

Athens Conversation:
On Ethnographic Listening and Comparative Acoustemologies¹

Steven Feld and Panayotis Panopoulos

Panos: In the presentations that you did these last two days², and in presentations I've heard you give on other occasions as well, you move through different projects that you have worked on over the last forty years. This is not standard for anthropologists to do at all, is it? Typically you have anthropologists working in one particular geographical area or field. Listening to you, yesterday and the day before, you were saying that it was an important insight for you, moving from New Guinea to other places...

Steve:...it was the most threatening thing that ever happened to me!...

Panos...but it was important in many ways, methodologically, and theoretically ... would you like to elaborate?

Steve: I had the idea, I suppose, when I started my work in the mid 1970s, that I would always be an ethnographer, and a theorist, of the world of Bosavi, in Papua New Guinea³. I assumed that I would have this ethnographic place, and that over time even if I spent less time there physically, this is what I would always be writing about – I would always be thickening, historicizing, developing, and following a story from the place where I started with it. And instead I had a rupture after twenty-five years. Those first twenty-five years were fantastic, and it was incredibly threatening and challenging to me to think that they were over.

And then, when they were over, or ending, I had this amazing experience in Greece. That is when I realized that I could go to a place where I didn't know the language, or any of the languages, where I didn't know the people, where I didn't know the history, but where I could just put on my equipment and engage as someone who really cares about close listening. So the challenge posed was this: what can I do with caring about listening, plus knowing sound technology, plus having expert local contacts? How can that lead to new ways to theorize anthropology in sound, both in sound recording and in conversation?

The very first time I turned on my recorder here in Greece was in the Jumaya market, with Charlie Keil standing next to me. And the first thing I heard and first thing I recorded was the perfume salesman with his very stylized and distinctive vocal sounds of selling, and his boombox with Stevie Wonder singing "Isn't She Lovely" in the background!⁴ For me, just then, in a flash, everything I had read or thought about globalization, about irony, about place, about remoteness, about encapsulation, about the materiality of the senses – it was all there. And at the end of the day it was still all there - on the DAT tape. So the idea emerged, boldly, that maybe I don't have to find another place to do what I did in New Guinea, to obsess about one thing deeply for twenty-five years.

Maybe it's possible to inquire in and through sound in other ways. This is what opened to me in my initial experience in Greece. It opened up slowly because I resisted it for a while, even while I was making those first recordings.

I was so nostalgic for New Guinea and worried that all of a sudden I was nobody and nothing when it came to ethnography. Luckily I had another intellectual project. After working in Papua New Guinea for ten years I started to engage with schizophonia and the "world music" question⁵. So when I came to Greece at the end of 1999 I was already deeply involved in that other project, thinking, well, if I can't do Papua New Guinea I'll do "world music" as a second project. So I didn't think, oh, ok, perfect, I'll make Greece my next obsession, like New Guinea. I realized that New Guinea was New Guinea and there would never be anything like it. But learning that there are other things for an ethnographer of sound to do, and that it doesn't always have to be thick, deep, obsessive ethnography was what I grasped here for the first time, in Greece.

Also I began to grasp that there are other kinds of productive dialogues to be had, dialogues stimulated and mediated by sound recording. That was the general insight. The more specific insight from that trip concerned the question of how, when, and why birds are like bells, or bells like birds, questions about possible connections between sound ecology and cosmology that linked Europe to New Guinea. In the space of two weeks in Greece I was often listening to goat and sheep bells, church and town bells, carnival and festival bells. And all of that made me ask myself how and why this kind of listening was similar or different to listening to birds, insects, water, ambiances in the New Guinea rainforest. That was a pretty fabulous little window that opened!

I've loved the visits here and everywhere in Europe, although they were too late in time for me to become a real ethnographer of any of these places. It's only through the generosity of Nicola Scaldaferrri in Italy, of you here in Greece, of Annemette Kirkegaard in Denmark, of Hans Weisethaunet in Norway, and of Helmi Jarviluoma in Finland that I have been able to do so many European collaborations in radio, CD recording, and video to explore anthropologies in sound on different terrain⁶. These have been as rewarding as anything I did in Papua New Guinea, because the work equally involves new knowledge, new ways of knowing, new conversations and recordings to probe what sound is and why it matters.

Panos: But after some five years of more sporadic wanderings in Europe you started a new long-term project, in Ghana, which in so many ways is different to what you did in Papua New Guinea. Different in terms of your knowledge of the languages, in terms of working in a huge city -compared to working in a small rainforest community-, or in terms of the experience and life histories of the people, people who have lived all over the world and are involved in a cosmopolitan project, in terms of music making, and so on. So how would you compare these two experiences?

