September 2020

Questioning Acoustemology: an interview with Steven Feld

Dr Tom Rice (corresponding author)

Senior Lecturer in Anthropology, University of Exeter, Exeter, United Kingdom.

t.rice@exeter.ac.uk
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7674-030X

Professor Steven Feld

Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Anthropology and Music, University of New Mexico, School for Advanced Research, Santa Fe, United States of America.

Biographical Note

Tom Rice is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Exeter. His book *Hearing and the Hospital: sound, listening, knowledge and experience* was an ethnographic study of the auditory culture of a London hospital, and he has since studied the sound environments of other institutions including prisons and most recently, zoos. Tom writes on key concepts in sound studies and has also made documentaries about sound for BBC Radio 4 and the World Service. http://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/sociology/staff/tomrice/; https://exeter.academia.edu/TomRice

Steven Feld is Senior Scholar at the School for Advanced Research, Santa Fe, and Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Anthropology and Music at University of New Mexico. His work in acoustemology ranges from rainforest Papua New Guinea to European towns and city bells to diasporic jazz in West Africa and is equally presented in audio, video, and text publications. www.stevenfeld.net; www.voxloxmyshopify.com

Word count: 7818

Questions for Acoustemology: opening up a key concept in sound studies

In this conversation transcript, Tom Rice asks Steve Feld a series of questions about ‘acoustemology’, a term Steve coined and which has become a key concept in sound studies. Referring to ‘acoustic epistemology’, a ‘knowing-with and knowing-through the audible’, acoustemology emerged in the context of Steve’s work on the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea and their intricate knowledge of the sounds of their rainforest environment (Feld 2015, 12). It has since been applied by Steve, and many others, in studies of sound in a wide variety of settings. Tom asks questions that have arisen as he tries to explore and clarify the implications of the term. For instance, are acoustemologies invariably culturally embedded, or can they also be understood to emerge independently of culture? To what extent are acoustemologies shaped by individual and personal preferences, experiences and abilities? Is it possible for one acoustemology to end and another begin or do acoustemologies merely shift in terms of the sounds to which they are orientated? Answering with illustrations from his own intellectual journey, Steve presents acoustemology as an open-ended concept which is generative rather than prescriptive and which invites ongoing empirical research and interdisciplinary discussion.

Keywords: acoustemology, listening, sound, sound studies

TR: Steve, thank you for taking the time to have this conversation. Acoustemology is a term that I’ve personally found very useful. I have read a great deal that you have written about it (e.g. 1983, 1996, 2003, [1982] 2012b, 2015) and used it in my own research on sound and listening in hospitals and clinical contexts (e.g. 2003, 2013). I have also written a review of the idea and the ways in which it has been applied and developed in sound studies (2018). Often when discussing acoustemology with other people, and especially with students, though, I have repeatedly bumped up against certain questions, and I thought the best way to get answers to some of these would be

to go straight to you, straight to the source, as it were. I think all of us will benefit from your responses.

You have written a very great deal, especially in your earlier work, about the Kaluli way of attending to sound and how that is part of their culture. Their sonic way of knowing emerges from a long-term, multigenerational system of engaging with and interpreting their rainforest environment and the sounds that characterise it. These sounds are produced by a variety of life forms: birds, frogs, insects, and by flowing and falling water and so on. My first question is really about the relationship between acoustemology and culture, because I wonder to what extent, even hypothetically, you can have acoustemology independently of culture, and whether a way of knowing through sound isn't something more fundamental, almost instinctive? I wondered what your thoughts were on that.

SF: Yes. That question has been posed to me in various forms by students. A little more typically, it comes from philosophers more often than it does from anthropologists, or philosophy students more than anthropology students; I don't know how that aligns with your experience. The philosophy students, of course, are wondering about the extent to which acoustemology is part of a broader way of rethinking epistemology, and, of course, they have a universalist agenda in thinking about epistemology; the way in which sensual knowledge or sensory forms of knowing are foundational to all human learning, experience and so forth.

So, this question of what does acoustemology have to do with culture, or can we conceptualise it apart from culture has come up. Philosophy students, typically, want to

