

## **Sounding Anthropology: a Jam Session with Steven Feld**

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Steven Feld is Senior Scholar at the School for Advanced Research in Santa Fe and Distinguished Professor of Anthropology Emeritus at the University of New Mexico. His seminal 1982 monograph *Sound and Sentiment*, on the Bosavi rainforest of Papua New Guinea, is a landmark ethnography for the anthropology of sound, music, and the senses. His subsequent turn to acoustemology draws on research on jazz in Accra and the relationship between bells, space and time in France, Finland, Norway, Denmark, Greece, Italy, Japan, Ghana, and Togo. His 2012 monograph *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra* comes with collaborative CD and DVD productions of his own documentary label, VoxLox. His experimentation with ways of knowing through sound, text, and image has been influential for anthropologists, music and sound studies scholars, linguists, filmmakers, photographers, and sound artists.

Between August 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020, Prof. Feld took part in the virtual seminar “Subject Constitution in African Contexts: Iteration, Differentiation, Intersectionality”, associated with the homonymous FAPESP-funded project developed at the Federal University of São Carlos. The conversation that follows took place on August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020, and builds upon the dialogue established between Steven Feld and project researchers over the virtual seminar. It includes topics such as subject constitution; theory and storytelling in anthropology; anthropology and music; anthropology and politics; linguistic anthropology; the pandemic; collaborative production; and affective engagement in fieldwork.

**Iracema:** I am going to start with a question that has to do with our seminar. Steve, in your keynote, you asked what the words *differentiation*, *iteration* and *intersectionality* do to the subject of subject constitution, whether they determine or unsettle it. I like this question very much. Also, the issue of how subjects are constituted and differentiated is very present in your ethnography, especially in the book *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra*. I find it very inspiring how social positionality related to race, class, gender, age, education, and cosmopolitan

circulation is interwoven into your ethnographic narrative. I was wondering if you could talk more about how your work engages with subject constitution ethnographically through sound, text, and image.

**Steve:** I did not really think about the phrase *subject constitution* until I realized the way you have been using it in your research group. Subjectivity and intersubjectivity, in the sense of Alfred Schutz's social phenomenology, have been a key theme for me, but this is my first opportunity to try and think with you about subject constitution. What I try to do in the *Jazz Cosmopolitanism* project is to biographically, historically, and ethnographically unsettle the notion of cosmopolitanism; specifically to talk about cosmopolitanism from below, to perform an anti-elitist perspective on cosmopolitanism in dialogue with theorists like Kwame Anthony Appiah, Pnina Werbner, James Clifford, Stuart Hall, Saskia Sassen, and Hannah Arendt. I was also very drawn to thinking about the contemporary state of the anthropological project as itself a re-theorization of cosmopolitanism. How are anthropologists reconfiguring their relationship to their own subjectivity and to the subjectivities they engage through their research.

Subject constitution in sound was an obvious starting point for me. Before I really had any serious verbal dialogue or interpersonal relationship with Nii Noi Nortey and Nii Otoo Annan, I immediately heard, in the way they were playing music, many things that were familiar to me. It was like they were walking and talking on a familiar path. I could take my instrument and we could just walk and talk. This is the intersubjectivity of being deeply in a conversation with other musicians, particularly through improvisation, through the history of Afro-diasporic musical idioms of jazz and blues. So rather quickly I thought a lot about how Nii Noi and Nii Otoo create dialogue that is at times very intimate and at times very tense, at times very conflictual but always closely entangled with North American jazz, world jazz, and African idioms.

This was also a way of asking how their subject constitution in sound was constantly referencing but also distancing, becoming close, becoming familiar, then becoming different and far away. How then was the differentiation of subject constitution explored and worked out through the medium of African and diasporic music. Subject constitution was refracted for me as the relation of listening practices to musicking practices. If I was listening to their history of listening, to their history of listening to African music, their history of listening to African-American music, what was different? How was I listening to a distillation of a historical process, the historical process by which they became different from other musicians and their surroundings, but maintaining multiple points of conversation? So, my first attempt to try and

grapple with subjectivity and intersubjectivity in that African context was through sound and through listening, asking myself: how could I travel six thousand miles and so immediately feel that I have known Nii Noi and Nii Otoo for a very long time? How can I pick up an instrument and immediately be part of an intimate conversation with them, but at the same time realize that this intimate conversation is unlike any I've known before?

Subjectivity and subject constitution was constantly being reworked for me, as a site of agency, as a site of pride of race, pride of place, pride of skill by coeval actors who were never fixed in a distant location called "African tradition." I realized that this kind of sounding and listening was a way of expressing a relationship with multiple locations, multiple timespans – the simultaneous multiplicity I associated with the notion of cosmopolitanism. The phrase *vernacular cosmopolitanism* that came from Homi Bhabha immediately struck me; the re-theorization of it in the context of anthropology by Pnina Werbner immediately struck me; and particularly the notion of *discrepant cosmopolitanism* from James Clifford immediately struck me. And I wondered how these theories could relate my history of listening to and sounding jazz to simultaneously close but surely different ways of listening and sounding for Nii Noi and Nii Otoo.