Steve: What I never had in Papua New Guinea or Europe, despite many amazing

and lucky experiences, is that I wasn't playing music as part of the research process. In my first week in Africa I met an African musician with whom I instantly bonded through a conversation about John Coltrane and all of this music that I grew up with—a conversation that took me back to the music and politics of my youth. And in time, following that conversation, I discovered that I could re-listen to that 60s and 70s music, with Africans, and learn about how it was heard differently, but similarly in some ways too, in very different social circumstances. And I discovered that I could learn a local instrument, and again in time, that I could have that conversation about Coltrane not just in words, but I could have that conversation by playing “free jazz,” experimental improvised music, with African musicians. And that led to opportunities to perform, and tour, and record with those musicians, which also meant coming to understand something about the ethical world of musical labor as they understood and lived it.

Getting close to these remarkably cosmopolitan subjectivities was a new and profoundly rich kind of experience for me because it involved ways of knowing that were musically transmitted, grasped, sensed, felt, shared. So this work in Ghana has reached towards new dialogic and collaborative highs for me, forms of epistemic and material equity that go beyond what I was able to do in Papua New Guinea. And through their musical cosmopolitanism, Nii Noi Nortey and Nii Otoo Annan have really kept our conversations focused on hearing struggle.⁷ Without being in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, they related the Coltrane story and civil rights in the 60s US context to colonial and independence history struggles in the 60s West African context. They felt the music to be both deeply political and deeply spiritual, full of fire and contemplation...

Panos: ...and experimental at the same time...

Steve: ...very much. And that's been a huge inspiration for me. What's so clearly cosmopolitan about their outlook is that they could also imagine how I, as a seventeen year-old white kid, could also have had a life-changing experience hearing John Coltrane in 1966. And indeed, that's exactly what happened, when, as a young musician, I heard Coltrane perform and was so inspired to study music and spirituality, music and political struggle. The other cosmopolitan opening here was in the ways that Nii Noi and Nii Otoo encouraged me to learn an African bass instrument, to experiment with it, hybridize it, and take the challenge to play it with them. They gave me so much guidance and encouragement and support in a musician-to-musician way, and that is what took this way beyond the idea of a standard ethnographic project, and made it so much a cosmopolitan project about listening to histories of listening, about knowing in and through sound.

When I first met Nii Noi, I told him about my night of hearing Coltrane in November 1966, when I was in high school...

Panos: ...live?...

Steve: ...yes, live, at Temple University, in Philadelphia. An unbelievable concert. I told Nii Noi that I went to this concert with my classmate, saxophonist Michael Brecker, and that as we drove home that night, to Melrose Park, the first suburb north of the city, where we lived, that Mike said to me “it’s going to take me twenty years to figure out what he did.” I don’t think it actually took him twenty years. But he did figure it out. And I remember saying to him, in response: “I’ll never figure out what he did, but I’ll always remember it, it’s always going to be with me in some kind of way.” And for years, every time I would run into Michael, at a gig, concert, club, phone call, email, there was some kind of way that this conversation we had in his little red Corvair came back into the picture.

Then, this last year, in October, 2014, an amazing thing happened. The tapes from that concert were discovered and the record was released. It’s called Offering, 2 CDs, Coltrane live at Temple University⁸. I had to wait forty-eight years to hear that concert again! I instantly bought two copies of the CD, and sent one to Nii Noi in Ghana. And two weeks later, when I called him on the phone, do you know what he said? He had listened to it continuously, and was dazzled by it. And he said to me, “you know, Prof, this is why we met. It was divined.”

That would only come out of the mouth of an African. I don’t mean to caricature. What I mean is that this is something about being cosmopolitan and being deeply engaged with a way of thinking about things we might call “coincidence” or “accident” or “clairvoyance”— which sees and feels the nature of connectedness. So I asked Nii Noi: “did you listen to the way Coltrane played ‘My Favorite Things’ on soprano sax? It sounds like a *shenai*, sounds like a *zurna*, that sound he was going for, no?” We were having this conversation about this, as we had for years, because Nii Noi plays *alghaita*, the north African double reed related to the *shenai* and *zurna*, and he knows that East-West crossroads sound very well, and was very interested in Coltrane’s studies of African and Indian music. And he said an amazing thing to me: “you know, Prof, Coltrane was world music before they called it ‘world music’.” Great insight, no?

Again, for me, this was an important way to grasp the thinking of a cosmopolitan, but from below, and through this West African detour, of being on the margins of the mainstream. That was quite special. He said: “Coltrane was the struggle. There, here, everywhere. That’s why we met.”