say, “Well, obviously, you’ve been really inspired by Merleau-Ponty ([1945] 2012) and inspired by Cassirer ([1923-29] 1955-57) and inspired by these philosophers who had ideas about the epistemic foundations of bodily forms of knowing. Isn’t it just that anthropology has taken all of this work from philosophy on the body and philosophy of the senses and just rewritten it as cultural knowledge rather than knowledge in and of itself?” I don’t know that I have a really good answer for that, but what I have endeavoured to do when I am asked that question is to talk about how certainly the turn to the body and the senses in anthropology since the 80s has deepened our way of understanding and reconceptualising certain ideas that might have taken on, first, an abstract form in philosophy (e.g. Csordas 1994; Howes 1991; Stoller 1989, 1997), but now we can really describe them through the route of ‘habitus’, routinised habitual forms of knowing through the body and the ears and the hands and the tongue (Mauss [1935] 1979; Bourdieu 1980). Discussion of the way in which people encounter the world and make it their world constitutes a long dialogue between philosophy and anthropology. We shouldn’t reduce this to a chicken and egg, a which came first kind of a question. My throwback to the philosophy students is often to say to them, “If anthropologists are late coming to the body and the senses, you people are late coming to culture”. So, I don’t know that I have a really good answer for this, but I have been actually trying to work on it right now. I am going to grab something to show you. It is right on my desk. I don’t know if you can see the side of it.

TR: *Affective Neuroscience: the foundations of human and animal emotions* (Panksepp 2004).

SF: Yes. So, I am also trying to read what these folks, who are really grounded in a much more neuroscientific kind of approach, have to say. What is core, pan-specific human and what are the evolutionary issues in the body, the senses and affect, and how does this relate to the general field of epistemology? How does it affect how we might think about acoustemology, and other bodily forms of knowing, in the future? So, what I think is cool is that, now, all of a sudden, through the route of culture, we, as anthropologists, whether working in the hospital and listening with stethoscopes [an allusion to Tom's research on listening in medical contexts] or listening in the rainforest, are obviously finding a much larger conversation here than one that is grounded in just the materialisations and specifics of a particular habitus.

TR: So, you wouldn't seek to provide a straightforward answer to the original question. You see it as part of an ongoing conversation with philosophy, essentially?

SF: Yes. I don't think I have a straightforward answer to it. I mean, I have enjoyed the conversation. I am still enjoying the conversation. I might still just be muddled about it, but, either through the work I have done in West Africa (Feld 2012) or the work that I have done in southern Europe (Blau et al 2010; Feld 2003-2010; Scaldaferri and Feld 2019) or the foundational work in the rainforest, I haven't found a straightforward answer. I think this also has to do with the constant dialogue that we have been having in anthropology, and which is now reinvigorated, about the relationship between "nature" and "culture" (stimulated so much by Descola 2005/2014). I am sure you have thoughts on this, and I am very interested in how you handle this in your conversations with students and colleagues. But my approach has just been, "Well, let's try and get it all on the table a little more".

TR: Ah, you've turned it back on me there! That was my fear: that you would invert the question and make me try and find an answer! I'm going to sidestep.

Another thing that often comes up in discussions I have about acoustemology is that, obviously, individuals have their own personal tastes and their own acquired associations with sounds, and presumably that is true everywhere – just as much in Bosavi as anywhere else. So, to what extent can people be said to have personal acoustemologies? What is the relationship between the individual and cultural acoustemology? Where do they branch off from one another, if at all, in your mind?

SF: This is a place where my early work is totally lacking, and my recent work tries to compensate for it a little bit (Feld 2012). In the work I did in the 70s, in New Guinea, I was working with a much more broad-based cultural model and in a society of two thousand people where hierarchies, even emergent hierarchies of different kinds of cultural knowledge, don't just jump out in front of you as vastly different one to another. You get the same answer to many questions from many people, and also, I experienced quite extraordinarily there, the extent to which some of the things that adults told me I also found out from ten and eleven-year-old kids.

So, I didn't really work on acoustemology and difference: difference of age, difference of gender, difference of power, different kinds of knowledge. Obviously, I wouldn't want to say that the acoustemological knowledge base or listening habits of an experienced male hunter is the same thing as the acoustemological knowledge base of a female making sago and singing songs. Obviously, these are different things and they

vary and people broaden them out in different ways. I also found women composers like Ulahi, the featured composer and performer on *Voices of the Rainforest* (Feld 1991, 1996; Feld, Leonard, and Richards 2019), whose knowledge of sounds and whose ability to turn it into poetic materialisations in vocalisation and poetics and so forth went far beyond many men in the community, even men who were experienced hunters and who had tremendous amounts of different kinds of forest knowledge.

So, the Bosavi work fails by flattening things out too much and not really making clear all of the vicissitudes of emergent hierarchy and difference in acoustemological ways of knowing the world and how these can operate. In Accra, Ghana, my aim was to really try and understand this from the point of global avant-gardes and what it means to feel connected by sound in this kind of diasporically intimate way that the musicians I worked with do, even though they are quite diversified in terms of class, backgrounds, education and other kinds of things (Feld 2012). So I did try to bring out these differences in the book and many companion cds and films that I did about Accra. So, this question is a really important one. It has been posed to me, I am sure, as much as it has been posed to you. I think it is something to really work on. We know that some people are really much more listeners than others, in the sense that they pay attention to voice, they pay attention to sonic details, and this is not determined just by their environments or other kinds of material aspects of their history. We can't account for so many things except by individual difference.