Then came the question of how to textualize this kind of overlapped conversation of listening and sounding. And that took me immediately to Bakhtin: It's about voice and polyphony and dialogism. So rather than textualize in analytic writing, I decided to locate these layered *listenings to histories of listening* through storytelling. So immediately I thought, "ok, intersubjectivity is intervocality; that's the way I have to textualize this." And that really made me think about linking Bakhtin and Voloshinov's linguistic philosophy to the kind of problem that Jim Clifford sets up in his discrepant cosmopolitanism essay. What does it mean to imagine that all cosmopolitans are not elites? What does it mean to imagine that forms of travel, forced, not forced, desired, travel in the mind, travel with things like record players or radios rather than actual physical travel, can be very much part of cosmopolitan constitution? And then I started paying attention to the books in Nii Noi's library. What do I have to know about Nii Noi's dialogue with these books, these ideas?" What do I need to engage through his cassettes, his LP recordings? And so I started to think about the gaps between physical travel and knowledge of the world and the kind of travel that you do when you listen to recordings and you play along with them, and you play along with the people who make this kind of music.

So I moved from sound to text through voice. And I found myself consulting Clifford, Werbner, Bhabha, and Appiah in terms of thinking how I might find my own voice in this kind of mix. Kwame Antony Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism* book was very, very important to me, not

only in the context of Ghana but in the larger theoretical and philosophical context, the way he theorizes cosmopolitanism now as the possibility of reconciling universalism and difference. And he breaks open the questions of “what does it mean to be rooted and cosmopolitan?”; “what does it mean to be patriotic and cosmopolitan?”; “what does it mean to be nationalistic and cosmopolitan?”

I started paying a lot of attention to the speaking and musicking voices of Nii Noi and Nii Otoo. And then, before I was even comfortable thinking about how to write intersubjectivity as intervocality, Nii Noi and Nii Otoo told me that they wanted me to produce a record for them, that they wanted to have their work documented and to get well paid for it. And from there I realized that film and sound recording were the best way to start the conversation. So, both subjectivity and intersubjectivity moved, quite literally, through the progression of *sound*, *image* and then *text*, in terms of the sequence of representational moves.

I have a very good auditory memory but I didn’t want to appear like a spy, so I asked Nii Noi and Ni Otoo if they would be comfortable with me wearing a pen in my pocket that was also a sound recorder with a built-in microphone. This seemed like a natural way to try and keep sound and voice at the forefront of the relationship between text, in-textualization and contextualization. In this regard I cannot stress enough the extent to which the exercise of thinking about subject constitution was foremost an exercise in thinking about the relationship between intersubjectivity and intervocality.

**Catarina:** Steve, what you have just described to us is this process of collaborative work, and yesterday we discussed this reconfiguration of the collaborative approach throughout the years, your personal and political commitment to multiple ways of knowing, and how getting to know something stimulates different kinds of imaginations. You also said that “collaboration is tied to an opportunity we have missed in anthropology to theorize intermediality”. Would you expand that idea to our readers?

**Steve:** That’s a great follow-up question, Catarina, because it really relates deeply to subject constitution and the force of Iracema’s question. In my first collaboration with Nii Noi and Nii Otoo I listened to them within the framework of somebody who had a deep practical background, education, and knowledge of jazz music. While listening to them I was also saying to myself “I know what you’re doing”; and “I’m in the groove with you. I’m in the moment.” This sensation that musicians often have, this very powerful sensation that you share a set of references, that you have a history of listening to the same things, even if you have listened to

them in very different ways, and you can use that as the basis for creating a kind of intimacy. For me the first phase of this collaboration was auditory intimacy. I felt a sonic intimacy with these other musicians because of my own listening and musicking history. And I felt immediately that we would be friends, and that we would work together. Indeed, I had the uncanny feeling that we had known each other for a long time.

Then comes the intermediality and this retraces the steps that I was laying out in response to Iracema's question. You know, what do we do in sound together? We listen together to different recordings. We talk about them. We make music together. We make instruments. We develop a playful kind of conversation with the materials of music-making: the instruments. We talk about the mutes, all of the different ways that jazz works with timbre, and sonority. We talk about temporality, the relationship between swing in jazz, syncopation, the offbeat phrasing of the accent. What is the relationship of that to the very strictness of the time cycles in West African rhythm? How do you work with these very different media and materials of improvisation at the juncture of the African space and the non-African space? Sound became the first medium of conversation and collaboration, which led me to realize that I could make recordings, work with Nii Noi and Nii Otoo on editing and producing these recordings. I came to do what a producer does: listen, find the strengths in the material, and help realize them, help transform things that are very subtle and very nuanced to make them legible for another group of listeners. I became an engineer and a producer and that was a way to collaborate to literally amplify Nii Noi and Nii Otoo's music.

But then there is the question of how to write about all of this. This is the place where intervocality, storytelling, and image-making comes in. We made a CD each year to document the work, and also three feature-length films. These were all available before I published the monograph. The book theorized collaboration as intermediality by presenting an extended version of liner notes to the CDs and DVDs. In-textualizing the book became a way of re-contextualizing the sonic and the visual material we recorded and the storytelling that surrounded it. This is how collaboration becomes intermediality. The conjunction of the sonic media, the visual media, the sono-visual media, and the textual media, was also the conjunction of intervocality, intermediality, and intersubjectivity.

Here's where collaboration became most critical to the project of thinking about subjectivity and subject constitution. It became critical to representing the work locally as well; the products of the research were first available in Ghana and to Ghanaian audiences, people could see the films, people could listen to the CDs. Sound-text-image at the level of subject

constitution and collaboration are forged as a kind of intermediality. The composite sign of collaboration is this intermedial space. Things are not frozen on a CD, in a paragraph in a book or on a DVD. There is always something *inter*; there is always some inter-play of these sounds, actions, words, feelings, ideas, and how they are mediated, represented and circulated.

