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Sonic Relations

SONIC RELATIONS: Anthropology of/in Sound

A Conversation with Steven Feld

Steven Feld and Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier

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Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier: This special issue of *Anthropologie et Société* (2019) is called “Champs sonores” (sonic fields). I was otherwise thinking of calling

it “sonic relations”, to emphasize the relational ontology that is connected with sound in Anthropology. I was wondering if you could tell us about how you moved the idea of an anthropology *of* sound towards an anthropology *in* sound, and perhaps share with us some reflections on the “acoustic turn” in your research? How did your work bring you to think about an anthropology *in* sound? What was the process?

Steven Feld: First of all, thank you for organizing the special issue and including me. It’s really a pleasure to have the chance to speak with you and to make connections to research reported by this journal, which I follow. Just yesterday I was reading the issue about “Liaisons Animales” because I’m writing about that theme just now.

On the history side, “anthropology of sound” is a phrase I coined in 1972. This is when I was a graduate student at Indiana University. I had to write a review of *The Anthropology of Music*, a book by my professor, Alan Merriam.¹ He made us do a deep reading of the book and a critical response to it in order for us to understand that music must be theoretically positioned in anthropology, no less than politics, or economics, or religion, or kinship, or any other domain. So I carefully read *The Anthropology of Music* and began my response essay with this provocation: “What about an anthropology of sound?”

That response really derived from two things. The first is that I had had some formation in electroacoustic music and *musique concrète*. I was involved in composing music for soundtracks and also performing improvised avant-garde music. And there, even by the 1970s, the story was very clear: the topic of music was sound. The first synthesizers were coming along. Popular music was exploding. Sound technology was at the center of it all. You didn’t have to be a physicist or an acoustician or futurist to really understand that everything was going to move in the direction of sound, in all fields of producing, performing, composing, circulating, and analysing music. That was one source of inspiration. The other inspiration was really ethnography. As an undergraduate, I studied with Colin Turnbull. I listened to the LP recordings that he made in the rainforest in Central Africa and I read his books very carefully.² I was really mesmerized by the idea that part of the deep story of humanity was the story of sonic evolution and adaptation, and particularly the evolution of auditory acuity, and the cultural nature of sound perception in rainforests.

In addition to electroacoustic music and rainforest anthropology there were other factors in play there in the early 1970s. On the anthropology side there was the emergence of ethnography and theory that led to the anthropology of the senses, the anthropology of environment, the anthropology of the body and gender, and the anthropology of place, all important theoretical clusters by the 1980s. On the music side technologies of recording and reproduction were becoming more portable and changing how music was made and circulated. So I did not do anything terribly original, I just seized on that particular moment in intellectual and technological history to ask “what about an anthropology of sound?” And to suggest that beyond music, it had to include the study of poetics, of voice, of nonhuman species, and of technologies.

When I went to Papua New Guinea in 1976, for my first fieldwork, in a rainforest community, I was very much following these instincts. My questions really had to do with how language, music, and the acoustic world of the rainforest were shaping forces in the constitution of being, becoming, and personhood. Bosavi turned out to be a very rich environment to study that kind of thing. People in Melanesian societies believe that being is completed by relations. Being doesn't pre-exist relating. Relating dominates the entire way of imagining the social, and most importantly that relational between-ness always includes spirits and non-human species on a parallel plane with humans. What I was able to do was to bring sound to that kind of relational perspective, and bring that kind of relational perspective to sound.

In the rainforest I was first seized by relations between humans and the avian world. In Bosavi those relations seamlessly fuse the natural historical and cosmological. On the one side birds are quotidian space-time clocks, telling the time of day, the seasons, and the layers of height and depth in the forest. On the other side birds are spirits, what humans become by achieving death. Listening to them simultaneously as absences and presences is part of the everyday experience and consciousness of Bosavi people. This is how the anthropology of sound started to take deeper ethnographic and theoretical shape for me, because of the importance of listening to the world and hearing the sociality and materiality of avian sounds and their many relational engagements with human ways of speaking, singing, crying and so forth.