So, I think this is a really important frontier: taking acoustemology in the direction of difference. Where is it significant? How is it significant? And I think your work is inspiring for me in that, not to turn it back on you, but to talk about how people

who we imagine as having a very specific kind of skill: somebody in training to be a doctor or somebody in training to know what it means to listen to a heart or what it means to listen to a pulse, how finely tuned these things can be (Rice 2010, 2013). That is what I was trying to do in Accra: ask how fine-tuned is the acoustemology of people who really have extraordinary musical skills and who spend their lives really listening?

TR: It is interesting that you bring it back to skill, and you are suggesting, for example, that Ulahi is a particularly skilful listener and composer. To what extent does that come back to personal biography and also to the neurological? What are the particular neurological connections that become significant in this?

SF: I think it does come back to these considerations. The very last conversations that I had with Alfred Gell before he passed and the last work that he did in terms of his reflections on art and skill, unfinished as it is, were really interesting in that direction (1999). I think perhaps because of the intense medicalisation that he experienced in the last part of his life, he was also asking questions about individual neurological or neurobiological bases, and forms of differentiation within art and ability. The last conversation I had with him I remember he was saying "Forget culture. We have to talk about prodigies. We have to talk about extraordinary differences in the ability to see and know and feel, reflected in the ability to make material things". And he connected it to mechanics and said, "What accounts for the fact that some people just have extraordinary mechanical skills of different sorts from the time they are very young? Or the fact that somebody can really learn abstract concepts in mathematics or in music much more quickly than others can?" So, in the context of you bringing up the word

'skill', I recall that being one of the last things that Alfie was so focused on and he made me think "I am going to have to really address this".

TR: I knew your work was connected with Gell's through a mutual interest in Papua New Guinea. He worked with the Umeda who I believe are traditionally neighbours or whose territory is at least near that of the Kaluli. I didn't know that you knew each other personally. I didn't realise you had met him and were in conversation.

SF: Yes, he was a very generous commentator on my work, especially during the last 5 or 6 years of his very short life. We exchanged things. I had read *Metamorphosis of the Cassowaries* (Gell 1975) very carefully. I thought it was just an absolutely unique and brilliant work. And I knew the people who collaborated with him in Papua New Guinea to make the film *The Red Bowmen* (1978). Chris Owen, the filmmaker, who passed last year, was a good friend. But I didn't manage to meet Alfie until a conference at the American Anthropological Association, where, of all things, we were all on a session together with Annette Weiner, Marilyn Strathern, Roy Wagner, and Nancy Munn, organised by Debbora Battaglia. I was kind of in heaven with these brilliant elders of New Guinea anthropology, the people of the generation before mine who had opened up so much. I found him to be not only generous and charming but also a really wonderful interlocutor. After that we exchanged works very regularly. There is only one place in print that he wrote about the Bosavi work. That was Eric Hirsch and Michael O'Hanlon's edited collection *The Anthropology of Landscape: Perspectives on Place and Space* (Hirsh and O'Hanlon 1995). His piece in there on phonological iconism in Umeda addresses the Bosavi research (Gell 1995).

TR: Yes. I know that piece very well. I think it is really important. I would really recommend it to anyone with an interest in sound studies and the anthropology of sound. It's surprisingly under-cited I would say. It was a real inspiration for me.

I was wondering if, for my next question, I could bring you back to the section at the end of your recent film, *The Voices of the Rainforest*, which you made during the course of further visits to Bosavi in 2018 (Feld, Leonard, and Richards 2019; also see Feld and Apley 2020). I am talking about the part where Monica, a young woman traditionally dressed, describes how when you first went to Bosavi in 1976, you stayed with her Uncle Yubi. She is speaking in Bosavi; the translation subtitles read:

> You heard a white cockatoo crying in the forest. You asked my uncle 'what is that sound?' And Yubi answered: 'a deep forest voice', (an ancestor spirit in the form of a bird). And you translated those words to English: 'the voices of the rainforest'. At that time birds were like a message carrier. They told us when the rain was coming. They told us when a death, a visitor, or a witch was coming. Then the missionaries came and brought the first radio. They told us to stop listening to the voices of the birds. The radio was like the birds. It gave messages about planes and sick people coming and going. But then the battery finished. We asked the mission for a new one but they refused. So we asked the government to give us a radio for emergency air transport. But they didn't give one to us either. So then we asked companies like Oil Search. But they didn't give one to us either, or feel sorry for us. So we can't hear from the outside. Our ears are closed. What can we do? Sometimes we take a sick person to the airstrip and hope for a plane. That's why my father died. So I want you to ask your

> American friends to help put a cell phone tower here in Bona. That's what I would like.