**Evanthia:** Recalling my reading of *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra*, I thought the ways in which stories and narratives were put together was very political without openly seeming to be so. Particularly the beginning of chapter two, with Ghanaba's calling of Americans "racists" and then in his elaboration of how America wanted Africans to look like, "to have a tribe", "to talk a tribal language", "to play their tribal drums." That, to me, was a very evocative kind of telling of colonialism, in the broader sense, and I think it was at that moment, Steve, that I felt that your work is very political, and that the story-telling, even though it could be criticized by some as non-analytical, is indeed very analytical. I would like to connect this observation with how you approach the politics of intermediality, or how you think intermediality could be political in ethnography-making or in storytelling more broadly. And could you tell us a bit about how the big shifts in your work, the shifts between very different research settings, and with working through very diverse media and in very diverse capacities of collaboration with your interlocutors might be seen as an intermediality itself or an intervocality itself; or how these big shifts in your career more broadly have informed your epistemologies toward intermediality and intervocality? In a previous interview of yours, you referred that moving from New Guinea to other places of research was "threatening." How challenging and constructive has this shift in research methodologies, more broadly, been for you? And how has this shift itself – the challenge, the construction – informed your current view of things, intermediality included?

**Steve:** Being a white person in a world of black music was not new to me. I understood the politics of jazz writing in America, the vexed politics of white scholars, white musicians, and white writers in the mix with African-American voices. This was a history that I had known as a result of constant interaction with African-American music and musicians from the time I was a teenager. So I was really very concerned with the question of authority, and the question of voice, and the question of perspective, and particularly the question of over-speaking or over-writing other people's histories. It also made me very attentive to letting my interlocutors lead the conversation and review it before I respoke it.

For example, I learned quickly to have Ghanaba start the conversation his way, in his voice. I developed a very unique relationship with him because he asked me if I could do

something that he really wanted and I was able to do it, which was to produce the *Hallelujah!* film. And I did not interview him for the second half of the film until fifteen months after we shot the performance half of the film. By then he was pretty comfortable with me. And I just let him swing. Sometimes I knew he was being very, very provocative, but I just let him go there. I wanted the politics to come out through his stories, his voice. It was like: here's Ghanaba, Ghana's most famous jazz icon, face-to-face with a white guy with a tape recorder. What is he going to do?

I am happy to say that Ghanaba read, or I read back to him, everything in the book; same with Nii Noi, Nii Otoo, and Nii Yemo. That was hugely important, not just for trust and collaboration, but to presenting intersubjectivity and intervocality. Certainly I tried to write as little of the politics as possible from a top-down historical perspective and let my interlocutors introduce every one of those political topics and attitudes as much as possible. This includes the footnotes, many of which report their comments after reading the book.

In terms of "big shifts," I just would say, very briefly, Evanthia, that I have not had very many of what I would call "big insights" or "ideas" in my life. I am just, I think, rather relentless in the way I pursue the ones I have had. Papua New Guinea in the 70s, 80s, and 90s remains the origin of everything I still do: *listening to histories of listening*, *anthropology of sound*, and *anthropology of voice* as critical responses to the limitations of "ethnomusicology," *acoustemology* as engagement with knowledge production and co-production. These things, and *dialogic auditing and dialogic editing* are what I later did in Europe, in Japan, in West Africa. These all really come out of the same attempts to inquire at the conjunction of the sociality and materiality of sound.

Yes, working in a place like Papua New Guinea, in the rainforest, could not be more different than walking through villages in northern Greece or hanging out with shepherds. But listening to goats and sheep turned out to be more like listening to birds than I could have possibly imagined. West Africa and an urban space like Accra with six million people and that kind of density, and linguistic, cultural, historical complexity, on the surface of it looks like a big shift perhaps, but the questions that immediately engaged me were the same. To shift from music to sound and listening, to make politics, to make difference audible by a commitment to presenting my work equally in text, sound, and image is something I have done from the beginning.

*Sound and Sentiment* was published after I published an LP recording as the first recording in the record series of the Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies. It was a political

and personal contribution to the establishment of a national music program. And it was very much about my relation to a country that I arrived in just at the moment of independence. There was a recording, a book, and a touring photographic exhibit that all happened at the same time. The intermedial interest as well as some of these questions were there. Of course, over time the questions developed, their theorization developed, I think I have a little more depth now than I did forty years ago. But I do not think of it so much as “big shifts,” but as deepening conversations and commitments.

**Suzel:** I wanted to go back to Nii Noi. From what I captured from the talk and the movie that we watched, there was a kind of marginality in his position in Ghana because he did not follow the nationalist orientation that was being valued of musicians. This raised the question for me about what kind of reception the recordings that you made had in Ghana, given his marginal position, because of his cosmopolitanism, and the way in which this might contrast to the way the very same recordings might have been heard or valued in, let us say, “the West”, where many listeners would be able to have a sense of what was going on there musically, because of the, in certain dimensions, common idioms. I was reminded of Tim Taylor’s idea of *strategic inauthenticity*. But it does seem to me that what we have here is not strategic inauthenticity and in many ways it blows that concept apart, a concept which is, in many ways, riddled with colonialist values; in fact, they were being totally authentic to their own histories of listening. This is a rather muddled question, but it has to do with how the recordings that you made together were received in Ghana and the West, and the contrast between receptions, if there is one, or the extent to which this might have shifted the strong nationalist requirements of musicians or, at least, given them greater space in the media.