That sound is as much a material basis or zone for relationality as kinship or religion was for me a way of connecting my work to the relationality theorists that I most admired in Melanesian studies, the people of the previous generation, like Nancy Munn, Marilyn Strathern, and Roy Wagner³. But it was also for me a very deep and powerful connection to Gregory Bateson, the work that he did in Papua New Guinea in the 1930s and the role of relationality in his ritual analysis of the *naven* ceremony. And it was clear how important that grasp of relationality was for Bateson's later intellectual forays into cybernetic epistemology and ecology of mind.⁴

Anyway, central to knowing this world, to learning in the field, was the technology of sound recording. I was engaged with sound recording all the time; not just recording the sounds of people speaking and singing, but the sound of the entire world in which they were living and working. Then, when I would sit down to transcribe songs or speeches of course I could always hear birds, insects, water. As Bosavi people listened with me and guided my transcriptions and translations they always commented on these things. This really brought out how sound was always relational, always social, always in a movement between the foreground and background of experience. That was heightened by how the song texts are sensuous sound maps of the forest. So in the moment I realized that the anthropology of sound was something much more than a supplement to the anthropology of music. In fact, it was something to be reckoned with in its own right and it was central to the very nature of relationality in Melanesia.

Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier: Is this how it became an anthropology *in*

sound?

Steven Feld: Precisely. Over time it became an anthropology *in* sound because I realized that I could not adequately communicate acoustic relationality only in words, in text. When I was a student, I had to establish the intellectual seriousness of what I was doing. To do that in anthropology means to write, first dissertation, then articles and books. Research still principally means textual publication. So I wrote for audiences in linguistic anthropology, in ethnomusicology, and in communications, because my first job was in that field, which again kept the spirit of my work close to the inspiration of Bateson.

But then I realized, I have something much more to do here. At the same time that I published my monograph *Sound and Sentiment* (my dissertation transformed into a book), and my first articles, I also produced two LP records.⁵ One was to initiate a recording series in Papua New Guinea. Another was in a German scholarly series. On these LPs I put not only the music and materials that I transcribed and analysed in my texts, but also the sounds of birds in the forest, indeed examples of all the different ways Bosavi people sing with and to and about water and birds and insects. So that complex conjunction of natural history and eco-cosmology was materially available in sound – available sensuously at the primary material level for others to experience as I did. But anthropologists did not take LPs seriously as scholarly research productions, so very few people listened. That even included people who took my writings quite seriously.

But then I had a really amazing experience in 1983. I recorded and edited 24 hours of sounds of the rainforest and I made a thirty-minute sound essay and this was published on National Public Radio in the US.⁶ And it got great response.

Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier: *Voices in the Rainforest*, right?

Steven Feld: Yes. I was frustrated by the LP experience and trying to do anthropology in sound and thought I should try radio. This move was really inspired by Murray Schafer's book *The Tuning of the World* and his World Soundscape Project at Simon Fraser University, where terrific researchers like Barry Truax and Hildergard Westerkamp bridged the worlds of sound composition and field research.⁷ Reading Murray Schafer I came across a line that I still love to quote: "soundscape research should be presented as musical composition." That's what inspired the idea that I needed to be more relentless in linking anthropology of sound research to doing anthropology in sound. That is why I concentrated so much effort in the 1990s on sound recording projects, like *Voices in the Rainforest*, *Rainforest Soundwalks*, and *Bosavi: Rainforest Music from Papua New Guinea*.⁸ These recordings circulate as CDs but also appear as radio broadcasts, sound art concerts, and gallery and museum installations. They have reached numerous audiences far beyond the readership of my academic publications. They are also important to me for a political reason: they make my work directly accessible to people in Papua New Guinea, and like books also bring royalty money back to the community of origin, aiding in everything from education to resistance to extractive resource companies. So doing anthropology in sound also has ethical and political consequences in terms of circulation and

feedback.

Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier: Could we say that the idea of an anthropology *in* sound ought to be expanded further and no longer necessarily be tied to the process of recording? The way you talk about it now, it's about recording. But could we expand this idea and say that it's more than recording, it's sensitivity, it's an approach towards sound that needs to be developed?

