Perspectives on a 21st Century Comparative Musicology: Ethnomusicology or Transcultural Musicology? stems from the ‘International Seminars in Ethnomusicology’ that F. Giannattasio conceived within the activities of the Intercultural Institute for Comparative Music Studies of the Fondazione Giorgio Cini, devoted to a wide reflection on aims, methods and objects of study of ethnomusicology in the light of the profound changes occurring in this field at the beginning of the 21st Century. It concerns a radical rethinking - at a theoretical and epistemological level - of the history of the discipline, due to the contemporary profound transformation of the object of study. The volume has the ambition of offering new views on what a comparative musicology could do in its enquiry into contemporary music making processes.

Scholars coming from different parts of the world, and from different fields of study such as W. Welsch, L.-Ch. Koch, T. Rice, S. Feld, J. Guilbault, J-L. Amselle, contributed to the volume presenting theoretical approaches as an implicit or explicit reaction to the theoretical issues presented by Giannattasio. Together with them, some Italian scholars (G. Giuriati, C. Rizzoni, G. Vacca, R. Di Mauro, M. Agamennone, F. Gervasi) present their thoughts drawn from research in two contexts identified as case studies: the area of Naples and its surroundings, and the Salento.
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COMPARATIVE MUSICOLOGY:
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OR TRANSCULTURAL
MUSICOLOGY?
Contents

Foreword ................................................................. Pag. 6

Francesco Giannattasio
Perspectives on a 21st Century Comparative Musicology:
an Introduction ..................................................... Pag. 10

Wolfgang Welsch
Transculturality - the Puzzling Form of Cultures Today......... Pag. 30

Timothy Rice
Toward a Theory-driven Comparative Musicology .............. Pag. 50

Lars-Christian Koch
Tonsinn und Musik
Carl Stumpf’s Discourse on the Mind as a Condition for the Development of Ethnomusicology and Erich Moritz von Hornbostel’s Proposals for Music-psychological Examination...................... Pag. 66

Steven Feld
On Post-Ethnomusicology Alternatives: Acoustemology ........ Pag. 82

Jocelyne Guilbault
The Politics of Musical Bonding
New Prospects for Cosmopolitan Music Studies ................ Pag. 100

Jean-Loup Amselle
From Métissage to the Connection between Cultures ............. Pag. 126

Giovanni Giuriati
Some Reflections on a new Perspective in Transcultural Musicology:
the Area of Naples as a Case Study .............................. Pag. 136
Giovanni Giuriati
The Music for the Festa dei Gigli in Nola......................... Pag. 146

Claudio Rizzoni

Giovanni Vacca
Songs and the City

Raffaele Di Mauro
Identity Construction and Transcultural Vocation in Neapolitan Song: a ‘Living Music’ from the Past? .................... Pag. 186

Maurizio Agamennone
Current Research in the Salentine Area: an Introduction........ Pag. 222

Maurizio Agamennone
An Historical Perspective on Ethnomusicological Enquiry: Studies in the Salento. ........................................ Pag. 226

Flavia Gervasi
Rhetoric of Identity and Distinctiveness: Relations between Aesthetic Criteria and the Success of Salentine Musicians in the Contemporary Folk Revival ......................... Pag. 248

Notes on Contributors.................................................. Pag. 272
Steven Feld

On Post-Ethnomusicology Alternatives: Acoustemology
There seems to no longer be a need for traditional ethnomusicological research and there is a risk that our field of study will be considered archaic and obsolete. For this reason, in this new global soundscape in which we are immersed, it is becoming increasingly urgent to make an assessment on ethnomusicology, its status, fields, tasks and methods of investigation. This review is so crucial that it could call into question the very name of our field of study.¹

The provocative and poignant introductory paper by Francesco Giannattasio (2013) that animated the conferences leading to this volume questioned a number of very troubling tendencies in mainstream ethnomusicology. These include a proliferation of new essentialisms and reifications of ‘ethnicity’, ‘tradition’, ‘identity’ and ‘the meta-culture of diversity’. How could it be that a discipline that takes as its object musical difference, could become so complicit in the banalization of musical difference? The invitation to the 2014 seminar underscored the seriousness of this critique and joined convergent concerns raised by Giovanni Giuriati (2010) that asked participants to engage this ‘[…] urgent necessity […] to set free ethnomusicology from the weight of its founding myths and from an unacceptable stagnancy’. This is a conversation that I am happy to join, for it is of longtime concern.