**Steve:** This is really a great question because it takes me back to Kwame Appiah’s question: *what does it mean to be rooted and cosmopolitan?* I rephrased that sentence as *what does it mean to be avant-garde and Ghanaian?* Nii Noi’s rootedness is very powerful in many different ways: he has equally studied Ghanaian music and Pan-African writings, beginning with Kwame Nkrumah, Cheikh Anta Diop, Amical Cabral, and Haile Selassie. So here is a link between rootedness and expansiveness. But certain kinds of expansiveness can lead to being marginal. Expanding logically into diasporic avant-garde jazz in the US civil rights era might sound progressive but it doesn’t translate into being able to get gigs at jazz clubs in Accra that expect musicians to play bebop and swing like they went to the Berklee College of Music in the US. The local expectation of a musical jazz cosmopolitan emphasizes the harmonic



language that developed in US jazz, whereas Nii Noi and Nii Otoo emphasize more the rhythmic and textural language of African percussiveness.

Nii Noi is not marginal to the world of African music in the sense that he has made recordings and films and is featured in a book, all now in university libraries all over the world. So our collaboration has produced a presence on the world stage even if he remains marginal at home because he is neither legible as a “jazz musician”, nor a “traditional Ghanaian musician.” With Nii Otoo, more working class and traditional in all ways, musically and culturally, the story is different. I called him and said: “I am going to talk to some people about our work today. Is there anything you want me to tell them?” And he said: “Yeah, tell them I just got the money from the royalties.” And then he told me that the money came just in time to support a ceremony for his twins, his last-born children. The royalties from the book, the films and the CDs are shared between all of the people featured. And Nii Otoo’s statement makes clear his class pride, to be well remunerated for his work.

**Rafael:** I would like to ask a question still based on *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra*. In Liisa Malkki’s book, *Improvising Theory*, she claims that ethnography is part of the tradition of improvisation that, in her perspective, is very similar to how jazz has incorporated improvisation in its own tradition. While writing *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra*, were you inspired by the way musicians like Nii Noi and Nii Otoo dealt with tradition and transformation in their craft, and could we say that your book relates to the anthropological tradition in the same way as their work relates to the contemporary jazz scene?

**Steve:** I really like Liisa’s book, *Improvising Theory*, and read it as soon as it came out. I thought it was also a wonderful way to represent the conversation between a student and a teacher in the field. I think it is a really good contribution to anthropological method, clarifying how so many of the things that we do in anthropology have to be invented over and over again. But I better not start talking about invention because then Iracema will have me talking about Roy Wagner’s *The Invention of Culture*, [laughs], a critical topic in her work. But here is the thing about improvisation: it is not really well understood in Western discourses either about music or about creativity. And I think that *Improvising Theory* did important intellectual work breaking up the “fixed empirical toolkit” idea of methodologies to focus on the research as a process of constant dialogue and refinement. What it reminded me of is really field linguistics. Suppose you and I do not speak a language in common. How am I going to find out something about your language? The best way is actually to make you laugh. I take some words I hear in your language and string them together. And you laugh. When you laugh, it says to me “that is

a non-grammatical string of words.” When I learnt to compose songs in Bosavi it was the same thing. I would juxtapose different sonic and poetic elements and when people would laugh I knew it was wrong. As I got better at this I made certain mistakes quite knowingly to refine my sense of what was right and wrong, just as a field linguist would do. Improvisation has to be understood in this kind of light. Improvisation is not just doing anything you wish. Improvisation is always grounded in principles, just like grammaticality in language or poetics in song. One has to become familiar with sonic elements, rhythmic elements, grammatical elements, linguistic elements, poetics, or anything else. And then, from there, try and create a space where you are constantly composing, re-composing, innovating, and inventing within structures and possibilities within them. Improvisation as a kind of trope for agency is, I think, quite powerful. As is improvisation as a trope for subjectivity, for the ability to fully realize one’s potential, to continuously invent.

**Iracema:** That sounds very much like Roy Wagner’s dialectic of invention and convention!  
[laughs]

**Steve:** Indeed. And it is a conversation that I had with Roy often. Roy was not extremely knowledgeable about jazz, although he brought jazz references certainly into his poetry. References to music in his books are largely to Western European music. Interestingly, he acknowledged a wish to have understood more about poetic and musical constitution in the Daribi world or in the Barok world in Papua New Guinea. As an anthropologist, he certainly acknowledged that musical and sonic forms of knowledge were powerful windows into what he called the *analogic imagination* of Papua New Guineans.

**Maíra:** In your book *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra* you tell us how hard it was to find a kind of storytelling voice for the work without performing an analytic authority. Stories, as you say, are not indeed analysis in the academic scheme of things, but this does not mean that they are unanalytic. Thus, how would you explain an analytical movement that works through a performed intervocality rather than academic contextualization? Please tell us more about this analytical movement. How do you compose knowledge through storytelling? And how can this be analysis?

**Steve:** Let us go back to an earlier reference that Evanthia brought up. It would be very hard in the space of one chapter or one book to thoroughly explore the topics of race, colonialism, and the biography of somebody like Guy Warren. There is great complexity there. But by composing knowledge through storytelling I could reconstruct for readers how I came to

understand much about the interplay of these topics by speaking with Guy Warren. And so, my analytic voice breaths through the relationship between my questions and his answers. Storytelling performs the analytic gesture of acknowledging how the question is always a leading question, but resists a pre-determination of the response. This for me was a way of creating space that was both interactive, friendly, and conversational, and had a certain level of innocence in it, allowing for surprise. At the same time it was always clear that the questions were not naïve, or falsely posed to appear naïve.