So ten years of the Accra project have been filled with powerful dialogues like that, revelatory stories that captivate me. That’s why I wrote a book about and full of stories. It’s the most polyphonic kind of ethnography and anthropology that I’ve done, surely the most intervocal, the most dialogic, the most collaborative, where biography, history, ethnography and memoir are most musically integrated.

Panos: It was very interesting, what you said yesterday coming home from dinner, when you mentioned that the book was well received by African writers.

Can you say something about that?

Steve: I've been very lucky; I've experienced a very generous response to the book in the way of excellent reviews and a prize⁹, and I'm grateful for that. There were serious risks that I took in the book, putting so much of theory and history in footnotes. But many people recognized the power of just foregrounding stories in action for theorizing contemporary vernacular cosmopolitanism. I'm particularly heartened by African responses that appreciate how the book was so dialogic. Anthropology is often a negative term in Africa, immediately suspect, associated with the colonial project. Even many West African academics say that good technical anthropology, critiques of development, neoliberalism, and the state, for example, still have a colonial edge. There is often a sharp critical response to the British style of empirical writing, the objectivist lens, where Africans are often summarized but rarely speak. So what my African readers have appreciated is the way the book gives space to the agency and voice of ordinary and extraordinary Africans.

Panos: Apart from the book you have produced many other publications in CDs and DVDs. The CDs¹⁰ seem particularly to be something that could have a much wider circulation. Does this happen? Are they part of a more general interest? Is there a wider audience for them?

Steve: The project, in all media, has multiple audiences – and this is what is so interesting to me. Those audiences include people from the worlds of music, film, African studies, from anthropology, particularly of the arts, of media, and of course of new modernities and vernacular cosmopolitanisms.

When I began in Ghana, I asked my interlocutors, “what do you want out of working with me?” Without hesitation they said, “we want our music to be well documented and we want to get paid for it!” And it took a little time but I gradually showed them that this could be done very professionally and that they could get paid, have their work documented as they wished, and have ownership and control of the royalties. Establishing trust, both through playing together musically, and doing CDs and DVDs each year, was the main agenda for five years. During this time I didn't write a word about Accra, except to collaborate on liner notes. So the media work in audio and video really has a foundational role in the project; it is not at all a matter of secondary illustration. Doing the CDs and DVDs is what authorized me to do the book.

This was very different than going to Papua New Guinea and doing research to write a dissertation, which then became a book. Ghana was a very different kind of experience because of my age and position. I had already written many things, and had a job, so I had the luxury of taking the time to focus on recordings and focus on playing music, without demand to publish or write, and certainly not in mainstream journals. Additionally, all of the Ghana work was not funded by a standard research agency, it was funded by my professorial position in Norway. So that's how I had money to rent an apartment, pay plane tickets,

musicians' salaries, produce recordings, everything; basically I had a second job and used the salary as a grant. Anyway, I was turned down for all the academic grants that I applied for, likely because I was not an established African researcher, but also because I was old by fieldwork standards, having started this work at age fifty-five.

All of this is to say that the CDs and DVDs have a very special place in the project for me. Some of them have done very well with audiences that cross-over from academic to popular; a few have been reviewed in academic journals but more often they have been reviewed in popular music magazines.

Panos: I realize that you are interested in reviews in jazz magazines all around the world...

Steve: ...yes, because this "global jazz" thing has really opened up and I very much want the Accra story to be part of this expanding conversation, much of which is taking place "unofficially" in jazz magazines.¹¹ One of the major developments in recent jazz history is acknowledgement that an American-centric or US nationalist framework for jazz history is both ideologically imperial and historically inaccurate. What is generally called "jazz" has multiple overlapping sources and interactions, in terms of social imaginaries and musical practices in collective improvisation. Many of these musical forms and practices moved and spread through the world in diverse and complicated ways, as did perceptions of race and space, whether we are talking about European capitals or about Shanghai or Accra. The story of jazz starting unitarily in New Orleans and moving up the river now reads more like a Walt Disney fairytale version of the real richness of jazz history.

So a book like Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra is part of a movement to de-centralize, de-imperialize, and de-nationalize the core issues and assumptions about jazz history. The only people who really hate my book are hyper American jazz nationalists. And the ones who hate it really hate it! They see it as a deeply threatening story. "Who are these Africans to walk in on the Coltrane thing?" is the kind of reaction coming from that camp.

Panos: Perhaps they wouldn't feel that threatened if somehow this kind of music you've recorded and documented was put instead under the label or rubric of "world music." I've been thinking a lot about the story that your work in general, both the book, and the CDs and DVDs, tells about the relation of jazz and world music, the use of labels and rubrics as something more than walking into a store and finding what you'd like to listen to. I'm thinking about what your work says, compared to let's say other stories coming from Africa like the Benda Bilili! film¹², which, in my way of viewing it, relates a success story of how some poor people from Africa made it in the world market. I've been thinking about that opposition, and about the importance of the rubric under which you put the music.