Coming of age in the radical 1960s, I never liked the term ‘ethnomusicology’. Its 1950s vintage felt terribly burdened by the legacy of colonialism and the cold war. ‘Ethnomusicology’ (even without the original and more problematic hyphen) immediately signaled to me the music of the Other. This missed out on the musical energy and ethos that compelled me in the moment of my own initiation to multiple musical realities, a politicized wave of worldwide experimental folk, rock, jazz, electro-acoustics, improvisation, and avant-gardism. At a time when one could embrace the musical cosmopolitanism of so many contemporary experimental fusions, as well as engage in research in remote and distant places that questioned the Eurocentric construction of ‘music,’ why follow the conservative path, policing the borders of what musics are to be deemed ‘traditional,’ or ‘popular,’ or ‘art,’ or ‘Western,’ or ‘non-Western?’

In 1972 I had a first chance to apply my 1960s musical and political radicalization to the concept of ‘ethnomusicology’ and the alternatives proposed by my professor, Alan Merriam, in his book The Anthropology of Music (1964). The assigned paper I wrote for his graduate theory seminar began with this sentence: ‘What about an anthropology of sound?’

For the next twenty years, into the early 1990s, I developed answers to this question, particularly through empirical studies in rainforest Papua New

¹ See Giannattasio, in this volume, p. 11.
Guinea, (cf., e.g. Feld 2012) and through scrutiny of the emergence of the ‘world music’ genre of global pop (cf., e.g., Feld 1995). The anthropology of sound idea continually offered zones of critical response to what I perceived as increasing limitations of the dominant anthropology of music paradigms of the 1960s and 1970s: Alan Merriam’s theorization of ‘music in culture’ (1964) and John Blacking’s theorization of ‘humanly organized sound’ (1973). Central to that critique, the anthropology of sound idea argued for an expanded terrain when engaging global musical diversity. That expansion acknowledged the critical importance of four areas typically left out, or, when included, un-theorized or under-theorized, at programmatic conjunctions of musicology and anthropology. These domains were (1) language, poetics, and voice; (2) species beyond the human; (3) acoustic environments; (4) technological mediation and circulation.

While the idea of an anthropology of sound was meant to help decolonize ethnomusicology’s disciplinary paradigms, the presence of ‘anthropology’ still made it too human-centric; the prepositional ‘of’ marked too much distance and separation, and the nominal ‘sound’ seemingly made it more about propagation than perception, more about structure than process. Other intellectual equipment was needed to address the sounding worlds of indigenous and emergent global geographies of difference across the divides of species and materials. Since the early 1990s I have tried to further develop some of this intellectual equipment through the notion of ‘acoustemology,’ and it is to this idea that I now turn.

Acoustemology imagines an alternative to the classic triad of music in culture, music and culture, music as culture. It tries to imagine an alternative to the musicology vs. anthropology debates that have dominated each ethnomusicological identity crisis for the last fifty years. It tries to think with and beyond ethnomusicology’s best recent theorizations of plural ontologies of music (e.g., Bohlman 1999), and to add a critical posthuman and posthumanist perspective to the continued insistence on the centrality of human practice and agency. The idea is to think bigger, to reimagine the object of study more expansively, more philosophically, and more experimentally.

Acoustemology starts over by conjoining ‘acoustics’ and ‘epistemology’ to question sound as a way of knowing. It asks what is knowable, and how it becomes known, through sounding and listening. Acoustemology begins with acoustics to ask how the dynamism of sound’s physical energy indexes its social immediacy. It asks how the physicality of sound is so instantly and forcefully present to experience and experiencers, to interpreters and interpretations. Answers to such questions do not specifically engage acoustics on the formal scientific plane that investigates the physical components of sound’s
materiality (Kinsler et al. 1999). Rather, acoustemology engages acoustics at
the plane of the audible – *akoustos* – to inquire into sounding as simultane-
ously social and material, an experiential nexus of sonic sensation.
Acoustemology joins acoustics to epistemology to investigate sounding and
listening as a knowing-in-action: a knowing-with and knowing-through the
audible. Acoustemology thus does not invoke epistemology in the formal
sense of an inquiry into metaphysical or transcendental assumptions sur-
rounding claims to ‘truth.’ Rather it engages the relationality of knowledge
production, as what John Dewey called contextual and experiential knowing
(Dewey and Bentley 1949).