The analytic gesture or the analytic moment that is performed by storytelling leads to a different understanding of authority: the idea that authority is collaboratively managed, that authority is collaboratively emergent. I am not backing off from analysis, I am not backing off from citing theory and theorists in the book. I am certainly not backing off from deep intellectual discussions. Nii Noi is a seriously deep reader and we could talk in a certain way about Fanon. So analytic moments emerge in many forms, both surprising and unsurprising, because of his depth of experience, travel and reading.

Other kinds of analytic gestures relate to some of the things I said about Nii Otoo. They burst out. I mean, was it a surprise for you that Nii Otoo had no clue that Dave Brubeck was a white man? It is certainly a surprise for most people. And of course, in the moment of our conversation, it was for me. It is also a surprise for most people that J.C. Abbey made a puppet with four legs in order to show James Brown dancing. Only afterwards did I hear him say, “a human being cannot do that; only four legs can do that.” These relationships between the element of surprise and the analytic gesture are very important. When I heard Nii Otoo refer to Dave Brubeck as a “brother,” I had a flash in the moment: “oh, he’s never seen a picture of Dave Brubeck!” And then of course the analytic reflex: “what will happen if I tell him that Dave Brubeck was white?” And it led to an analytic revelation: that he assumed the entirety of Voice of America jazz broadcasts were performed by African Americans. And really, how could he have possibly known that Voice of America, the medium that empowered him as a child to know jazz, was an ideological instrument of American propaganda?

The kind of way in which just these small moments make worlds collide performs and recenters the analytic gesture. This is what interests me: when composing knowledge through storytelling, the analytic moment sometimes takes quite a while to emerge, but other times, it just hits you in this moment.

As a way to frame this play of storytelling and analysis I used parallelism for the chapter titles in the book, making each one a “From “X to Y via Z” detour: everything comes by way

of something else. Each one of the chapter titles was a way of analytically voicing the way that knowledge is revealed in both surprisingly direct and indirect ways. And storytelling is what does the work of that, of giving you the detour, like in the title of Nii Noi's chapter: "From Pan-Africanism to Afrifones via John Coltrane."

**Catarina:** I just want to insist on this issue of theory because you know that it is commonly assumed that analysis is necessarily, and an analytical text is necessarily, one that positions theory explicitly. You know that this is a commonly held assumption or view. And even though, in your storytelling, theory often is not explicit, you perform it. You do not have to quote Bakhtin, you perform it in the dialogical relationship with your interlocutors, right? And this has a very particular aesthetic effect. Your analysis comes with, necessarily, an aesthetic effect or comes *as* an aesthetic effect – I do not know, this is part of the question. So, would you say that if you were to perform different kinds of theory or even theories of your interlocutors, wherever they may be, this would have a different aesthetic effect every time?

**Steve:** First of all, I think that the idea of "getting to the point" always has an aesthetic effect. Is it not wonderful to read a mystery novel that goes on for three hundred pages where the whole thing comes together in the last five or ten pages? Think of Agatha Christie. Only in time do different things you have been reading, each description, elaborate plot developments, a perfusion of personalities, finally come together. Same when you see an Alfred Hitchcock film that does this. For me, analytic gestures and analytic effects are likewise deeply aesthetic and they operate in all media and in multiple ways. The word "research" is a term that is associated with empiricism and a certain kind of prestige, but how could we possibly claim that artists do not do research? The work of each medium, the varieties of elaboration, development, refinement: how can we not call that a research? It is a research into the very materials of process and production. For me aesthetics and research, or the aesthetic affect and the research effect, are things that are revealed in a kind of flash sometimes and in the same moment.

To me, this connects to improvisation. Because improvisation is often about ways of landing on the right note, ways of moving from one gesture to another, making things cumulatively come together in a certain way. You listen to something developing and then, "Aha! Here's how all that comes together". In music we use the word "resolution". In the Gestalt language of art and perception we speak of "figure and ground." Whatever you call it, for me it is the in-textualizing of analysis in and through storytelling. It is a way of trying to reveal things that might otherwise be concealed; revealing but not over-determining the

revelation; connecting the revelation to some kind of resonance. Somebody has to do the work of putting these things together. When it comes to improvisation artists and anthropologists are their first spectators; isn't that also Roy Wagner's point about invention?

Theory is much more like chemistry than it is like architecture. You have to let the elements mingle in different kinds of ways and see where the interactions are. And so, chemistry also has an aesthetic effect. As does, you know, everything that I have ever been involved in in science: studying physics as a student and dropping a ping-pong ball into a bowl of water and measuring the refractions and the ways, and understanding the relationship between physically visible waves and non-physically visible waves, and how the spectrum operates similarly in terms of acoustics, in terms of colour, in terms of heat; that the interrelationship of the senses is the interrelationship of the arts; that our whole sensory apparatus is profoundly tuned to spectra, just as the material that we make of it. Clifford Geertz famously said that "art and the equipment to grasp are made in the same shop." That is another way of saying that the perceptual resonance, the perceptual apparatus is very deeply connected to the aesthetic construction of the thing.

**Iracema:** Since you are talking about language and materiality, I would like to ask you a question about the signifier and your dictionary with Bambi Schieffelin. I would like to ask you about the relation between language and sound, especially as far as the signifier, homophony, and meaning are concerned. As you know, I am interested in post-structuralist engagements with the possibilities of transformation that reside in the unstable relation between the signifier and the signified, that is, in how meaning is re-enacted or transformed as signifiers are iterated. Since you compiled a Bosavi-English-Tok Pisin dictionary with Bambi – and dictionaries are composed of signifiers–, I was wondering if you would have something to say on the acoustic dimension of the signifier in relation to meaning and materiality. And if you like, I would be curious to know a bit about this process of making a dictionary.