Steve: This is what's fascinating about studying new formations of

cosmopolitanism. It really exposes the fault lines of studying music as a history of genres and styles. Musicology is so rooted in this notion of stylistic evolution, that music is a “what begat what” of styles and genres. The “world music” story was important because we were all able to intervene in this style and genre discourse and talk about the market, to show how a market was invented to amalgamate things that had been previously called by multiple genre and style labels, like “international,” “folk,” “exotic,” “primitive,” “ethnic,” and so forth. All at a moment in the 80s and 90s, when the music market, like the global economy as a whole, was expansive, the CD business was booming – before digital delivery transformed the industry. That 80s and 90s period was when the market took on every new niche, and “world” was a major space for amalgamation and inclusion. Deconstructing “world music” as a market history was an important move that many of us were able to participate in and clarify, intellectually, during the 80s and 90s.¹³

Of course for some people, music made in Africa and by Africans, no matter how historically “traditional,” no matter how currently “modern,” must be “world music.” A band called “Accra Trane Station” surely blurs the labels, confronting the idea that “world,” “jazz” and even “world jazz” might be shallow glosses for a contemporary black-inspired but racially inclusive cosmopolitan, improvised, and experimental music made in Africa, and acknowledging multiple roots and affinities.

My recordings of the Por Por car horn music presented people with other genre issues, as it was sometimes categorized as “world music,” or “folk” and “traditional,” but never “jazz.” Despite its astonishing modernity, there has been an attempt to keep it in the realm of the non-modern, which perhaps signals nothing more than it is neither electric nor amplified.

I was not surprised that the Yearbook for Traditional Music reviewed the Por Por CDs but not the Accra Trane Station CDs. But, not to portray them wrongly, I was pleasantly surprised and pleased that they reviewed Nii Otoo Annan’s CDs Bufo Variations and Ghana Sea Blues. That’s a good example of expansive thinking about “traditional.” Trevor Wiggins, who knows a great deal about traditional xylophone music in northern Ghana, reviewed Bufo Variations and recognized that it was clearly the work of a virtuosic musician who has tremendous understanding of traditional forms but had obviously taken them in very creative directions. I thought that was a generous review and I brought it to Nii Otoo in Accra last February; he was very pleased to get that from someone known in Ghana to be a very serious traditional music specialist. Ghana Sea Blues was reviewed by Amanda Villepastour, a specialist of Yoruba drum traditions of Nigeria and Cuba. She said the music was more light than virtuosic. However, she called it a refreshing CD in terms of what is being produced by the “world music” industry. Nii Otoo was also very happy with that.

Panos: I’m thinking a lot, since yesterday evening, after your Borderline Festival talk, about the impression that I got –and I talked about it with some other people who attended- the impression I got from the different examples you gave. I don’t

know how to interpret the different impressions from the various ethnographic examples, but I had the feeling that while you were talking about New Guinea, you were totally absorbed. And when you came to the other examples, there was a kind of –I would put it in many quotation marks- a kind of “absent-mindedness.” I thought at some point that perhaps this had to do with some kind of nostalgia, and the emotional involvement this meant for you, perhaps, or, at some other point I had the interpretation that cosmopolitanism, and what happens in Ghana, does not need the absorption on the part of the ethnographer that was necessary for the study of the Kaluli people. So I don't know, I might be completely wrong, in both significations...

Steve: ...not at all Panos, I think that is extremely accurate and really insightful. And I know what it's about. And it's something that I feel very strongly. I think that inside me, deeply, I'm defensive and protective about Papua New Guinea because I know that people often respond by thinking to themselves: “it's so primitive.” And I have worked hard, for many years, both in writing and speaking, and particularly through recordings, to try to open a window into the profound sophistication, depth, and complexity of this so-called “simple” society for all kinds of readers and listeners. So what you sensed is my emotional connection with the material and the people, yes, but it's also a political conviction.