Acoustemology situates the social study of sound within a key question driv-
ing contemporary social theory. Namely, is the world constituted by multiple
essences, by primal substances with post facto categorical names like ‘human,’
‘animal,’ ‘plant,’ ‘material,’ or ‘technology?’ Or is it constituted relationally,
by the acknowledgment of conjunctions, disjunctions, and entanglements
among all co-present and historically accumulated forms? It was the latter
answer that compelled a theorization of sounding and listening aligned with
relational ontology; the conceptual term for the position that substantive ex-
istence never operates anterior to relationality.

Relational ontology can be traced across a number of discourses linking philos-
ophy, sociology, and anthropology. Phrasings associated with both Ernst Cas-
sirer (1957) and Alfred Schutz argue that ‘actors plus locations’ are produced
by ‘relations-in-action.’ Cassirer’s formal anti-substantialism argued that being
was never independent of relating. Schütz’s life-world philosophy focused on the
character of sharing time and space with consociates, compared to sharing or not
sharing time with contemporaries and predecessors. Relationality as ‘inter-ac-
tion’ and ‘trans-action’ appears in John Dewey’s writings with the hyphen for
emphasis on both across-ness and between-ness (Dewey 1960). Without the
hyphen, these terms became sociological keywords anew in the 1960s and
1970s, always in the service of arguing against the reduction of agency to a set
list of entities or essences (Goffman 1967; Emirbayer 1997).

British social anthropology, in its formative period, focused on the study of
‘relations of relations’ (Kuper 1996). This idea echoed into new frontiers with
the conjunction of the terms ‘social’ and ‘ecology,’ ‘ecology’ and ‘mind,’ and
‘cybernetic’ and ‘epistemology’ in the writings of Gregory Bateson (2000). The
notion that actors plus relationships shape networks both within and across
species or materialities is part of how more contemporary theorists – such as
– have schematized relationality’s critical logic. These themes are likewise
present in contemporary writings on interspecies and nature/culture relations.
by Philippe Descola (2013) and Eduardo Vivieros de Castro (2000), as well as in posthumanist theories refiguring human relational presence and action with all technological, animal, and environmental others (Wolfe 2009).

Acoustemology’s logical point of connection to a relational ontology framework is here: existential relationality, a connectedness of being, is built on the between-ness of experience. Acoustemology, as relational ontology, thus takes sound and sounding as ‘situational’ (Haraway 1988) among ‘related subjects’ (Bird-David 1999); it explores the ‘mutual’ (Buber 1923) and ‘ecological’ (Bateson 1972) space of sonic knowing as ‘polyphonic,’ ‘dialogical,’ and ‘unfinalizable’ (Bakhtin 1981, 1984). This is to inquire into knowing in and through sounding, with particular care to the reflexive feedback of sounding and listening. The kind of knowing that acoustemology tracks in and through sound and sounding is always experiential, contextual, fallible, changeable, contingent, emergent, opportune, subjective, constructed, selective. Knowing through relations insists that one does not simply ‘acquire’ knowledge but, rather, that one knows through an ongoing cumulative and interactive process of participation and reflection. This is so whether knowledge is shaped by direct perception, memory, deduction, transmission, or problem solving.

Unlike certain classic and contemporary writings in the phenomenology of music (Smith 1979, Benson 2003), acoustemology focuses more on relational knowing in and though sound, than on the more specifically philosophical arguments about listening and the existential character of sound.

While concerned to relate the full constitution of sound to its environmental contexts of production, acoustemology writes with but against ‘acoustic ecology’ (Schafer 1977). That is because, unlike R. Murray Schafer’s World Soundscape Project, acoustemology is neither a measurement system for acoustic niche dynamics nor a study of sound as an indicator of how humans live in environments. Nor is it a program for evaluating sound environments for their high or low fidelity according to volume or density, and cataloging place-based sounds and soundmaking objects through physical space and historical time. While concerned with place-based space-time dynamics, acoustemology concentrates on relational listening histories – on methods of listening to histories of listening – always with an ear to agency and positionalities. Unlike acoustic ecology, acoustemology is about the experience and agency of listening histories, understood as relational and contingent, situated and reflexive.

Acoustemology likewise writes with but against ‘soundscape,’ the key legacy term associated with Schafer and particularly his debt to the theories of Marshall McLuhan (Kelman 2010). Against ‘soundscapes,’ acoustemology refuses to sonically analogize or appropriate ‘landscape,’ with all its physical
distance from agency and perception. Likewise it refuses to replace visualist occularcentrism with sonocentrism as any sort of determining force of essentialist sensory master plans. Acoustemology joins critiques and alternatives offered by Tim Ingold (2007) and Stefan Helmreich (2010) in recent essays deconstructing ‘soundscape.’ Along with their proposals, acoustemology favors inquiry that centralizes situated listening in engagements with place and space-time. Acoustemology prioritizes histories of listening and attunement through the relational practices of listening and sounding and their reflexive productions of feedback.