She narrates the whole of colonial history, basically, through reference to the sounds to which the Kaluli have attended, or been brought to attend, which is an amazing piece of narrative.

SF: Yes, I was really struck by it. The first thing I should say is that Monica was one of 16 people who came forward to speak to the camera when I went back to Bosavi in 2018 to film and to work on turning the earlier *Voices of the Rainforest* CD soundtrack (1991) into a visualisation. Monica and other younger people said, "This is really good, but we want to talk about the things we're feeling now". And the sentiments that are voiced there are part of a narrative that I was hearing all over the place. It was: "We're poorer now and more remote than when you came here in 1976". What this is about is that neighbouring people, through contracts with logging companies, contracts with oil companies or mining, extractive resources, have seen a flood of money and other kinds of resources: roads and things like that. The repeater tower that reaches Bosavi does reach to the area of the airstrip, which is 45 minutes away from the village where Monica is speaking that statement. But the few people who have cell phones cannot get reception when they are in the villages.

Young people particularly question what they felt was going to be brought to them by missionaries, and they relate their present lives and conditions to the history of the mission and the history of extraction and the history of visiting anthropologists. The only way in which they could imagine us as humans is to imagine us as feeling sorry for

them, and feeling sorrow means different kinds of things. It means wanting to hear their story. It means wanting to listen to them. It means paying attention in multiple senses.

So, to say that companies and mission and government don't feel any sorrow is a way of saying, "They don't want to hear from us. They don't want to know what we're thinking. They don't want to know what we would like. So, I am going to tell you what I would like." So, that is the logic there. And I just want to say that it was a generalised logic across generations, people saying, "You came here and now there are people here who can speak English." Like my oldest friend said, "My son's learnt English. You helped them. You put them through school. They have cell phones. They call you on your cell phone. So, why don't we have toilets?" So, this is a world of people who are seeing this disparity between certain basic material kinds of things, and it is all about the sense of, "When missions came and when you people came, we started to feel we were going to be connected – connected to Papua New Guinea, connected to the world. Now, we feel that we are going backwards."

In fact, one person totally blew my mind. I met him at the airport. He was working at the airport in Mount Hagen, 100 miles from Bosavi. I told him, "It has been 18 years, Molugu. I am so happy to be going back and I am going to see your family". I mean, it was an amazing little reunion before I even got to Bosavi. And he looked at me and said, "Steve, I'm sorry but Bosavi…", and then he spoke English, and said, "Bosavi is still bush, still primitive". So, he is using this racist colonial vocabulary to describe this sense that they have gone backwards. And that is really the vibe in Monica's speech. What is so powerful there is that she relates it to the medium of sound, to sound

technologies, and also to the history of other people listening to them and their ability to get their voices out.

TR: That is what I wondered, whether that was a coincidence or whether you saw her words as a deliberate use of a powerful local idiom. To what extent is the existence of a deep-rooted Kaluli acoustemology relevant to the metaphors or the idiom she chooses there?

SF: Well, of course, in the context of the film, that was a powerful statement. It is also powerful because she chose to dress up in traditional clothes, when she doesn't typically do that. In fact, she is the daughter of the first Bosavi person who became a powerful Christian pastor. So, she was raised in a very Christian home where people weren't walking around wearing feathers even when other folks in the village were. So, the fact that she made the choice herself to wear that in front of the camera was very striking, and it is something that I will explore more when I go back. But other people spoke about wanting a hospital or wanting a high school or wanting support for people for more education, building a midwife house, building better roads, having access to infrastructure. Somebody even asked me did I think it would be possible to put a windfarm there. He said "We have very good air here. Maybe we don't have oil, but we have very good air. Can we find some way to sell it with a windfarm?" And I was amazed. I didn't know how he knew about windfarms.

People had conferred among themselves about what they were going to talk about on camera, but they didn't confer with me. So, over two days, when people sat up on the porch and said what they were thinking about, she was the one who focused on

sound. There are other references to birds and other references to the environment. "The good thing about not having roads and not having logging is that we can still hear the birds and we still can live the way we have. Other people have lost these things. We don't have to buy all of our food at the store". So, they recognised the Trojan horse in the deal. But I selected that extract because it was the best way to connect a younger generation to this particular film, which is about sonic cohabitation, histories of listening, and the acoustemological world of two previous generations.

TR: Yes, so, on that note, how do you choose to conceptualise in your own mind the acoustemological change that has happened? Do you feel that it is a question of loss of, say, the sonic way of knowing that you encountered in the 70s? Do you prefer to conceptualise it in terms of change or do you see it more as a layering: so one being built on another with an underlying constant? What is your preferred way of considering it?

