force, and ordinary
speech no longer suffices.
When the words that we need shoot up of themselves,
we have a new song.⁴⁰

Adams then proceeds to voice the reflections of “she,” a novice shaman, who “would sit alone in stillness” at “Naalagiagvik” and “listen” to the “waves lapping,” “birds passing,” “earth stirring,” “snow melt[ing],” “ice melt[ing],” and “caribou flood[ing] the great plain.” Seated “before the wind and the great sea,” she discerns the “languages of the birds,” “the quiet words of the plants,” “the voices of her ancestors,” and the “voices of the land . . . carrying the memories of those who live here now and those who have gone.”⁴¹ Listening shapes her vision; she becomes a seer of visionary auditions. With these lyrics, Adams evokes a medium of synesthesia so that seeing becomes listening, listening becomes seeing, and the place of listening becomes sentient, even perspicacious.

In turn, these voices stir memories of “an old shaman” who had once spoken to her of “*silam inua*—the inhabiting spirit” or “the voice of the universe” itself. This latter voice, she now remembers, speaks “not through ordinary words but through fire and ice, sunshine and calm seas, the howling of wolves, and the innocence of children, who understand nothing.” Ultimately, she comes to behold a polyphonic universe beyond that which informs the delimiting language of an all-too-human world. If “she” personifies the capacity of the shaman to be affected by “the inhabiting spirit” with a child’s impressionability, *silam inua* signifies the capacity of elemental forces to spirit and

38. *Ibid.*, 14–19.

39. Adams, *Winter Music*, 5.

40. *Ibid.* The poem was first published in the journal *Terra Nova* in 1997.

41. *Ibid.*, 6.

shape the place they inhabit with greater-than-human intelligence. When at last she arrives “at the heart of winter,” and “darkness envelops her—heavy, luminous with aurora,” Sila conducts her thought with those quietest inspirations—“the frozen air [that] rings like a knife blade against bone,” “the sound of her breath as it freezes,” and “muffled wing beats of a snowy owl” that pass “down long corridors of dream, deep into the earth,” and vibrate with “the resonant stillness.” Ever-seeing with ears wide open, she “draws a new breath” and “in a voice not her own . . . she begins to sing.”⁴²

“The Place Where You Go to Listen” further elaborates in words the wordless spirit that once moved Uvavnuk to sing of how earth and the great weather set him adrift on the cosmic sea. Moreover, it advances Adams’s idea of how the Arctic, with its vast silence and spontaneous turbulence, presents the universal ground and immanent music of creative thinking itself. For Adams, thinking does not begin and end with human reasoning. Rather, it rises with the wind and permeates the air with expressive sonorities and infinitely subtle variation. When human thinking resonates with Nature’s thinking, it sings a worldly song.

Silattuqsarvik, or The Place Where You Go To Listen (“A Sound and Light Environment”)

We might regard the poem “The Place Where You Go to Listen” as not only a coda to *Earth and the Great Weather* but also an interlude between that earlier orchestration and the eponymous sound and light environment that Adams would construct ten years later. It marks a shift in Adams’s thinking, away from the idea that music should imitate the operations of nature and to the idea that music should be a place for nature to sound its own symphony of forces. From 2004 to 2006, Adams and a team of geophysicists, mathematicians, computer scientists, sound engineers, architects, and tradesmen designed and built a computer-lined room that relays live data feeds of climate information into clamorous currents of synthetic sound.⁴³ An upper alcove of the Museum of the North at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks, the room is small but it captures a meteoric play of events with intimate immensity. Visitors to *The Place Where You Go to Listen*, as the installation is called, are immersed in a continuous clamor of colliding tectonics, pulsating auroras, rising-falling suns and moons, and modulations in weather that can be heard nowhere else but here. As Adams explains, “*The Place* is dedicated to hearing the unheard music of the world around us. The rhythms of sunlight and darkness, the phases of the moon, the seismic vibrations of the earth and the fluctuations of the earth’s magnetic field all resonate within this space. Streams of data derived from these geophysical phenomena shape the sound and light of *The Place*, which