**Steve:** Yes, I came to consider dictionary-making to be a very radical anthropological activity. And I could cite several reasons for this. The first reason, in the case in Bosavi, was that it was profoundly political without being overtly political in a kind of noisy way. That is, it would be an instrument that would serve de-colonizing purposes in the community, as people learned to read, and as people learned to engage more with English and with Tok Pisin, the national lingua franca. Another reason is that a dictionary, unlike a grammar, is accessible to anyone; you don't have to be a linguist to use it. A dictionary gives you the pleasure of finding something, and

the surprise of what you can't find. Like two days ago, friends in Bosavi sent me a picture of a snake that I'd not previously seen. I asked the name and when I forwarded the message to Bambi, her response was: "Oh! It's not in the dictionary!" [laughs]

Another way dictionary-making is radical is that the project is collaborative. Bambi and I worked over fifteen years with five local people, literate and non-literate, male and female, young and old, and that was fantastic. Beyond that, the dictionary created a very strong bond with the community – much more than our monographs or articles could ever do. The party that Bosavis prepared when the dictionary was published really honoured both local forms of knowledge and the relationships that brought that knowledge forth.

Yet another way a dictionary is radical is in the way it locally signifies. Bosavi people held it up as a sign of their own importance. When visiting politicians came, what did people in Bosavi want to give them, beside the usual Papua New Guinean things like feathers and net bags? A copy of the dictionary. It was a way of saying: "We have a language and it took these white people fifteen years to write it down [laughs]. And it was published by a University in Australia."

Also people shaped the dictionary as an ideological document. We explained to our collaborators that some dictionaries go from one language to the other, in the first half, and then, in the other half, goes from that other language back. And they said, "No, no. We don't need that. We want to go from our language to English and Tok-Pisin, and you can put a small part in there from English to some basic words in our language." So they were very focused on themselves as the principal users. We also explained that dictionaries can also have these parts at the end, to explain some parts of their vocabulary that are very important. And people said, "Well, we want all the names for the different parts of the house", or "We want all the names for relationships". So the construction of the appendixes was also a fantastic exercise in thinking about linguistic ideology and representation.

And that led to an appendix of the dictionary that was truly unique, an appendix for *gɔnɔ to*, meaning sound words. Because in the Bosavi language every one of the vowels can indicate something about space. The Bosavi language utilizes in the poetic domain a tremendous amount of what would crudely be called *onomatopoeic* terms. These are not limited to onomatopoeic terms. They are *phonaesthetic* terms, in the sense of Roman Jakobson; that is, they do work which provides tremendous amounts of sensory information. That can be information about height and depth; it can be about closeness and distance; it can be about any dimension of space or time or volume or density. And *phonaesthesia* is not only a reference to sounds; these terms can refer to light, to motion, to movement. An example that I always give

because it shows the relationship between grammatical precision and thought process is *gugu-gɔgɔ*. Here you have one consonant that appears four times; and you have two vowels, each that appears two times. The first is *u*, which is the highest vowel in the back of the mouth. In the phonesthetic paradigm *u* indicates sounds that move from above to below. The other is *ɔ*, which is the lowest sound in the back of the mouth, indicating sounds that move from more proximal to more distal; sounds that move outward. And then you have reduplication: the *gu* is not just *gu*, it is *gu-gu*, it is reduplicated. Here is a classic iconic: you say the consonant plus vowel twice, and it means that it is continuous, right? It is straightforward iconicity. So *gu* is downward moving sound and *gugu* is continuously and repeatedly downward moving sound. *Gɔ* is outward moving sound and *gɔgɔ* is continuously and repeatedly outward moving sound. What is continuously and repeatedly downward moving sound plus outward moving sound? *Echo*.

**Suzel:** Ah, I was going to say *waterfall!* [laughs]

**Steve:** Why *echo*? Because in the rainforest, where you cannot see more than one meter in front of you, and in the depth and the height of the layers of the forest what we understand as a reverberation is a continuity of sound that moves downward and outward. That is what creates what we would call an *echo*. So here is a classic example of how iconicity and phonoaesthetics produce what, at the same time, is a very precise and very evocative mental image, one that is poetic and aesthetic, indeed, like a rainforest waterfall, which is continuously moving downward and the water is moving outward.

And in the context of song, as Suzel suggested, a singer might use the term to refer to a waterfall that's beyond the reach of the immediate phrase that you are singing, to intensify the phonoaesthetic and iconic relationship to song as movement through places, a path of place names. Sound can be part of the way in which meta-languages are formed, extremely precise dimensions of language are articulated, and at the same time be part of the nebulous, the ephemeral, the ambiguous, and the imagination. After all, is not that the most fantastic resource for a poet? That you can use a word in a language which can have such profound resonance, ambiguity, and a constant play between its precision and its evaporation or its ephemerality? What an amazing resource for a poet! The poet has the world in their mouth.

**Iracema:** That is an amazing example about how the distinction between concreteness and abstraction can make no sense. Just like what we discussed regarding theory and narrative.

**Steve:** It also goes back to Catarina's question because that is an example of how language itself can simultaneously have the effect of aesthetics (poesis) and analysis (precision). I mean, how do you get to apprehend *gugu-gogo* unless you listen to the forest? You have to do a kind of research into what is confusing or ambiguous about sound to come up with that kind of spatial and temporal understanding of reverberation and echo, right? But at the same time it is profoundly aesthetic, it has an immediate grab, it produces pleasure, draws you in, and it is memorable.