Acoustemology, then, is grounded in the basic assumption that life is shared with others-in-relation, with numerous sources of action (actant in Bruno Latour’s terminology; 2005) that are variously human, nonhuman, living, nonliving, organic, or technological. This relationality is both a routine condition of dwelling and one that produces consciousness of modes of acoustic attending, of ways of listening for and resounding to presence. Acoustemology figures the presence of sounding in heterogeneous contingent relating; locates sounding in manners of cohabiting; concerns sounding as what it means to attend and attune; to live with listening to that.

Acoustemology for me has largely been a slow-growing grounded theory whose emergence was deeply stimulated by my ethnographic studies of the sociality of sound in the Bosavi rainforest region of Papua New Guinea. Indeed, the relational linkage of ‘significant’ to ‘otherness’ was in many ways the key

Water is to voice as land is to body’, a guiding premise of Kaluli acoustemology
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challenge when I went to Papua New Guinea for the first time in 1976 and set in motion the twenty-five years of research that recast an anthropology of sound into acoustemology.

There seems to no longer be a need for traditional ethnomusicological research and there is a risk that our field of study will be considered archaic and obsolete. For this reason, in this new global soundscape in which we are immersed, it is becoming increasingly urgent to make an assessment on ethnomusicology, its status, fields, tasks and methods of investigation. This review is so crucial that it could call into question the very name of our field of study.

I initially imagined that Bosavi songs were an acoustic adaptation to a rainforest environment. I had no idea that ‘adaptation’ was an inadequate framework for understanding relationality in a forest of plurality. And I had no idea that I would need an equal amount of skill in ornithology and natural history to add to my training in music, sound recording, and linguistics. I had no idea that Bosavi songs would be vocalized mappings of the rainforest, that they were sung from a bird’s point of view, and that I would have to understand poetics as flight paths through forest waterways; that is, from a bodily perspective rather different from perceiving with feet on the ground. And I had no idea that Bosavi women’s funerary weeping turned into song and that men’s ceremonial song into weeping: in other words, that apprehending Bosavi soundmaking would require a gendered psychology of emotion in addition to a dialogic approach to vocality.

So there were many surprises, and after more than fifteen years of them I felt that I had exhausted the conceptual repertoire of an anthropology of sound, particularly those approaches deriving from theoretical linguistics, semiotics, communications, and more formal theorizations in symbolic anthropology. This was when I realized the necessity to reground and revise all of my recording and writing work through a deeper engagement with the phenomenology of perception, body, place, and voice (Feld 2012).

This realization became especially powerful for me when trying to understand human/avian relationality in Bosavi, with all that implied about transformative interplays of nature/culture, and life/death. To Bosavi ears and eyes, birds are not just ‘birds’ in the sense of totalized avian beings. They are *ane mama*, meaning ‘gone reflections’ or, literally translated, ‘gone reverberations’. Birds are absences turned into presence, and a presence that always makes absence audible and visible. Birds are what humans become by achieving death. And

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this ‘becoming is creation,’ precisely as Deleuze and Guattari declare in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987: 106).

Becoming is certainly not imitating, or identifying with something; neither is it regressing-progressing; neither is it corresponding, establishing corresponding relations; neither is it producing, producing a filiation or producing through filiation. Becoming is a verb with a consistency all its own; it does not reduce to, or lead back to, appearing (1987: 239).

Given this transformative potency, it is not surprising that bird sounds are understood not just as audible communications that tell time, season, environmental conditions, forest height and depth but also as communications from dead to living, as materializations reflecting absence in and through reverberation. Bird sounds are the voice of memory and the resonance of ancestry. Bosavi people transform the acoustic materials of bird soundmaking – their intervals, sound shapes, timbres, and rhythms – into weeping and song. In the process, they create a poetry that imagines how birds feel and speak as absented presences and present absences. They become like birds by sounding the emotion of absence into newborn presence. Human weeping turns into song, and song turns into crying because sound always becomes and embodies sentiment; sonic materiality is the transformed reverberation of emotional depth. To paraphrase Donna Haraway (riffing on Claude Lévi-Strauss), birds here are more than ‘good to think’; they are good to live with, as a companion species. For Bosavi people, birds are the other that one becomes, as one becomes another.