42. Ibid.

43. Adams recalls Varèse, whose music dispenses with narrative and “invokes the language (or at least the rhetoric) of mathematics, crystallography, botany, engineering.” Varèse “eventually mak[es] use of the new systems and mechanisms of sound reproduction” (Macdonald, “New Heaven?,” 4), whereas Adams uses computer technology to connect listening directly to the music of outer climes in real time.

are synthesized and modulated on a computer, in real time.”⁴⁴ Gone are the “Arctic Litanies” of human voices as well the Iñupiat and Gwich’in drum rhythms, the vibrating strings, and the wind harp recordings. Gone too are the “metaphors of space and place” that figure in the poem of *The Place*. In this newer variation, an architectural framework of computers collects, converts, and assembles incoming geophysical information into an audible ecology of music. Sila inhabits this framework as synthesized, sonified, and illuminated fields of chaos. Noise is the ground of this ecology, just as it is the ground of *Earth’s* sonic geography. But the noise of *The Place* comes directly from Sila, albeit in frequencies that have been engineered and calibrated for human hearing. As Adams further explains, music that is grounded in the polytonal “breath of the world” is music that places us in connection to the cosmos of all breathing things: “If music grounded in tone is a means of sending messages to the world, then music grounded in noise is a means of receiving messages from the world. Noise takes us out of ourselves. It invites communion, leading us to embrace the patterns that connect us to everything around us. As we listen carefully to noise, the whole world becomes music. Rather than a vehicle for self-expression, music becomes a mode of awareness.”⁴⁵

With reference to the *Inuktitut Living Dictionary*, I would describe *The Place* as *silattusarvik*, or “a place to get wise.” *The Place* is where one goes not for easy entertainment but for baffling enlightenment. Visitors who expect to hear the forms of music to which they are accustomed will be radically disappointed, if not distressingly bombarded. They may depart in dismay, or they may stay and experiment in becoming receptive to a degree well beyond their comfort zone. If they do the latter, they may even go so far as to perceive the diverse currents of a becoming-music that shapes, at once, the intensive interior and extensive exterior of *The Place*. Immersed in an “acoustic atmosphere” that makes listening itself the subject of music, they may lose themselves in a “listening act” that is at once “dangerously open” and intensely affecting.⁴⁶ Then too, they may feel an uncanny connection taking shape between their small human orbit and earth’s outer spheres.

The Place houses space made to resonate with the ground on which it has been built. Adams describes it as “a nexus between the architectural space in which we listen

44. Adams, *Place Where You Go to Listen*, 4.

45. *Ibid.*

46. Ecomusicologist Gernot Böhme redefines music as that which

occurs when the subject of an acoustic event is the atmosphere as such, that is, when listening as such, not listening to something is the issue. . . . Music in this case need not be something made by humans. . . . In a listening which does not leap over tones, voices, sounds to the sources where they might stem from, listeners will sense tones, voices, sounds as modifications of their own being. Human beings who listen in this way are dangerously open; they release themselves into the world and can therefore be struck by acoustic events. . . . Thunderclaps can shatter them, scratching noises can threaten them, a cutting tone can damage them. Listening is a being-beside-yourself (*Außer-sich-sein*); it can for this reason be the joyful experience of discovering oneself to be alive. (Böhme, “Acoustic Atmospheres,” 17–18)

and the larger geographic space.”⁴⁷ Contrary to the basic architectural functions of laying firm foundations and providing shelter, the frame of *The Place* conducts outer turbulence indoors and listening infinitely outward. The totally enclosed interior fills entirely with exterior sensations, and it floods the bewildered senses of its inhabitants with boundless focus. Visitors find themselves immersed in volatile geography without occupying territory. A chaos, or chaosmos, of sound and light dissolves the fundamental borders between interior/exterior and house/wilderness. Sensations that fill *The Place* are precisely sonifications of solar, seismic, geomagnetic, and meteorologic change in measures recorded by various weather stations across Alaska and conveyed to a sound-generating system of computer synthesizers and loudspeakers. More precisely, they are audifications, or sonifications of inaudible phenomena in nonmusical media.⁴⁸