That is the other thing about certain kinds of sound sequences. You do not forget them. Certain words seem like they have always been there even when they are new to you. When was the first time you heard the word *ping-pong*? And were you immediately attracted to the idea that the sound of ping-pong was something like the sensation of playing a game that you have to listen to? All languages have this, but the extent to which they are formalized, and the extent to which they are utilized to cross the poetic, the aesthetic, and the domain of precision is quite different. Roman Jakobson said it very beautifully when he suggested that the whole of language is a sea of potentially consummable iconicities, only some of which are ever consummated. You can imagine a language doing this, being entirely based on this kind of sensuous engagement with the world. Jakobson made an important contribution to language and thought by clarifying the potential of iconicity to be systematic, even paradigmatic. So rather than slavishly following the dictum that language is all arbitrary relationships between signifier and signified, Jakobson said that all languages show both arbitrary and motivated relationships, and that they can constantly play with each other. So, to your question about the importance of sound, I think this is where sound fits into the study and the representation of a language. Not as an abstract or arbitrary system of phonemic, phonetic representations but as a system that motivates the relationship between sensation and the perceptual knowledge of the world, and the ability to simultaneously engage the world abstractly and sensuously as if it was immediate. And this is a kind of knowledge that calls out for attention, and for representation in a dictionary as a unique resource for the speakers of the language in question.

**Suzel:** I think that my question really follows on from you, especially on this issue of abstractness versus the iconic. It has to do with the idea of *sounding*. I was curious about your thoughts on Christopher Small's *musicking* because you have been using the word from time to time. First of all, what are your thoughts on Christopher Small and musicking, but you could also comment on how useful it is to make a distinction between music and sound or musicking and sounding.



**Steve:** That is a great question, Suzel. I love Christopher Small's work and its contribution to the discussion of both the philosophical and the practical necessities of shifting descriptive language in music studies to a processual framework from the orientation to the sound object, pieces, compositions, fixed entities. The term *musicking* does a great deal of work toward that. I took a different tack on this in the seventies and eighties, following my first work in Bosavi. To reprise the story very quickly, on my first day in Bosavi, somebody died in the village just after I arrived, and I was exposed to a local form of simultaneous sung-texted weeping, that is cultivated as an extraordinary poetic art form among Bosavi women. It took me a lot of time to wrap my head around this because I thought I was there in Bosavi to study songs. And here the first sonic expression I heard and recorded – a form of expression that was emotionally and sonically highly organized, articulated, focused, and processually powerful, involved not song but weeping, melodic weeping, melodic sung-texted weeping. To some extent my emphasis on an *anthropology of sound*, and on *sounding* started right away when I heard that. I realized in that moment that my research “object” was not song, not music or musicking. Rather, my object was social and emotional construction in and through sound.

Similarly, six months later, when I knew enough language to begin work on the poetics of Bosavi song, my teachers started by taking me into the forest to listen to birds. Well, my prior music education did not include bird-call recognition! So here I was, in a new kind of music conservatory, with teachers insisting that I understand bird sounds, names, behavior, in order to understand the poetic phrases associated with them, as well as how each one of those sounds is related to melodic shapes that are used in the particular scales of these songs. Here are two very different entry points into the world of what we call *music*. One is the structured gendering of lament, or sung-texted weeping, in this case, and the other was the way in which the underlying poetic and melodic material of song was understood to be a conversation with birds. So it just kept becoming more difficult for me to use words like *music* or *musicking* in any kind of ethnographically accurate or theoretically sensible way, even though, of course, the point of process over product in Chris Small's sense was certainly significant. But at ground zero, I was trying to describe a form of knowledge that is simultaneously cosmological and ecological, and I was trying to describe a set of sounding and listening relations that were across species. This was an early recognition of what now is called *multispecies ethnography*. But more important in terms of an anthropology of music, this was a direct example of how indigenous knowledge production, in this case, of sound, deconstructs western categories, here, of “music.” Really; what better deconstruction of the term “music” could I have possibly asked for than to land in a place where crying and birds are simultaneously ecological and

cosmological facts of life that structure gendered understandings of the relationship between emotion and sound?

When I use the word *sounding* and talk about *listening to histories of listening*, and when I talk about moving from an anthropology of music and sound to acoustemology, when I talk about sound as a system of knowledge production, it is because what fascinates me the most is how in Bosavi sound brings disparate domains of experience together as an analogic machine for sensuously engaging the world. We study cosmology in one part of the university and ecology in another one, and here is this extraordinary example of a very different imagination of knowledge, which has now been shown to exist in many places in Papua New Guinea, not just where I was. Knowledge of the environment is itself represented and understood as a kind of architecture of the spirit world. Every one of those trees, and all the kinds of fruits that are in them and who is partaking of them, and why birds are migrating at certain times and doing certain kinds of things; all of this is very much of an analogous piece of the work that Roy Wagner called *invention*. But, as Roy stressed over and over again, the most important part of invention is the creative font of the human imagination. We have to understand creativity as a central issue in discussing agency, not as something that comes after certain other kinds of foundational categories. If there is a foundational category for anthropology, I agree with Roy that it is creativity, which also takes us back to our discussion of improvisation. Creativity everywhere and every way depends on improvisation. What is improvisation if not making slight constant forms of variation and repetition? Repetition with variation is precisely how Jakobson defined *poetics*. Repetition with variation is what Amiri Baraka called *the changing same*. That is exactly what jazz musicians call the *groove*, that each time around there is something a little different. So this is a place where Papua New Guinea is very important in terms of really pushing us forward toward thinking about the creativity of agency, and thinking about the constant relationship, constant performative relationship between listening, sounding, and musicking.