SF: I would prefer to consider it as a kind of layering, as a differentiation process, as a diversification process that is historically dynamic. However, I am very aware of the fact that local people, their tendency is to narrate things very intensely in terms of loss. Loss is one of the most important metaphoric as well as actual material dimensions of the way Bosavi people calibrate the difference between one day and the next, whether it is loss of persons, loss of particular kinds of knowledge, loss of particular kinds of experience, loss of particular kinds of places, loss of particular kinds of opportunities or the sense of loss that they feel when they encounter people from other places nearby and compare themselves. Or the sense of loss that they feel inevitably when they go to the local community school and see that teachers, who come from areas that surround them,

had much more opportunity than the older brothers and sisters or parents of their generation.

So, Bosavi people tend to narrate their historical experience in terms of loss. That was a theme that Buck Schieffelin (1981) took up in his work about evangelicalism and the Bosavi narration of history, and differentiation for Bosavi people is loss. But, analytically, I would line up with you that differentiation has to be analytically treated much more as a very complex process of layering and not one thing replacing another, but sometimes the replacement is partial and then there is a pull back or a pull forward and things can happen very quickly or they can happen very slowly, and these things are going on simultaneously. So, layering is a more attractive metaphor for me than loss here.

TR: So, on that note, is it possible for one acoustemology to end and another begin or is it that acoustemology shifts in terms of the sounds to which it is orientated?

SF: Well, I will give you an example of the kind of layering that made most sense to me back in the 1990s, when we first started to see a real sonic change. I started to track this history of the first generation of people who listened to guitar and string band music and to recognise that this music was also very much about loss and they associated the vocality and all the voice mechanisms as well as the poetry and the sound of it as about loss, although it was, of course, a completely new sound. Even though I tracked the history of the first ukulele arriving in Bosavi in 1976 all the way up to the generation of young people in the 1990s who were playing string band music, I saw how, in one generation, people, after they learnt these missionary hymns, used the melodic

frameworks of them but adapted them completely to the poetic formulas of the songs of the parental generation and grandparental generation that I knew (Feld 2001, 1982/2012b). So, those songs were still using place names, they were still very much about experiences of loss, they were about family, they were about food, they were about relations – relations between birds and humans. So, the same themes of a core relationality that inhabited both the world of listening practice and the world of speech-making, story-telling, song-making, poetic practice and things like that, that remained the same across those three generations even though here is a new generation with, obviously, a new kind of very specific knowledge: how to do it with guitar music. And that, obviously, had this direct relationship to being the first generation to grow up with missionary hymns in their sonic environment.

So, that is an example of something that can be really pretty carefully historicised in terms of acoustemological transformation. But, just to give you an example, Gaso, the guy who was my drum teacher in the 70s and 80s, the best drummer in Bosavi, his father Kiliya, was a person who made first contact. So, this is an interesting family. Kiliya's grandson, and Gaso's oldest son, Oska, became the leader of the guitar band movement. Now, Oska's oldest son Jimmy is one of the drummers that you see in the *Voices of the Rainforest* film. He really knows how to play the guitar, but he practised his ass off for weeks because he wanted to be in the film drumming. So, there is a really good example of how these things are obviously layered forward, backward, sideways, and it is not one thing totally replacing something else.

TR: Yes, I totally take that point. Was he performing that in a way of a person self-consciously performing heritage in the same way that Monica might have been wearing a traditional dress, for instance?

SF: I think that is a fair assessment, but, at the same time, I also think this relates to this theme of loss and it relates to the theme of the way people imagine everything about reciprocity and exchange, as something that works in cycles. It's a local way of 'what goes around comes around' or 'what comes around goes around'; this kind of idea that the people you teach become your colleagues, become your professors, in terms that would be familiar to us.

TR: So, as you say, it loops back as well as forward. The temporality of it is quite complicated.

SF: The temporality is complicated, and it is hard to make a big generalisation except to say, as in many things in the Bosavi world, and this relates to, I think, a lot of historical themes, that there is openness to these kinds of surprise. Jimmy [the drummer in the *Voices of the Rainforest* film] is not seen as somebody who is going backward because he wants to drum. In fact, before I left, he said, "I know that you have my grandfather's drum and I want you to keep it". He said, "I'm not asking you to bring it back to me, but I'm asking who is going to look after it after you, because you're going to die too. So, who's going to look after my grandfather's drum? And I know you took the pictures and have the pictures of my grandfather with that drum. I want that drum not to be in Bosavi. I want it to stay with you white people. I want it to stay outside, but I want people to know that that was my grandfather's drum and that he was the one who taught

you and that is why the world knows something about this". So, here is this kid who is speaking to me in English, and very, very sophisticated, but he is returning to a really important Bosavi theme: generational relationality. What does it mean once this relationality reaches outside of Bosavi? And he wants to know do I have a son who I am going to pass that drum to or where is it going to go? So, that is a really good example of how people keep these conversations very fluid.