Adams designed computer programs to convert solar and geophysical activity into “white noise” (and its optical counterpart “white light”) for subsequent filtering into frequencies of pitch and light within range of human hearing. “Day and Night Choirs” swell the atmosphere of this Arctic ecosystem with an “audible light,” or a “slow sweep of synthetic noise [that] rises and falls continuously in relation to the rhythms of day and night and the height of the sun above or below the horizon.”⁴⁹ Passing through two harmonic prisms, this noise-sweep refracts into two emerging “choirs of voice-like tones.” The “Day Choir” intones a “rising harmonic series” of “bright, ‘major’-sounding harmonies” whose pitch is tuned to the degrees the sun rises above the polar horizon on its annual arc over Fairbanks, whereas the “Night Choir” hums an inverted “subharmonic series” in “‘minor’-sounding clouds of sound” whose pitch is tuned to the degrees the sun falls below the polar horizon over the course of solar night.⁵⁰ However “voice-like” these choirs are, they fill the air with an atonal, inhuman song. Rippling tectonic seizures, or “Earth Drums,” and shimmering solar storms, or “Aurora Bells,” add inestimable, otherworldly dimensions to this song as they vibrate randomly across vast space above and below the Alaska plateau. Synthesizing seismic data into low-frequency rumblings of white noise, the “Earth Drums” reverberate through the lower, atmospheric layers of *The Place*. Conversely, the “Aurora Bells” rattle the upper, stratospheric layers with pulsating auditions of the polar magnetosphere.

Synthetic lighting accompanies synthetic sounding so that the relatively small space of *The Place* (ten by twenty feet with a ceiling sloping from fifteen to thirteen feet and empty except for a small bench in the center) creates an Arctic ecosystem in microcosm. The artificially illuminated interior resonates with real rays of sun as they light

47. Adams, *Place Where You Go to Listen*, 8.

48. A sonification might, for example, sound an approaching solar flare in erratic changes in the tone, pitch, and rhythm of a classical piano piece; see Frazier, “Sonification.” Or it may compress and densify environmental evolution over great periods of time in a short musical clip, as does Penn State’s sonification of a data set of four hundred thousand years of Antarctic ice sheet changes; see Ballora and Kennedy, “Changes in Antarctic Ice.”

49. Adams, *Place Where You Go to Listen*, 118.

50. *Ibid.*, 121.

up Fairbanks at varying angles of elevation over the course of a solar year. Contiguous glass panels comprise an opaque wall of windows that a fiber-optic cable is programmed to illuminate in variance with the different sun angles. Through the cable, chromatic gradients of white light filter and project onto the windows that, in turn, become the “Day and Night Fields” of *The Place*. Their noisy luminosities add to the noisy sonorities of the “Day and Night Choirs.” One who visits *The Place* at midnight on the winter solstice will find herself engulfed in a light-mix of the midnight blue and violet of “Day and Night Fields” and a sound-mix of the low-pitched droning and effervescent tinkling of “Day and Night Choirs.” Conversely, one who visits at noon on the summer solstice will be engulfed in a light-mix of “maximum yellow” and “maximum cyan” and a sound mix of high-pitched ringing and slightly dampening humming. One who visits *The Place* will at any time be exposed to impulsive shifts in sound set off by earthquakes and auroras as well as by daily inclemencies of weather that Adams further programmed into the mix.

However complex and involved it may be, the technological infrastructure of *The Place* is hidden from view. Adams minimizes evidence of human handiwork to maximize sensations of Sila’s unmediated presence. Having built *The Place* for public navigation, he withdraws to the margins to let the process of Silarjuarpomorphization take hold of the listener with no further input on his part. Like the shamanic initiate who finds his or her way to *Naalagiaġvik*, every visitor to *The Place* enjoys the prospect of becoming moved and honed by *silam inua*. How does it feel to undergo this process? When I visited *The Place* on the 2011 summer solstice, it was thrumming with high-pitched ringing and radiating with floor-to-ceiling, yellowing-to-blueing luminescence. Perturbed by vertigo, I anchored myself on the bench at the center of the room. After a few drowning minutes, variable streams of sound disentangled themselves and compelled me to move about in search of directional flows. Instead of direction, I discovered dimensions—depths of intermittent rumbling and heights of tiny trilling as well as boundlessly vibrating parts of my own dis-organizing body. Floating along wavy ground, my feet reconnected with my ear, and looking hopelessly into the windows of colored light for cues to where I was going, my eyes became all ears. When others entered the room, my solo travels became communal, though no glances or words were exchanged. Together, we became the ear people, brought together in observant confusion.⁵¹