This also has to do with the context of coming here to Greece, and presenting the lecture at an avant-garde and new music festival, held at an institution of very high culture, the Onassis Cultural Centre, with an audience of people who are very cultivated and sophisticated in different kinds of ways. So if there is any place where I walk a thin line between statement and overstatement in the attempt to communicate a particular depth to the material it is certainly Papua New Guinea. Speaking in Europe about European carnival customs and bells is different. For a Greek audience the sounding of bells is not exotic. Nor is a sounding of globalized music practices like African jazz. Speaking in Athens, the place where the words “cosmos” and “polites” were joined together long ago, yes, of course you're absolutely right, there's something much more familiar about the Europe and Africa parts of the show and certain things can be left aside a little more easily. I feel like I don't have to work so hard to communicate about Africans who can simultaneously dialogue with J.S. Bach with one hand, and with the other, dialogue with Elvin Jones. But to present a bunch of half-naked people, dressed up in feathers, people who are remote politically, remote historically, remote geographically, that's very far from people's experiences here in Greece, and it takes more work to help people understand why I am as seriously engaged with musical subjectivities in Papua New Guinea as I am with those in Greece, or Italy, or Norway or Finland, or West Africa. But I think your reading of it, your feeling of what was going on there, what I was performing, is absolutely right.

Panos: For some time now I have been wanting to ask you if you could describe the case of the sonic world of the Kaluli people in Papua New Guinea in terms of a “sonic perspectivism.” Of course it might seem strange to use a visual

metaphor to theorize sound. But I'm wondering if you can take this new theoretical interest in perspectivism, as presented by Viveiros de Castro¹⁴, and somehow view at least some of your research projects through the ethnographic and theoretical lens developed by the perspectivism idea, that is if "acoustemology" could possibly and fruitfully be described as a kind of "sonic perspectivism."

Steve: Like many other scholars outside the Amazonist sphere, I think Viveiros de Castro is deeply thoughtful about the generativity and productivity of difference-making and that "perspectivism" contributes to important debates in social theory, especially on the topic of equivocation. While this is very useful I have not been attracted to use "sonic" either to qualify "perspectivism," or to brand a variety of this theoretical stream, for two reasons. The first is that I don't want to get bogged down by debates on what Alcida Ramos calls the politics of "perspectivism," that is, debates about whether the inversion of "culture" and "nature" is a neo-structuralist ontological ground that situates radical alterity in binarism and promotes an overly homogeneous view of the Amazon region.¹⁵ The second reason is that for many years auditory perception studies have theorized the "perspectival" nature of hearing and its acoustic and biological basis. As the terms "perspectivism" and "perspectivalism" are close there is also room for confusion here about what "sonic perspectivism" might mean.

I was led to the coinage "acoustemology" because I wanted to emphasize knowing through the audible, that is, the knowingness of ordinary listening and its importance to *habitus*. The relevance of phenomenology, relational ontology, and relational epistemology here are, of course, connected to certain tenets of "perspectivism," even if my philosophical, sociological, and ethnographic inspirations were somewhat different to those of Viveiros de Castro.¹⁶

Anyway, coming back to "perspectivism" and the "perspectival," of course there is also the problem that these terms are so deeply rooted in the visual, and connected to the master metaphor, both in perception and social studies, of "point-of-view." For me "acoustemology" sidesteps that metaphoric minefield and places the emphasis squarely on fusing acoustics and epistemology.

Panos: My interest in these issues starts from the lurking danger of essentializing sound and listening. I'm referring to what Jonathan Sterne has described as the litany of the audio-visual opposition¹⁷ which is always one of the main problems in putting together this thing we call sound studies. What would you say about that?

Steve: I hate "sound studies"! I love studies of sound; that's not the issue. I hate the conglomeration phrase "sound studies" because it is a market-rationalized attempt to round up, commodify, and manage diffuse ideas into products with a

singular identity. It's the kind of term that is loved by certain colony-making presses, certain entrepreneurial academics, and, of course, certain administrators who busy themselves manufacturing and marketing packaged programs of study.

"Sound studies" totalizes the object "sound," and it presumes an imagined coherence to that object that one is supposed to know in advance. Who and what is served by that? More financial and managerial interests than intellectual ones, I think. It's a perfect microcosm of neoliberal education.

Apart from that, what is most problematic to me about "sound studies" is that ninety-five percent of it is sound technology studies, and ninety-five percent of that is Western. So if I refuse "sound studies" it is because I think plants, animals, and humans everywhere are equally important to technologies, and I think that studying dynamic interactions of species and materials in all places and times are equally important and should be equally valued. That's a way of saying that I want more "sound agency studies," more "sound *actant* studies." I want more "sound plural ontology studies," or "sound relationality studies." Or "sound companion species studies." Even if sound studies will, happily, increase interest in historical knowledge and the practice of ideological critique, the dominant model will remain the Western cultural studies form of ideological text reading. Anthropologies of sound will only fill the exotic slot here; the real center of attention will remain Western sound technologies, and Western avant-garde music and sound art.