TR: One of the fundamental points about the Kaluli work is that, at least in the early material, the rainforest environment is visually somewhat restrictive, but sonically very rich. If we look at other contexts in which acoustemology has been applied, sounds also tend to be conspicuous in some way. So, for instance, in my own stuff about the hospital, or Andrew Eisenberg's (2013) work about the Islamic calls to prayer in Mombasa, or in Michele Friedner and Stefan Helmreich's (2012) piece on acoustemology and deaf studies, sound is conspicuous, or in the latter case, conspicuous in its absence or in its non-auditory presences. So, to what extent do you think that that sonic conspicuousness is really essential to the development of acoustemology or is it just that acoustemology becomes more noticeable in those contexts? Can you have an inconspicuous acoustemology, for instance?

SF: Yes. I think I would go back to the term 'habitus' here, in terms of the way that we think about routinised forms of practice. Some of them, of course, become very conspicuous, noticeable and, of course, they become reportable: they are things that people remark on. And the obvious acoustemologies are the ones where there is a meta discourse. Bosavi was extraordinary because there was so much meta language about sound. Some cultures, we know, have much more meta language, literally a language

about language. Then, at the same time, there are many places where people say, “Well, people simply don’t talk about this”, so there meta language is not the thing. You have to study practice itself.

So, the cultivated habits of knowing the world are very much connected to the cultivated habits of how you perform it, talk about it and make it conspicuous, that is make it public, make it available. My interest in cosmopolitans in West Africa, and particularly my interest in the globalisation of jazz, was the way in which this thing which has been narrated with such a nationalist American story about this as ‘America’s classical music’ and all this stuff, but that this is a narrative that is just blown to shreds by the world empirical evidence of the fact that for many people making jazz, not only their own language, but their own meta language references the music in terms of change and difference. So, Bosavi people can talk about birds and the radio in the same sentence. These West Africans that I encountered can talk about liberation struggles in Africa, civil rights struggles in the US and jazz music in the same sentence.

So, these are examples of high, front-loaded or whatever you want to call it, conspicuous acoustemologies. And, of course, I have been attracted to that because it gives me access. But are there other ways, are there other zones of this that are considerably more subtle and take much more teasing out? I think the answer is yes. And I think Michele and Stefan’s piece on sound studies and deaf studies offers some good directive there, and I think that now what we are seeing is that many people who are attracted to visual artforms and the study of them, or who are attracted to dance or attracted to performative situations or attracted to different kinds of discourses, are seeing that sound is relevant to them. It can be a pretty subtle material. I was just at a

conference about this at the University of Chicago, in September 2019, organised by Meghanne Barker and Constantine Nikassis, about relations between linguistic anthropology and visual anthropology, where my keynote proposed that we have to go back to spectralism as an approach to the senses, linking sound and image. So, people were talking a lot about concepts like 'vibe' and 'groove' and all of these, and a turn to getting interested in the really ephemeral aspects of culture and practice.

TR: Are you referring too to 'non-representational theory' and 'more-than-representational theory' here? (e.g. Thrift 2007; Lorimer 2005).

SF: Yes. Non-representational theory and also 'affect theory' (e.g. Stewart 2007; Navaro-Yashin 2012; Pelkmans 2013) and where that is going to lead. My response was also to say, "Yes, but I am also trying to get a sense of where people are going in the affective neuroscience or affective biology of emotions area, to try and understand how we have to take account of what the neural affordances are, not just the cultural ones".

TR: I think anyone who is interested in acoustemology will find these answers really helpful.

SF: Good. I think I was necessarily vague about all of them because I can't say I have definitive answers. I haven't done definitive research in any of these areas that you bring up. Perhaps it is also just a personal thing. I am more attracted to things that are in play and in process. I never wanted to make acoustemology something that was like geometry. I mean, I think of it as a kind of experimental word in a larger experimental zone that connects senses and bodies and affects. But the fundamental thing is, whether

you study from the point of view of culture or you study from the point of view of the brain, you are going to get to epistemology in some way or another and, sooner or later, you are going to get to what sound has to do with epistemology.

TR: That's interesting. So, do you think that the discourse around acoustemology has become a bit too introspective?

SF: Let me put it this way, many people who ask me or who hear a presentation of mine where I am talking about this, say to me "Why aren't you making this more legible? Why aren't you theorising this more?" And my response is always "Well, I am theorising it, but I am theorising it from the ground, from the material. I am attracted to ethnography, as I always was, as a process of learning to think about larger things through the materiality and the forms and the practices of the everyday sphere and the ritual sphere".