Steven Feld: Yes, I think that's a really good point. Linking an anthropology of sound to an anthropology in sound is really about insisting on research in and as active listening, on serious deep listening. It is a way of insisting that studying listening as *habitus* must be linked to heightened listening as a way to engage and study the materiality of sound. I think that arguing this idea was aided in the 1980s and 1990s by the development of the anthropology of the senses. I published an early essay, I think in the first anthropology of the senses reader that David Howes from Concordia organized, *The Varieties of Sensory Experience*.⁹ That connected me to many more anthropologists outside of the language and music realm. And I participated in some of those early conferences that David generously organized at Concordia, which I think also helped to make clear to anthropologists that sound was not some exotic material of limited interest only to linguists and musicologists, but it was really a serious part of the very big history of human sensual and perceptual relations.

It is worth noting here that Canada also has a very particular place in this kind of story because of the tradition of audio-documentary and sound art broadcast on CBC. I listened to "The Idea of North" and other Glenn Gould works, as well as many other sound art and environmental compositions like the Québec sound odyssey project of Claude Shryer, and of course *The Vancouver Soundscape*, and then its updates, from the World Soundscape Project.¹⁰ CBC and other world platforms like Listening Room in Australia, or Radio Atelje in Finland, were, like the development of the anthropology of the senses, key to making culture audible at a critical moment, thus making it possible to imagine anthropologies of sound becoming anthropologies in sound, and, as you suggest, creating a deeper conscious awareness of sound as a medium for knowledge production.

Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier: You were very much inspired by your background in music and also by the place where you conducted your PhD field research. Could we think about developing an anthropology in sound in other contexts or any other ecological niches, or environments? Could it be in the city? Is it possible to adapt that approach in different places where sound is not necessarily recognized as being so rich, although it can be?

Steven Feld: Yes, that's a really important point and certainly part of this story for me. During the twenty-five years of work in Papua New Guinea even people who were extremely positive often said things like, "well this is great but you can only do something like this in this isolated rainforest environment with just two thousand people." I never once believed that. I would point out compositions, or radio works, or works by different anthropologists that related to this anthropology of sound idea from all different kinds of environments and societies.

Here we were in the 1980s at the apex of explosion of the globalization story within anthropology and the world music industry. So the first way I talked back to that issue was by studying what came to be called “world music” – the story of music globalization. The first really major recording that announced this whole thing, in 1986, was Paul Simon’s *Graceland*. I wrote a response to that recording for the very first issue of *Public Culture*.¹¹ When the LP was released I was teaching a course on popular music and mass media for the first time, realizing that my students would not be doing research like mine in remote places in Papua New Guinea. So I wanted to teach about popular music and media. From there I took up the study of what Murray Schafer called schizophonia, the splitting of sounds from sources, and developed a theory of schizophonic mimesis over a series of articles in the 80s and 90s. This became an important way for me to take anthropology of/in sound into the acoustic contestations over indigeneity and its appropriations, as well as its politics of representation.¹²

The other way that I tried to expand anthropology of/in sound was with new field recording and research in Europe. I thought, well, if there is any place where I can break the idea that this is just about the exotic, just about remote rainforests, it would be in cities and villages in Europe. I began recording in Greece, in Italy, in France, in Norway, in Denmark, in Finland by listening to bells. And I realized that I was listening to ten centuries of history in sound. At the same time, listening to bells in Europe was no different to listening to birds in the New Guinea rainforest. Both of these histories of sounding and listening are about the production of consciousness about space and time.

Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier: Regarding your work on bells in Europe in general, I was wondering if you were influenced by the work of the World Soundscape project, what they did in Europe with the soundscapes of villages? Did that directly or indirectly influence you, or not really?