I want to start differently, problematizing sound by asking what it means to know in, with, and through it *differently*. I want studies of sounding with, to, and about, that is studies of sound as a critical mode of relating and relationality across species and materialities. I want "sound *difference* studies." But I think these things will always be a small sidebar to what is much more marketable: sound *genre* studies and sound *object* studies and sound *technology* studies. Mind you, I'm not disparaging researchers and their research; there are many terrific projects here, and many dedicated and smart people doing them. I'm just responding to "sound studies" as a regime, what the phrase signifies now as a corporate formation.

Panos: From the moment I started getting involved in this idea of approaching sound from a social scientific perspective, I always liked what the historians did. And I know you also have a soft spot there. We've never discussed that, your relation to that, so I'll try to put the question simply: Is it possible that we could focus not on what you called "doing anthropology in sound"¹⁸ but, rather, "doing history in sound"? And how would you imagine that? Because I think that one of the most important things that history contributes here is the most elegant methodological elaboration of how to approach sound that you will never hear.

Steve: I think that is absolutely right on. I love Mark Smith's work. I just read his sensory history of the civil war and I thought it was fantastic. Reading that as an anthropologist, like reading Alain Corbin on bells, and smells,¹⁹ makes clear the

intersensory stakes in smell and hearing as shaping forces of historical experience. This opens up so many ways to think about archives of sounds and memories of sound, about the meaning of inscription and recording...

Panos: ...recording as something else, as documentary evidence. This is one of the greatest ironies of the social study of sound. We have lived with this idea that sound doesn't leave any traces, because it's lost in the air. But the historians have showed us that we can approach sound even without archaeological ruins or things left behind.

Steve: The thing that's fantastic about the historians is that they are not separating sound from the fullest understanding of sensory experience. Corbin and Smith are exemplary here. Smith writes about what the smell of hundreds of dead soldier bodies would be like after a day, a week, a month of the Civil War, and what this does to a field, a river, a path. And that takes you to the sound of decomposition at a particular month and season of the year. And from there you hear the sounds of the weapons and the physical contact that produced all of that, the sound of battle and the sound of killing and wounding, the screams of all that pain. And in turn that takes you to the voices and cries and shrieks of people seeing that, experiencing the trauma of battle and the sensory horror of decomposition in their midst. And so there is this whole entanglement of sound in smell and smell in sound. This is fabulous anthropology in and as history. Think of all the tools that you are given there to understand the experiential ravages of warfare, and the lingering mess of battle when it is over.

This very much resonates for me with what you have written about bells in Naxos.²⁰ That work opens the reader to the layering and resonances of history living in the present, the ways bells are ringing and people are listening, and how this knowing of the world in sound is sited on particular bodies, in particular places, through particular times. And what this opens up is the ability –which takes us back to your remark about historical methodology- to understand that the bells are ringing throughout a timespace even when they are not physically ringing in the specific moment in that timespace. So we come to understand how bells are entrenched in the being of the place, and this is exactly where history and ethnography meet.

In the best contemporary work in sound technology studies we also have glimpses of this. Jonathan Sterne's book on the MP3²¹ shapes the reader's ability to understand how social, political, sonic, engineering, and technical history congealed around a central problem that was defined in a historical moment: how to make something very big into something very small with an almost imperceptible loss of quality. The reading is dominantly about the politics of effort and the capital forces shaping that effort and its outcomes. But the historical importance of this is related, for me, to the larger point that Corbin and Smith open for sensuous history: the kind of work it takes to retrieve something that has been buried, or erased, or hidden, or taken for-granted in some generalized location we call "the archive."

Panos: Do you also have the feeling that somehow in sound art we move to a time that is postdigital? That we have here an interest to do things that are not exactly the state of the art technologically, by returning to earlier technologies and exploring them, even in a nostalgic way, to evoke earlier relations to sound, for example using a cassette instead of a digital source?

Steve: I'm often feeling more hopeful about what's going on in sound art than in "sound studies." And my reason for that is that I experience something I really like in sound art now: forms of generosity, a sharing in ways of exploring things. There seems less of an institutional and colonizing impulse, more a spirit of open exploration. Sound art as it is practiced now, particularly through possibilities that exist for tapping into populist and popular culture areas, can work with radios and mobile technologies, can potentially empower and enlighten and engage and entertain. This strikes me as quite interesting. I'm speaking of course as someone who is older and retired, so the energy of the "do it yourself" world impresses me more than the academic world now. At my age I'm learning more about sound from artists than from academics.

Panos: I've also been thinking a lot about the presentation you gave in Mytilene, at University of the Aegean. And what that talk might mean for developing your work further. The idea of acoustemology meeting the anthropocene is not so different from what you've done before on different spaces, environments, and music. But it is now on a different level, let's say. Somehow now you are trying to bring together the most micro level and the most macro level of analysis. And I wonder how all this comes together in what you want to do here in Greece on cicadas, following your cicada work in New Guinea and Japan.