In the words of phenomenological anthropologist Tim Ingold, who has spent time among Arctic and sub-Arctic peoples, *The Place* provokes visitors to “dwell within a weather-world” and to “inhabit the open.”⁵² To inhabit the open, he explains, is to inhabit a world that is not ready-made but that is “continually coming into being . . . a world, that is, of formative and transformative processes” (117). Listening *here* is

51. For a glimpse of *The Place* see the author’s video, “The Place Where You Go to Listen,” February 14, 2016, YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=xePWRFrO2JA&feature=youtu.be.

52. Ingold, *Being Alive*, 115 (hereafter cited parenthetically in the text).

listening, feeling, moving—becoming alive *in*—this weather-world and changing with its climatic processes.⁵³ As Ingold observes, “To perceive and act in the weather-world is to align one’s own conduct to the celestial movements of sun, moon and stars, to the rhythmic alternations of night and day and of the seasons, rain and shine, sunlight and shade” (132). Inhabiting such openness is radically disorienting—“light floods, sound drowns out . . . and feeling carries us away. Light, sound and feeling tear at our moorings”—and yet it is also enlivening: “immersed in the fluxes of the medium, the body is enlightened, ensounded, enraptured” (134–35).⁵⁴

Silarqupaa, or To Go Outside and Wayfind with Inuksuit

Having experimented with framing the Arctic environment to resonate resoundingly indoors, whether in the concert hall of *Earth and the Great Weather* or in the synthesizer-lined room of *The Place*, Adams began thinking about composing instrumental music for performing outdoors. Each of his experiments attempts to conduct listening along different conduits to Sila with accruing *Silatuniq*. But, arguably, his most radical experiments are those that place the listener outside the architecture of the sound chamber and onto an open field of noise.

Inuksuit (“for 9 to 99 percussionists”) scores a series of oscillating, wavelike rhythms for breathy, chiming, pounding, and rattling percussion instruments that sound not so much *like* as *with* those atmospheric forces that already animate the performance site. Adams had no specific site in mind when he composed this piece, but his score comprises an array of elemental wave patterns that, wherever performed, amplify whatever ambient noise happens to weather the performance site. “Each performance of *Inuksuit* is different, determined by the size of the ensemble and the specific instruments used, by the topology and vegetation of the site—even by the songs of the local birds.” Though not site-specific, *Inuksuit* is nonetheless “haunted” by what Adams *was* thinking at the time of composing—namely, “visions of the melting of the polar ice, the rising of the seas, and what may remain of humanity’s presence after the waters recede.”⁵⁵ Each performance of *Inuksuit* affects the performance with an idea of extreme climate change, so that even audiences who are familiar with the surroundings must navigate the music with a new ear.

Inuksuit dispenses with classical architecture, but it retains a minimalist frame for filling music with Sila. A primary framing device is the score for drums (tom-toms and bass drum) that Adams composes in the shape of *inuksuit*. *Inuksuit*, he explains, “are the

53. Ingold writes, “Rather than thinking of ourselves only as observers, picking our way around the objects about the ground of a ready-formed world, we must imagine ourselves in the first place as participants, each immersed with the whole of our being in the currents of world-in-formation: in the sunlight we see in, in the rain we hear and the wind we feel in” (129).

54. “We may, in practice, be anchored to the ground, but it is not light, sound or feeling that holds us down. On the contrary, they contrive to sweep us off our feet” (134).