What can it mean that Bosavi ears and voices sensuously absorb and reverberate by vocalizing daily with, to, and about birds, insects, and waterways in the rain-soaked and sun-dried *longue durée* of rainforest cohabitation? This question led me to the idea that listening to the rainforest as a co-inhabited world of plural sounding and knowing presences was, most deeply, a listening to histories of listening. And it shaped the dialogic methodology of recording and composing the CDs *Voices of the Rainforest* and *Rainforest Soundwalks,* which transformed my anthropology of sound into an anthropology in sound (1996).

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After years of privileging symbolic and semiotic representations of modes of knowing (particularly ritual expression), acoustemology pushed me to think more through recording and playback, to conjoin practice with experiment. I returned to the basic questions that had intrigued me from my earliest times in Bosavi. How to hear through the trees? How to hear the relationship of forest height to depth? Where is sound located when you can’t see more than three feet ahead? Why does looking up into the forest simply take one’s senses into the impenetrable density of the canopy? How to inquire into the sounding-as and sounding-through knowing that shaped the mundane everyday world of rainforest emplacement: the everyday world that in turn shaped the poesis of song maps, and of vocalities linking local singers with the soundings of birds, insects, and water?

Passing by the village longhouse as I headed to the forest to listen and record, I’d invariably encounter groups of children who would join and guide my forest walks. We’d play a simple game. I’d attach a parabolic microphone to my recorder and enclose my ears in isolating headphones. Standing together in the forest, I’d point the parabola in the direction of un-seeable forest birds. That would be the signal for the children to jump up, take my forearm, re-adjust its angle, and anchor it. Sure enough, as they made their move, a bird was in all-of-a-sudden sharp acoustic focus in my headphones. Then the kids
would burst out laughing, meaning it was time for me to come up with something more challenging.

This was a daily lesson in listening as habitus, a forceful demonstration of routinized, emplaced hearing as an embodied mastery of locality. It is only a matter of seconds before a twelve-year-old Bosavi kid can identify a bird by sound, describe its location in the forest density, and tell a good bit more about the location of its food, nests, and partners. How does this knowledge happen? The lesson was bodily, powerful, and gripping. Acoustically co-inhabiting the rainforest ecosystem, Bosavi life is relationally built through all-species listening as co-living, as intertwined presence. Could this be the acoustemological foundation of how and why Bosavi songs are machines for cohabitation, or, in today’s more radical philosophical parlance, interspecies cosmopolitanism (Mendieta 2012)?

In addition to my younger teachers, some exceptional Bosavi adults also guided my introspection into such questions. One was Yubi (Feld 2012: 44-85). For years, every encounter with him made me wonder, why were Bosavi’s most prolific composers also its most accomplished ornithologists? Yubi taught me to hear acoustic knowing as co-aesthetic recognition. He taught me how each natural historical detail had symbolic value-added. He taught me how knowing the world through sound was inseparable from living in the world sonically and musically.

Ulahi, featured singer of Voices of the Rainforest, composing and singing at the Wolo creek
© 2017 Steven Feld
Ulahi was another guide to how songs sung in a bird’s voice linked the living and dead, present and past, human and avian, ground and treetops, village and forest. She explained that songs don’t sing the world as experienced by travel on foot but move through watercourses, following the flight paths of forest birds (Feld 1996). Ulahi taught me how water moves through land as voice moves through the body. She taught me how songs are the collective and connective flow of individual lives and community histories. Just one creek and its flow from her local home and to the gardens and land beyond mapped dozens of poeticized names of birds, plants, shrubs, trees, sounds, intersecting waters, and all of the activities that magnetize them to the biographies of lives and spirits in her local social world.

‘Song is like a waterfall in your head’, another guiding premise of Kaluli acoustemology
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Over twenty-five years, with the help of Yubi, Ulahi, and many other singers, I recorded, transcribed, and translated about one thousand Bosavi bird-voiced forest path songs. They contain almost seven thousand lexical descriptors, names of places, of flora, fauna, and topography as well as sensuous phonaesthetic evocations of light, wind, motion, and sound qualities. These songs constitute a poetic cartography of the forest, mapping the layered biographies of social relationships within and across communities. The chronotopic historicity of sounding these songs is thus inseparable from the environmental
consciousness they have produced. This is why, as knowledge productions – as listenings to histories of listenings – Bosavi songs are an archive of ecological and aesthetic coevolution. And this is why, in whatever agentive mixture of human and ambient, of vocalic and instrumental, sound is routinely audibly experienced and attended in Bosavi as dulugu galanan, as ‘lift-up-over-sounding,’ a layered alternating, overlapping, and interlocking assemblage. This ‘lift-up-over-sounding’ idea articulates with the three points about the power of the rhizome articulated in Deleuze and Guattari: that ‘any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be’ (1987: 7), that ‘it always has multiple entryways’ (1987: 12), and, most significantly, that it ‘is an a-centered, nonhierarchical, non-signifying system without a General’ (1987: 21).