Steve: The biggest problem that I have experienced with the notion of acoustemology is when people respond with, "oh... you're doing philosophy now." That response - and it is rather frequent - suggests that acoustemology is taking a step away, distancing myself from the politics of history that lives in all of the work that I've done on senses of place in and through sound—New Guinea, Europe, Japan, West Africa. Perhaps I'm both defensive and annoyed by that response. Which is why I now want to present a framework that insists on how acoustemology is as ethnographically and politically useful as any other approach to environmental devastation. This is why I want to comparatively explore the cicada story as histories of hearing heat, of biopolitical archives. I see this cicada work as engaging what I've always wanted to engage with and through sound - politics, history, and culture...

Panos... "echo-muse-ecology" ...²²

Steve: ...yes...

So the micro/macro issue is how to link the aesthetics of cicada songs in Papua New Guinea to their importance for sensing climate change in the rainforest, and how to link cicada haiku poetics in Japan to the cicadas sounding at critical radiation sites like Hiroshima or Fukushima. And to bring Greece into the picture, how to listen to cicadas in Athens through the centuries, from the classical time of Phaedrus,²³ a story about love, dialogue, and distraction, that can also reveal the anthropological ear as a witness to history and the anthropocene. Can the Hearing Heat project successfully evoke multiple sensuous juxtapositions of geography, history, politics, science, and art, from the Hiroshima of the bomb to the river Ilissos of Plato and the rainforest, the global lungs, in Papua New Guinea? That's the challenge.

Panos: This project has both visual and sound dimensions and it seems that you would basically like to work on this with artists, that they would have more to contribute.

Steve: No, it's not that I would rather work with artists. It's that I want to animate new kinds of relationships and conversations between artists and researchers.²⁴ I want to acknowledge that artists also do research. And I want to acknowledge that anthropological research can be done artfully in multiple media. I want to put these issues in play. And I want to work experimentally, whatever it means for success or less than. I like the way artists have responded to my recordings. They have found things there to be excited and ask about, which is hardly the case for anthropologists, who pretty much only respond to my writings. The recordings have brought me into contact with many people beyond academia, and that is increasing. This marks a really interesting moment, this "ethnographic turn" that we are seeing throughout many artworlds and art practices. So I am simply hopeful that acoustemological research, presented artfully, can be experienced by many different audiences equally as good to hear-see-feel and good to think.

Endnotes

1. This text originated in conversations in Athens, Greece, recorded 11 & 12 March 2015. The transcriptions have been lightly edited, modified, and annotated for clarity and context.

2. The two lectures referenced here were titled “Hearing Heat: Acoustemology meets the Anthropocene,” presented at the Department of Social Anthropology and History, University of the Aegean, Mytilene, 10 March 2015, and “Birds, Bells, Toads, and Car Horns: Acoustemology and/as Companion Species Sound Art,” presented at Borderline Festival, Onassis Cultural Centre, Athens, 11 March 2015. The first drew on research from Papua New Guinea and Japan, and the second on research in Papua New Guinea, Italy, Greece, and Ghana.

3. See Steven Feld, Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression. Durham, Duke University Press, 2012 (Third and Thirtieth Anniversary Edition).

4. This scene can be heard on the CD that accompanies Dick Blau, Charles and Angeliki Keil, and Steven Feld, Bright Balkan Morning: Romani Lives and the Power of Music in Greek Macedonia. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002.

5. See Steven Feld, “A Sweet Lullaby for World Music”, Public Culture, 12(1):145-171, 2000, reprinted *in* Arjun Appadurai, ed., Globalization. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001.

6. Outcomes include Bells and Winter Festivals of Greek Macedonia, Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Folkways, 2002 and then the CD and DVD series The Time of Bells, 1-5, 2004-2012, Santa Fe: VoxLox; the CD books Santi, animali e suoni. Campanacci a Tricarico e S. Mauro Forte, edited by Nicola Scaldaferri, Udine: Nota, 2006 and I Suoni dell'albero: il Maggio di San Guiliano ad Accettura, edited by Nicola Scaldaferri and Steven Feld, Udine: Nota, 2013; and the CD/DVD/book Skyros Carnival, photographs by Dick Blau, texts by Agapi Amanatidis and Panayotis Panopoulos, CD and DVD by Steven Feld, Santa Fe: VoxLox, 2011.