55. Adams, composer’s notes, *Inuksuit*.

stone sentinels constructed over the centuries by the Inuit in the windswept expanses of the Arctic.” He scores sixty-six different *inuksuit* of four different shapes—“stacks, windows, double windows, and pyramids”—to correspond to the shapes of real *inuksuit* he observed in Alaska’s far north (fig. 1).⁵⁶ These figurative *inuksuit* frame literal blocks of sound for shaping a virtual ecology of noise. “Stacks” and “pyramids” frame layers of musical staves scored for differing tempos, while “windows” and “double windows” frame blocks of silence to open the play to drifting breeze, birdsong, and other, dynamic atmospheric din.

Adams’s instrumental *inuksuit* do not evoke a musical landscape so much as call one into existence through a spontaneous orchestration of environmental effects. Like real *inuksuit*, the literal translation of which is “to act in the capacity of the human,” Adams’s *inuksuit* are human conduits to greater-than-human worlds of possibility and perception. The drum scores, together with the scores of elemental wave patterns for wind-making instruments, shape human-made noise into resounding interaction with Silarjuapomorphizing forces that naturally and already inhabit this place. For audiences who wander through the performance site, the scores of windows frame into view overlooked and under-heard breathing, pulsating, resonating life-worlds.

The other major piece of the frame, the “Event Map,” outlines the interactive movements of three groups of performers and their process of circulating and sounding the performance site. The performance begins when Group 1 commences with “Breathing” (megaphone, bullhorn, microphone, and trumpet or horn), followed a few minutes later by Group 2 with “Wind” (rubbed stones, maracas, rattles, shakers, sandblocks, rice in drum, or other friction sounds), which is, in turn, followed slightly more quickly by Group 3 with a different performance of “Wind” (whirled tubes, bullroarer, or other aeolian instruments). Once “Breathing” and “Wind” set the place into (com)motion, Group 1 performs a blast of “Calls” (conch shell trumpet, Tibetan trumpet, airhorn, plastic horn, other horn or trumpet) that Groups 2 and 3 answer, one after the other, with tom-toms and bass drum and with suspended cymbals and tam-tam. Groups 2 and 3 play the staggered drum scores of “Inuksuit (rising)” for nine minutes, followed by those of “Waves” and “Inuksuit (falling),” each for another nine minutes, while Group 1 accompanies them with a sequence of “Waves” (siren, timpano, wind machine, or water gong) and “Clangs” (handbell, suspended bell, chimes, temple bell, or Tibetan cymbals). After the drums finish rising and falling, the first two groups again play the “Wind” in sequence (triangle or small bell(s), sizzle cymbal) and the third group lastly plays “Birdsongs” (orchestra bells with optional piccolo parts).⁵⁷

The “Event” sounds a seventy-four-minute noise-wave that rolls across and beyond the space circumscribed by the performers. The first ten minutes of “Breathing,” “Wind,” and “Calls” spirit this space with animating auditions as all three groups (of up

56. David Shimoni, “*songbirdsongs and Inuksuit*,” 254, 257.

57. For an outline of Adams’s “Event Map,” see Schick, “Sacred Noise, Sacred Places,” 100.

Tom-toms
and Bass Drum

Double Window 1

Figure 1. "Double Window 1." From Shimoni, "songbirdsongs and Inuksuit," 257

to thirty-three apiece) move outward successively in widening, concentric circles, stopping at nine equidistant points on the way to their performance stations. Moving and stopping on their way, the performers map a territory of shape-shifting sensations with evolving dimensions of awareness. Once at their stations, they commence playing their *Inuksuit* parts, becoming the instruments of a tempestuous Sila. Audience members simultaneously become nomads, drifting from *inukshuk* to *inukshuk* and taking their bearings amid the turbulence. Together, performers and audience members partake in

an intensive form of listening that involves heuristic “wayfinding,” wherein their “knowledge of the environment undergoes *continuous* formation in the very course of their moving about in it.”⁵⁸