Steven Feld: It was certainly one of the references. The book by the great French social historian of the senses Alain Corbin, *Les cloches de la Terre (Village Bells)* was an extraordinary influence on me.¹³ More than anyone else, he gave the historical background to how bells were central to the story of peace and war, how they were central to the story of the struggle between the church and the state for the right to control time and labor through sound. These are really big historical themes. So I thought, ok, I can get anthropologists to listen to this. I decided to make an experiment. In the end it was not a successful experiment, but nonetheless I think it was a good experiment. I thought, let me go to places where I don’t really know the language, where I am not doing in-depth ethnography. Let me work with local people, researchers, friends, just asking them to “show me your bells.” Let me do the same thing I did in Papua New Guinea, record sound environments, create sonic compositions from them, play them back locally, find out what people think about this, explore how this is an expression of history, culture, time, space, and relationality. So I did that and released it all on CDs and on the radio, without writing a word.

Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier: Not even field notes or anything like that?

Steven Feld: I did not write anything except sparse liner notes to the CDs. I published these five CDs, *The Time of Bells*, and I collaborated on other CDs in Greece with Charles and Angeliki Keil, photographer Dick Blau, and the sound anthropologist Panayotis Panopoulos, and also in Italy with musicologist Nicola Scaldaferri and visual anthropologist Lorenzo Ferrarini on two CD books. And I did the same thing in Japan with the music anthropologist Yoichi Yamada, a good friend from the early 1980s in Papua New Guinea.¹⁵ The idea was to completely erase the spectre of ethnographic authority, or deep ethnography, to completely change everything from the New Guinea situation and just focus on sound. Well, it didn't work. I made lots of new friends in the world of sound art, radio, museum and gallery installation, and the work was an aesthetic success on that plane, and people liked it at the places of origin. But I could not get it reviewed in any anthropological journal or taken seriously as research by anthropologists.

Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier: Is it the same approach you adopted when you went to Ghana, with your most recent work in Accra? Was it the same approach?

Steven Feld: At first I thought I would just record some bells in Ghana in the same way. But then the story turned out quite differently. My Ghana project, published now in a book, ten CDs, and five DVDs, obviously developed into deep ethnography, now over twelve years, even if it started as an accident. I just went there for a couple weeks and by chance met these incredible avant-garde musicians and ended up playing in their band. That turned into a very different entry point for anthropology in/of sound in an urban environment with a deep connection to the study of globalization through jazz.¹⁶

Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier: You say it was different there. How different was it for you? Was your sensitivity to sound in Ghana continuous with all of your previous work? Do you see a continuity there?

Steven Feld: In terms of Ghana it was different because studying city sounds, jazz and car horns took me into diasporic history and certainly the issue of diasporic intimacy. And it took me into new ways to engage with race theory and vernacular cosmopolitanism. But there also turned out to be many continuities, like in the sound work I did about gutter toads and percussion music, about water and slavery along the Ghana Coast, and especially about car horns, whose ecological and cosmological story turned out to have a lot in common with the story of rainforest birds and village or city bells.¹⁷

As for other continuities in the course of the last 40 years, I would also answer yes, although with some differences in different periods. The 1970s was really for me about learning to be an ethnographer and listener in Papua New Guinea. That continued on for twenty-five years, through the 1980s and 1990 and that's what led to me realizing that the whole idea of the anthropology of sound was too general. So I began to develop the idea of acoustemology (acoustic epistemology), sound as way of knowing. And a big factor in that was the work I did in 1990-1991 with Mickey Hart from Grateful Dead to produce *Voices of the Rainforest*, a CD with twenty-four hours of sounds of the rainforest in one hour.

This was certainly musical documentary, but it was also radio composition, using techniques associated with electroacoustic music. While it is my most experimental project it is also the deepest in terms of acoustemology because it creates the most sensuous form of listening connection between the world I heard so closely, and my representational capacity to let you hear it too.

By the 1990s, when I released that work, anthropology had become more historical and political, through feminism, postcolonial theory, globalization theory, critical race theory, Foucault and projects about governing, and so forth. The “world music” globalization and schizophonia work that I did in the 1990s was a way of extending anthropology in sound to really participate in that. By the time I got to Europe, in the 2000s, and then to Ghana in 2004, the emphasis was really urban and global and deeply historical, as well as more political. I think that I moved with what’s happened in anthropology over forty years. But a constant for me in all of this work on sound is that Batesonian focus on the intertwined sociality of nature and the nature of sociality.