7. These themes, and the centrality of Nii Noi Nortey and Nii Otoo Annan to them, are discussed in Steven Feld, Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra: Five Musical Years in Ghana, Durham: Duke University Press, 2012, as well as the DVD trilogy of the same name, Santa Fe: VoxLox, 2009, and numerous recordings, listed below (note 10) and sampled on Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra: CD Companion, Santa Fe: VoxLox, 2012.

8. Offering: John Coltrane Live at Temple University, 1966. Two CD. New York: Resonance Records, 2014.

9. For information see the Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra book page at the website of Duke University Press, www.dukeupress.edu

10. The Accra CD projects, published yearly 2005-2010, with more recent volumes as well, include: Accra Trane Station, Tribute to a Love Supreme, Santa Fe: VoxLox, 2005; The Time of Bells, 3: Musical Bells of Accra, Santa Fe: VoxLox, 2005; Accra Trane Station, Meditations for John Coltrane, Santa Fe: VoxLox, 2006; Por Por: Honk Horn Music of Ghana, Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 2007; The Castaways Project (with Virginia Ryan) Santa Fe: VoxLox, 2007; Accra Trane Station, Another Blue Train, Santa Fe: VoxLox, 2007; Accra Trane Station, +2, Topographies of the Dark, Santa Fe: VoxLox, 2008; Nii Otoo Annan and Steven Feld, Bufo Variations, Santa Fe: VoxLox, 2008; Klebo! Honk Horn Music from Ghana, Santa Fe: VoxLox, 2009; Waking in Nima, Santa Fe: VoxLox, 2010; Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra: CD Companion, Santa Fe: VoxLox, 2012; Nii Otoo Annan, Ghana Sea Blues, Santa Fe: VoxLox, 2012; Afrifonica/PyraSonix, Santa Fe: VoxLox, 2014.

11. The trend is charted in many recent monographs, articles, as well as anthologies like Jazz Planet, edited by E. Taylor Atkins, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003. A new journal of Transnational Studies of Jazz has been announced by Routledge, and recent networks like Rhythm Changes www.rhythmchanges.net promote scholarship, research, and conferences on jazz histories across, within, and beyond borders, destabilizing the Americanist orthodoxy or hegemony of jazz studies.

12. Benda Bilili! (2010), a film by Renaud Barret and Florent de La Tullaye, starring Leon Likabu, Roger Landu, Coco Ngambali. The film tells the story of Staff Benda Bilili, a performance group of street musicians in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo. The four key musicians are elder paraplegics who perform in wheelchairs.

13. A big picture of the world music market, summarizing the first generation of research, is Timothy Taylor's Global Pop: World Music, World Markets, New York: Routledge, 1997; a second generation update is Music and Globalization: Critical Encounters, Bob W. White, ed., Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012.

14. See Eduardo Viveiros De Castro, "Cosmological Deixis and AmerIndian Perspectivism," Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (NS): 4: 469–488, 2000.

15. For critiques of perspectivism see Alcida Rita Ramos, "The Politics of Perspectivism," Annual Review of Anthropology, 41:481-494, 2012.

16. Steven Feld, "Acoustemology," in David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny, eds., Keywords in Sound: Towards A Conceptual Lexicon. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015, pp. 12-21.

17. See Jonathan Sterne, The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction, Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

18. Steven Feld and Donald Brenneis, "Doing Anthropology in Sound," American Ethnologist 31(4):461-474, 2004.

19. Mark M. Smith, The Smell of Battle, The Taste of Siege: A Sensory History of the Civil War. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. Also see his Hearing History: A Reader. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004. Alain Corbin, Village Bells: The Culture of the Senses in the Nineteenth-Century French Countryside. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998; also his The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988.

20. Panayotis Panopoulos, "Animal Bells as Symbols: Sound and Hearing in a Greek Island Village," Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute 9(4): 639-656, 2003.

21. Jonathan Sterne, MP3: The Meaning of a Format. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012.

22. Steven Feld, "From Ethnomusicology to Eco-muse-ecology: Reading Murray Schafer in the New Guinea Rainforest. The Soundscape Newsletter, 8: 9-13, 1993. Reprinted in M. Bull and L. Back, eds., The Auditory Cultures Reader, 2nd edition, London: Bloomsbury, 2015.

23. Plato, Phaedrus, Translated with Introduction and Notes by Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995. Also see G.R.F. Ferrari, Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato's Phaedrus. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

24. See Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright, eds., Between Art and Anthropology: Contemporary Ethnographic Practice, 2010, London: Bloomsbury, and in that volume, Steven Feld in conversation with Virginia Ryan, "Collaborative Migrations: Contemporary Art in/as Anthropology," pp. 109-126.

April 30, 2015

<http://www.stevenfeld.net>

<http://aegean.academia.edu/PanayotisPanopoulos>