Inuksuit situates audiences outdoors where they become exposed to the outside of music, which is to say music filled with Sila. At once noisemakers and landmarks, the scores of *Inuksuit* and the events of Sila derange and reorient the acoustic terrain so that listeners must learn on site how to navigate by ear and conduct their wayfinding in tune with the fluctuations of their environmental surroundings. I found myself undergoing a process of becoming nomad while attending the debut of *Inuksuit* at the Banff Centre on the 2009 summer solstice. Despite having lived many years in these mountains, I quickly began to flounder in *Inuksuit*’s strangely reverberating landscape. Delayed by a passing storm, the performance commenced at dusk on a wet, sloping lawn overlooking the winding river, emerging peaks, and surrounding forests of the postcard-famous Bow Valley. Calamitous waves of breathing, clanging, drumming called *everything* into listening, including things that had no sound, like the clearing rain, dewing grass, retreating storm clouds, thickening darkness, glittering stars, and meandering shades of fellow listeners. Instead of settling on the horizon, my vision became engulfed in a misty, shimmering entanglement of the “near faraway”—dewing grass and darkening mountains—that the music’s tiny chimes and mighty clangs brought *together* into view. Lacking all perspective in this limitless intoning of intensely weathering micro- and macroecologies, I gave up looking for Banff’s familiar vista and began listening on my feet, seeing with my ears, and obscurely feeling my way with spontaneously sprouting sense organs.

Inuksuit has since been performed all over the world, sounding Arctic extremes of climate change in places as disparate and as distant from Alaska as Chicago, Toronto, Berkeley, Lisbon, the Hague, Melbourne, and Belo Horizonte, Brazil. In most every case, these performances have taken place in city parks or cultivated green spaces like the Banff Centre’s lawn, including Pittsburgh’s Lake Elizabeth Park, Libbey Park in Ojai, California, Seattle’s Seward Park, and Cleveland’s Lake View Cemetery. One outstanding exception is the New York premiere of *Inuksuit* (and finale to Eighth Blackbird’s Tune-In Festival) on February 15, 2011, in the Park Avenue Armory. As Alex Ross, music critic for the *New Yorker*, describes it, the Armory’s Drill Hall is a “raw industrial cavern with the booming acoustics of a Gothic cathedral . . . [and] no encrustation of classical tradition”⁵⁹ To Adams, it presented an indoor space that was possibly large enough to resound with outdoor expansiveness. “More like a man-made canyon than a concert hall,” the Armory supplied an array of niches: “the main floor of the Drill Hall,” “catwalks on all sides,” “hallways that connect to smaller rooms at the front of the building.” Performers were able to set up their stations and set off “an engulfing, complexly

58. Ingold, *Perception of the Environment*, 230.

59. Ross, “Reverberations.”

layered noise . . . that seemed almost to force listeners into motion.”⁶⁰ The “reverberation” proved voluminous enough to move the thirteen hundred people in attendance on a dispersive breath of noise that connected everyone to the immanent drift of the place.

After *Inuksuit*, Adams worked for a while “only on pieces designed to be played outdoors.”⁶¹ But the power of the Armory performance to affect masses of listeners with an awareness of their surroundings that, in turn, affected their surroundings by shaping a connective drift eventually inspired him to compose music for performing in large gathering spaces indoors or in outdoor atria like that of the Hearst Plaza, where *Sila: The Breath of the World* premiered.

Silauip Aulaninga, or Shaping an Ear for Climate Change (Conclusion)

As goes the Arctic, so goes the Earth.

—John Luther Adams

Before composing *Inuksuit* and while still at work building *The Place Where You Go to Listen*, Adams was already planning *Sila: The Breath of the World*.⁶² His idea, at the time, was to construct a massive “weather piece” that would comprise a vast multitude of “places where you go to listen” for capturing, intoning, and illuminating global climate change: “Like *The Place Where You Go to Listen*, I imagine *Sila* as an invitation to heighten our awareness and, also, to contemplate our influence on the world. This work will celebrate the complex forces of weather and climate, transforming data from stations around the earth into an enveloping continuum of tone and color.”⁶³ Each station would have its own voice tuned to the breath of its geographic location. Heard together around the space of the work, these voices would create a virtual choir that sings with the breath of the world. Within *Sila*, each station would be illuminated in its own wash of color. Seen together, these colors would evoke a composite atmosphere of the whole earth. As the temperature at each station rose and fell, the voice of that place would rise and fall in pitch, and the color of light would become “hotter” or “cooler.” Changes in wind and sky conditions would further modulate the sound and light.