So, I experience, I guess from students and colleagues, almost a voiced kind of frustration: "Hey, these ideas have been around for a long time. Why aren't you nailing them down more?" or, "Why haven't you created more definitions?" or this kind of stuff. That is just not who I am or what I do. What I am attracted to is when people take an idea and run with it, the way you took ideas and ran with them and gave us new things to think about by saying that, "Hey, this isn't just about exotic folks living in the rainforest. You can really think seriously about what is going on in hospitals by thinking about ordinary, everyday practices of listening and hearing and how they are stratified and how they are connected to meaning making", or Michele and Stefan saying, "You can even do it in deaf studies", people saying, "We can do this with anything from street

practice, to studying television commercials, to multiple different forms." I find that exciting and interesting. I don't really feel any desire to nail anything down. I think keeping it all in play is just fine. I don't know, that is just me.

TR: I think people will be interested to hear what your own vision of acoustemology is. Because the tendency as you say might be to think, "Well, he's going to want to be prescriptive about what acoustemology means and can mean", but, actually, that's not how you see it.

SF: No, I don't see it as a formula to be applied to anything, a theory that is going to be like, "Oh, we have a new mould in the cheese factory here", I'm not interested in cheese factories or formulas. I am interested in the way that, by pointing out what I noticed and how I noticed it, I can create the conditions for other people to explore other kinds of knowledges and practices, and so we can somehow *collectively* refine what we mean by acoustemology, which goes back to your first question. There was just an article recently, actually, in a music philosophy journal about acoustemology, looking at this (Granger 2019). So, I think, if philosophers of the senses are going to take this up and take it in their direction, and if people who really work through and around concepts of culture and practice are going to take it and run with it in different kinds of ways, great. It came to me at the conjunction of philosophy and anthropology, so let it run.

TR: Did you have any kind of notion when you wrote the term down in that '96 piece that it was going to go this large?

SF: No. Originally, I had used the term in the early 90s, and the first time I took it into the public domain was at a birthday party for Murray Schafer, a conference in Banff, Canada, called *The Tuning of the World*. It was Murray's 60th birthday, in 1993 in August as I recall. So, I was one of the keynotes for that. There were a variety of people from history, from communications, from music. There were composers, there were a lot of radio people, a lot of Murray's Canadian crowd. I was in a period where I was really reading a lot about senses and emotions, and I was really reading a lot in philosophy. This acoustemology term struck me. I was also reading a lot of John Dewey and his stuff about pragmatic epistemology (Dewey and Bentley 1949). It was just a period in my thinking when I had taken a pause to really pursue a certain kind of reading. So, I introduced the term in the context of a keynote that I gave at this birthday party for Murray, and I introduced it by saying, "One of the gifts that Murray has given us is that he likes to invent words and that he is playful and that he brings playfulness into musical composition and his writing. Some of his neologisms, as he knows, have gone nowhere and some of them go somewhere." So, I said, "In that spirit, I'm going to tell you that I'm thinking about acoustemology", and that was the first time I used the term in the public.

TR: Really interesting. I think it's safe to say it was one idea that 'went somewhere'. Thanks so much for talking to me, Steve. I really appreciate it.

SF: OK. Thank you, Tom.

Declaration of interest statement: No conflicts of interest were identified in relation to this article.

References:

Blau, D., A. Amanaditis, P. Panopoulos and S. Feld. 2010. *Skyros Carnival*. Santa Fé: VoxLox.

Bourdieu, P. 1980. *The Logic of Practice* (trans. R. Nice). Cambridge: Polity.

Cassirer, E. 1923/1955. *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Erster Teil: Die Sprache*. Berlin: Bruno Cassirer. Translated as *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume One: Language*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Cassirer, E. 1923/1955. *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Zweiter Teil: Das mythische Denken*. Berlin: Bruno Cassirer. Translated as *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume Two: Mythical Thought*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Csordas, T, ed. 1994. *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Descola, P. 2005/2014. *Beyond Nature and Culture*. (Translated by J. Lloyd). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Dewey, J. and A. Bentley. 1949. *Knowing and the Known*. Boston: The Beacon Press.

Eisenberg, A.J. 2013. "Islam, sound and space: acoustemology and Muslim citizenship on the Kenyan coast". In *Music, Sound and Space: transformations of public and private experience*, ed. Georgina Born, 186-202. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Feld, S. 1983. *Voices of the Forest*: *a village soundscape*. National Public Radio programme. Also available in Feld, S. 2001. *Bosavi: Rainforest Music from Papua New Guinea*. 3 CDs (track 10, disc 2). Washington, DC: Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.