Now I’m working again on my Papua New Guinea materials, both a new book, on voice, and a 25th anniversary edition of *Voices of the Rainforest* in 7.1 cinema surround sound. In both text and sound I’m wrestling with how anthropology now struggles to overcome its original sin, the separation of the concepts of society and culture from the concepts of nature and the body. Now, in the most positive development I think, we are headed to what Philippe Descola calls, in *The Ecology of Others*, a “recomposition.” I like the metaphor of recomposition of course because, for me, it is a musical expression which relates exactly to what I am trying to do with sound: to recompose across past theoretical divides of nature, culture, body, society so that their material intimacy is “audibly entangled,” to use the expression of Jocelyne Guilbault.¹⁸

Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier: It’s interesting that you say that this is happening right now, but don’t you think that your work was already doing that thirty-five years ago with this idea of the co-presence of birds, and their connection to the rainforest and the Bosavi people, you were already doing that, no?

Steven Feld: Yes. But that is also a long history, going back to my time as a student in Paris in 1974, and a long history of thinking about a way to reconcile Bateson and Lévi-Strauss and never coming up with a very good answer. Descola and I are the same age so it is interesting for me to think in cross-historical terms not only because Descola’s *In the Society of Nature* was dazzling and inspiring but also because of the way that researchers of our generation in Amazonia and Melanesia confronted some similar challenges when it came to the nature and culture business.¹⁹ For us, in Melanesia, the reference was perhaps more Bateson than Lévi-Strauss. But Lévi-Strauss was also unquestionably critical in the Melanesian context. In Bosavi there are powerful myths about the transformations of humans into birds and birds into humans. What I tried to do is bring together mythology with the materiality of sound and to understand that materiality in the sonic embodiment of sentiment, through weeping, poetics, and song.

Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier: In your conversation with Don Brenneis, you say that “ethnography through sound is about listening, recording, editing and representation.”²⁰ I was wondering if you see this as a linear process or if it’s something that goes forward and backward, if it’s something that is more dialogical than a linear process. How do you imagine it?

Steven Feld: I imagine it as multidimensional and very much dialogical. When I started to think that I could present ethnography in sound as much as I could present it in text, I really needed to imagine that as a kind of complete ethnographic responsibility, as an ethical responsibility to the people in Bosavi, but also as an intellectual responsibility to the field of anthropology. Let’s face it, whatever the anthropology of the senses accomplished it certainly was not to make the field any less text-centric. And remember 1986, with *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* and *Writing Culture*.²¹ Yes, all of a sudden there was an explosion of concern with representation, ethnography as a literary genre, and literariness. But whatever good that did in terms of the politics of representation, and of critique, it also drove the field into an even deeper kind of textual fetishism.

The question of representation, the question of dialogue is as much a question of how we work in any medium. Sound affords a very particular departure here because there is an instant dialogic springboard: you record the sound, then you play it back, and then what happens? When I made *Voices of the Rainforest*, which is composed from dozens of recordings, I was able to playback the component tracks in Bosavi and do dialogic auditing and editing. This idea of feedback and dialogue was very important in the film world of Jean Rouch. When I studied with him in Paris in 1974 he always insisted that the most powerful aspect of film in anthropology was the potential for feedback, and the way it puts representers and represented literally eye to eye. Inspired by Rouch I developed the idea of dialogic editing and auditing, of ear to ear feedback as listening to histories of listening. For me this became a central method for anthropology of and in sound.²²

Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier: Did you ever use film or visual recordings for that dialogical approach, or was it always happening between the dialogue verbal vs. sonic?

Steven Feld: Of course the 70s and 80s and 90s was not the time of iPads and portable laptop computers and technologies like that in Papua New Guinea. We did not have digital cameras. The closest thing to get instant feedback with images was Polaroid pictures. With sound, of course, I could have instant feedback. It became a privileged medium in that way, also because we could leave cassettes and cassette recorders. I would have to go away to develop the pictures and come back to Papua New Guinea in order to interact around them. It was a very different kind of moment in terms of the instant possibility of sharing images and sounds and making dialogues around them. Now I can send a picture over my cell phone to somebody in the rainforest in Papua New Guinea. In 1976, this was a totally incredible kind of idea.