This realization takes me back to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s sensory phenomenology, which posits perception as the relationality of bodies dimensional to a milieu (1968). As he put it in the introduction to The Primacy of Perception (1964: 5), the body ‘applies itself to space like a hand to an instrument.’ Is this not what is invoked by the commonplace Bosavi feeling of living in a world that is ‘lift-up-over-sounding’? Is this not what is invoked by the everyday Bosavi question Dabwuo? (‘Did you hear that?’) Could it be that when Bosavi people utter just this one word they are acknowledging audibility and perceptibility as simultaneously materializing past, present, and future social relations? Could they, in that sparse gesture, be theorizing that every sound assemblage is equally immediate to human experience and to the perceptual faculties of others, of perceivers who may even be absent, nonhuman, or dead?

For Donna Haraway, companion species tell ‘a story of co-habitation, co-evolution, and embodied cross-species sociality’ (2003: 4-5). In the context of her work with dogs she asks: ‘how might an ethics and politics committed to the flourishing of significant otherness be learned from taking dog-human relationships seriously?’ (2003: 3). Bosavi acoustemology likewise asks what’s to be learned from taking seriously the sonic relationality of human voices to the sounding otherness of presences and subjectivities like water, birds, and insects. It asks what it means to acoustically participate in a rainforest world understood as plural (Brunois 2008). It asks if what are more typically theorized as subject-object relations are in fact more deeply known, experienced, imagined, enacted, and embodied as subject-subject relations. It asks how Bosavi life is a being-in-the-world-with numerous ‘wild’ or ‘non-domesticated’ others, others who may be sources of food, trouble, or danger, others whose soundings may readily announce caution or nervous co-presence, as well as something like Haraway’s ‘cross-species sociality. It asks how sounding-as- and sounding-through-knowing is an audible archive of long-lived relational attunements and antagonisms that have come to be naturalized as place and voice.
Like the ‘transcultural musicology’ alternative that animates this conversation, acoustemology means to present alternate genealogies for intellectual projects on contemporary musicalities. While many individual researchers acknowledge the importance of more closely theorized and critical projects grounded in research on musical agency and practice, there is, as Francesco Giannattasio and Giovanni Giuriati suggest, a large historical weight that has accumulated around reifications of tradition, identity, and locality in ethnomusicology, and the time is now to rethink priorities not only for research, but for core terminology. As part of this conversation, the idea of acoustemology means to animate deeper connections between cultural studies of music and the broader arena of sound studies, itself a convergence of conversations from musical humanities and media, science and technology studies.

Acoustemology thus means to push the transcultural musicology conversation into engagements with posthumanist critiques of the foundational assumptions of Renaissance and Enlightenment humanism. It asks us to consider the nature of human sonic interactions with all other species, with environments, with technologies. It asks about the ethical and political consequences of an anthropocentric belief in an essential human nature, and engages how this idea aided imperialism and the domination of people, species, and places. It takes seriously the implications of these consequences for studies of music and sound.

Acoustemology particularly cares to add the transpecies perspective to the transcultural one. It asks us to consider the human as but one life form, one organic possibility, among many. This term acknowledges the profound impacts of humans on other species, and of other species on humans at every time and every place in history. It opens us to the sonic consequences of concepts of co-habitation and of cross-species sociality. It broadens transcultural perspectives into engagements with species and environments through an additional concern for the place of music and sound in cyborg (short for ‘cybernetic organism’) places and times. No study of music today can ignore the history of mixings of organic and mechanical materials, specifically technological enhancements of primal bodily capacities. Human life takes place not only in the regular company of non-human species; it takes place in the company of non-human objects, many assemblages of animate and inanimate, organic and mechanical. In part we are all as defined by our interactions with technologies as we are defined by our interactions with other persons or species, and this has tremendous implications for knowing in and through sound.

For these reasons, the intellectual genealogies of anthropology of sound and acoustemology present theoretical trajectories for research that join posthumanist, cyborg, and transpecies concerns to the absolute necessity of the kind of post-ethnomusicology alternatives suggested by transcultural musicology.
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