But after performing *Inuksuit* around the globe, Adams began to reimagine *Sila* as an outdoor performance piece. “Like *Inuksuit*,” he projected, “*Sila* will be a site-determined work. The number of performers will vary, and the music will be shaped in response to the unique features of each performance site.”⁶⁴

60. *Ibid.*

61. “Ten Questions for John Luther Adams.”

62. Adams posted the comment “As goes the Arctic, so goes the Earth,” on Facebook, February 18, 2016 www.facebook.com/john.l.adams.9?fref=ts, in response to new data on global warming from NASA and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration as reported in Mooney, “Scientists Are Floored.”

63. Adams, *Place Where You Go to Listen*, 38.

64. John Luther Adams, pers. comm., September 13, 2012.

Like *Inuksuit*, this revised *Sila* explores ways of scoring and arranging a noisy battery of instruments for sounding otherwise inaudible forces and unattended surroundings. But if *Inuksuit* features primarily percussion instruments, *Sila* features “choirs” of woodwinds, brass, and voices. The “broader instrumental palette” of *Sila* recalls the instrumental use of voices in *Earth and the Great Weather* to augment and rise above the weather-texturing vibrations of the wind harp and strings. Yet unlike the voices of *Earth*, those of *Sila* speak no text. Instead, they blow long breaths and low wails at crosswinds to those blown by the woodwinds, brass, and whatever natural winds spontaneously wind their way into the performance.

Adams scales down his original idea of *Sila* to a “less grandiose” production with “a minimum of 42 musicians” and a single site for each performance instead of a global continuum of musical production as originally planned. But his aim is no less ambitious. “It’s my hope,” he declares, “that *Sila: The Breath of the World* may inspire us to more ecological listening and deeper, more creative thinking about our relationship with this miraculous world we inhabit.”⁶⁵ Even in its modest final form, *Sila* advances the idea of music as a concerted provocation to everyone with ears to listen and think with the inhabiting spirit of where they find themselves, here and now, amid the larger dis/composing climate of infinite becoming.

To put this ambition to the extreme test, Adams scheduled the world première of *Sila* to take place in the cultural heart of a global city, as far removed from the wild and warming Arctic coast as could be. Moreover, unlike the “man-made canyon” of Park Avenue Armory’s Drill Hall, Lincoln Center’s Hearst Plaza houses a coiffed courtyard of trimly framed acoustics. Yet even here, *Sila* circulates auditions and visions of uncontrollable climate change. Voices and trumpets blow and wail across the green, stir the surface of the Paul Milstein Pool, and recoil against the ramparts of adjacent buildings in vibrating concert with the city’s undulating clamor and the weathering worlds beyond. With these coiffed surroundings and for these urbane crowds, *Sila* molds an event of ecological unfolding whose sounding escapes the urban grid.

The scoring of *Sila: The Breath of the World* may, like that of *Inuksuit*, be “haunted by visions of the melting of the polar ice, the rising of the seas, and what may remain of humanity’s presence after the waters recede.” But the Arctic front that each work delivers is one that dwells in the place of performing, which is much closer to home than most people think. Adams believes that “music can provide a sounding model for the renewal of human consciousness and culture.”⁶⁶ The renewal he has in mind is ecological, and it is long overdue. Yet the acquiring of *Silatuniq*, or wisdom that comes with learning how to inhabit extreme climate change, is, as Inuit know, a long-lived process of immersion, perception, and adaptation. Little by little, Adams pushes us out the door into the cosmic storm that has always been our firmament and that we bunker our

65. Ibid.

66. Adams, *Place Where You Go to Listen*, 1.

senses against at our peril. *Sila: The Breath of the World* blasts straight to the core of our reified, urbanized, anthropomorphized universe, and for an enduring, eventful moment, exposes us to the larger chaotic reality of our greater climatic becoming.

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