But yes, of course, what happened was that in the 1990s and the 2000s we

experienced a really important thing in visual anthropology, which is the rise of the acoustic. We finally got a generation of visual anthropologists who were saying “hey, sound is not just something that is recorded simultaneously with an image. Sound is a medium in which you can also edit and create at precisely the level of the visual.” A good example is what is going on at The Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology with the work of Rupert Cox and many younger scholars, like in the *Beyond Text?* conference and book that he put together with Andrew Irving and Chris Wright.²³ It really demonstrates new ways to put the visual and sonic into much more serious conversation.

Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier: Do you think that the connection that exists between visual anthropology and the anthropology of/in sound comes from the shared possibility of recording, because of the possibility of editing and montage afforded by recording devices?

Steven Feld: Yes, I do, and it’s not a new story. Think of Dziga Vertov. Vertov had a laboratory of sound in the 1920s. All of the *Man with a Movie Camera* experiments that he did in the visual field with montage, he had already tried in sound. Even though Rouch picked up on this and talked about the combined ciné-eye-ear, he did not take it very far in his work after a few radical soundtrack experiments in the 1950s and early 1960s.²⁴

My own history in all of this also starts with film. I got involved in *musique concrète* and electroacoustic music because I wanted to compose for film soundtracks. Most of the ideas that I had about this, before I was an anthropologist, I had them in a dark room, watching images, either silent images or images with sounds on the screen, while thinking about creating different kinds of soundtracks mixing performance music, verbal art, text, and sound editing and sound montage. In the old days, all it took was some scotch tape and a pair of scissors or razor blade, and an editing block. Tape is a very, very material medium, and it encourages editing. It was only in the era of instant video where the sound is recorded simultaneously with the picture that people could take for granted that image and sound are one, fused and forged, and that the editing of one is the editing of the other. In ethnographic filmmaking, this, and the concept of “witnessing,” taken quite transparently, led to an excessive emphasis on verbal content. Acousmatic, or off- screen unseen sound, was largely music added for effect or transition. You had absolutely no emphasis on experimentation or detailed sound editing. But all visual environments are sonic environments, and they call out for co-construction. Which really leads to film being as powerful a medium for anthropology of/in sound as anthropology through image. I think that the last ten-fifteen years in particular have been terrific, with your generation and the current generation of students changing visual anthropology and making it much more sonic and sensuous.

Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier: In the third edition of *Sound and Sentiment* you write that “And I hope that you can join me to wish ethnography a more creative future in the relationships of words, sounds, and images.”²⁵ I was wondering how you think a more creative anthropology will develop, it’s probably already emerging. What form will it take?

Steven Feld: There are several ways to answer. But perhaps the most important concerns anthropology's relationship to art, where it's important not only to go beyond texts, but also to take seriously as anthropologists the intellectual and ethical responsibilities of experiments across audiences, across formats, across modalities, and to use all media of representation. To imagine a creative future for anthropology is to imagine a future where every anthropologist is equally skilled in writing, filmmaking, sound making, picture making, web media production. Why not? We live in this era with ubiquitous technology and heightened access and interest in representation. Some people think that the public intellectual future is Ted Talks, journalism, blogs, and punditry. I hope not. I hope that the future is deeper alliances, deeper collaborations, between anthropology and art practice, particularly more inventive and creative understanding of multiple media representation. The discipline and our journals and conferences are still extraordinarily conservative. I understand that this is complicated. I was a teacher for thirty-five years. It would have thrilled me to tell my students that they should do more of what I was doing with media and even more aggressively and with more risks. But that would have been ethically irresponsible. Those students had to first become good researchers and good writers to be taken seriously in anthropology and to get work. Now I think it is a bit more possible to encourage our students to take more risks and to be more experimental, while at the same time maintaining a deep grounding in the key intellectual issues that formed and continue to transform the field.

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