Feld, S. 1991. *Voices of the Rainforest*. CD. Boston: Rykodisc.

Feld, S. 1996. Waterfalls of Song: an acoustemology of place resounding in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea. In *Senses of Place*, eds. Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso*,* 91-135. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.

Feld, S. 2001. *Bosavi: Rainforest Music from Papua New Guinea*. Book and 3CDs. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Folkways.

Feld, S. 2003. A Rainforest Acoustemology. In *The Auditory Culture Reader*, eds. Michael Bull and Les Back, 223-239. Oxford and New York: Berg.

Feld, S. 2003-2010. *The Time of Bells*, volumes 1-5. CD/DVD. Santa Fé: VoxLox.

Feld, S. 2012. *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra: five musical years in Ghana*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Feld, S. 1982/2012b. *Sound and Sentiment: birds, weeping, poetics, and song in Kaluli expression*. Third and Thirtieth Anniversary Edition, with a new introduction. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Feld, S. 2015. Acoustemology. In *Keywords in Sound*, eds. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny, 12-21. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Feld, S. and A. Apley. 2020. Mixing Time and Space: A Conversation with Steven Feld. Documentary Educational Resources. https://www.der.org/mixing-time-and-space-a-conversation-with-steven-feld/.

Feld, S., D. Leonard, and J. Richards. 2019. *Voices of the Rainforest* (CD, photobook, BluRay disc). Santa Fé: VoxLox. Distribution by DER.

Friedner, M., and S. Helmreich. 2012. Sound Studies Meets Deaf Studies. *The Senses & Society* 7, no.1: 72-86.

Gell, A. 1975. *Metamorphosis of the Cassowaries: Umeda Society, Language and Ritual*. London: Athlone.

Gell, A. 1995. The Language of the Forest: landscape and phonological iconism in Umeda. In *The Anthropology of Landscape: perspectives on place and space*, eds. Eric Hirsch & Michael O'Hanlon, 232–54. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gell, A. 1999 *The Art of Anthropology: Essays and Diagrams*, ed. Eric Hirsch. London: Athlone.

Granger, C. 2019. Acoustemology: a retrospective glance at a 1990s sound concept. Music and Philosophy Study Group Retrospective Review No. 2019:1. http://musicandphilosophy.ac.uk.

Hirsch, E. and M. O'Hanlon. 1995. *The Anthropology of Landscape: Perspectives on Place and Space.* Oxford: Claredon Press.

Howes, D, ed. 1991. *The Varieties of Sensory Experience: a sourcebook in the anthropology of the senses*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Lorimer, H. 2005. Cultural geography: the busyness of being 'more-than-representational', *Progress in Human Geography* 29, no.1: 83–94.

Mauss, M. 1935/1979. Body techniques. In *Sociology and Psychology: essays by Marcel Mauss* (trans. B. Brewster). 97-123. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Merleau-Ponty, M. 1945/2012. *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris: Gallimard; *Phenomenology of Perception*, Donald Landes (trans.), London: Routledge.

Navaro-Yashin, Y. 2012. *The Make-Believe Space: Affective Geography in a Postwar Polity*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.

Panksepp, J. 2004. *Affective Neuroscience: the foundations of human and animal emotions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pelkmans, M. 2013. The affect effect. Anthropology of This Century 7. http://aotcpress.com/articles/affect-effect/.

Rice, T. 2003. Soundselves: An Acoustemology of Sound and Self in the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary. *Anthropology Today* 19, no.4: 4-9.

Rice, T. 2010. Learning to listen: auscultation and the transmission of auditory knowledge. Special Issue, J*ournal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* S41-S61.

Rice, T. 2013. *Hearing the hospital: sound, listening, knowledge and experience*. Canon Pyon: Sean Kingston Press.

Rice, T. 2018. Acoustemology. In *The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology,* ed. Hilary Callan. London: Wiley.

Scaldaferri, N., and S. Feld, eds. 2019. *When the Trees Resound: Collaborative Media Research on an Italian Festival*. (Book + CDs). Udine: Nota.

Schieffelin, E.L. 1981. Evangelical Rhetoric and the transformation of traditional culture in Papua New Guinea. *Comparative Studies of Society and History* 23, no.1: 150-156.

Stewart, K. 2007. *Ordinary Affects*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.

Stoller, P. 1989. *The Taste of Ethnographic Things: the senses in anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Stoller, P. 1997. *Sensuous Scholarship*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Thrift, N. 2007. *Non-Representational Theory: space, politics, affect.* London: Routledge.

Filmography

The Red Bowmen. Directed by Chris Owen. Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies. DER, 1978.

Voices of the Rainforest. Directed by Steven Feld. VoxLox. DER, 2019.