**Rafael:** My last question is more focused on present times. Since March 2020, depending on which country you were at the time, we experienced an unprecedented sanitary crisis set up by the coronavirus pandemic and we continue to do so. Attempting to adapt to this “new normalcy”, many people started relying more and more on digital media in order to maintain communication despite distance. However, many obstacles have appeared during that process and a lot of them relate to sound. People have trouble understanding each other, background

noise interferes with intercommunication, problems with synchronicity pop up all the time. How could we engage that matter from an acoustemological standpoint?

**Steve:** There has recently been much written and recorded indicating how much quieter the world is now in this time of covid. I listened to a radio program just the other day where Leah Barclay, a prominent Australian sonic ecologist, talked about the importance of the kind of sound recording projects she and her students are doing in Australia right now, because of unprecedented amounts of quiet in many different places where previously the ecological relationships were dominated much more by human and technological presences. I find all of this fascinating, but I resist relating to our time-space in terms of a binary opposition between noise and quiet. I think listening always is significant for its shifts of foreground and background, signal and noise, partiality and incompleteness. Now I think that what we are hearing during times of social isolation are more signs of being simultaneously connected and disconnected from each other. I do not know that there is a big takeaway from all of this. I think of it as an experimental moment. Where I live in the mountains, I experience the same quiet that I always do, no more or less planes, or people, or animals, or winds.

And as my first experience, these last 3 days of a Zoom webinar, my only takeaway is that I think that digital communication is more tiring. In some ways it demands more of us than the kinds of interactions that are more typical. I have found myself really tired each night after talking and I do not easily get tired by talking about ideas and listening to people share research. I could sit with the six of you around the table and talk for hours and not yawn when we stop. I never think of this kind of collegial interaction as tiring, but now I do. I think there is an added kind of stress level that goes with this kind of communicating. Partially because we are wondering how long we are going to be interacting this way, how much we should be acknowledging that this is not normal, and partially because we are trying to be efficient and orderly in ways that are unusual.

I have spent a lot of time talking to musicians who are confronted with this new reality of using their living rooms as performance studios. They have to create from home without an audience, without applause, without faces in front of them. For some musicians who work in a solo fashion this is not a big issue. For other ones who, like in jazz, rely on the spontaneity and sparks and the hearing and playing in the moment, this has been a devastating kind of challenge. How to get that feeling of really being present with each other, that you are having this very

intimate conversation in the moment, that's difficult. Art forms that depend on spontaneity and a particular kind of thoughtfulness in the moment are really struggling right now.

I am also really aware of how much this moment reproduces and amplifies so many of the existing inequalities. I've worked with jazz saxophonist and flutist Alex Coke for many years and he has come to Accra with me and worked with the Accra musicians for some time. Alex and I have the technological means to jam virtually, but any attempt to set up the technological means so that we can rehearse and perform with Nii Noi and Nii Otoo in Accra, is almost impossible. Bandwidth in the world is not equally distributed, nor is access to the resources to do these things. So, yes, you can see the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra all playing from their apartments and playing in synchrony. We can do it between the U.S. and Europe with no problem, but to do it between Europe, the U.S. and Ghana is really difficult. I am afraid what this is all going to mean is that inequality and the effects of inequality are just going to be noisier, louder, more upsetting, and more of a struggle.

**Maíra:** You have told us that this Fall you will release a DVD with some of your lectures and talks, which are made of a mixture of texts, sounds, and images, as was the keynote. Would you like to tell us more about this project?

**Steve:** I have four lectures that I have developed for different audiences over the last ten years. And in response to the suggestion that I turn them into a book on acoustemology I realized that I would rather put them on a DVD, with spoken performances accompanied by image, sound and video-rich PowerPoints. There is a lecture called "Acoustemology" which moves through the development of my ideas in rainforest Papua New Guinea, their expansion to the study of European bells, and then into my work on truck horns in Accra. It asks, what does listening to truck horns in Accra or Carnival, church, town, and animal bells in Europe have to do with listening to birds in the Papua New Guinea rainforest? Through this question it traces the empirical and theoretical moments that have built my idea of acoustemology.

The second lecture is about sound, nostalgia, and modernity. It is about what happened when guitar bands developed in Bosavi, in Papua New Guinea. This is the story about differences in knowledge of the world by the children and grandchildren of the people I first worked with in Bosavi in the 1970s. It is the story of how a new kind of poetry, a new kind of understanding of the forest, a new concern with memory, a new way of listening to birds was critical to the invention of a new music. There was a period in my life where I was a kind of midwife to the birth of a new music in Papua New Guinea but also present at a kind of funeral

for some of the older music. This provides an extraordinary opportunity to think about acoustemic inventions and transformations.

The third piece is an update on the jazz cosmopolitanism in Accra project; stories that continue and develop dialogues opened in the book. But this time the book is part of the story, not just the sounds that we were making and listening to. I try to situate the book and the dialogic space that comes in its response and aftermath to the larger development of an anthropology of cosmopolitanism, and to acoustemologies of diasporic intimacy.

The fourth lecture deals with acoustemology and the Anthropocene through the intersensorial relationships of cicadas in Papua New Guinea, Japan, and Greece. It starts with the way that women sing with cicadas in Papua New Guinea; how cicadas are understood as signals about the heat and changing temperature in the environment. It then moves to my engagement with Hiroshima, pilgrimages there on August 6 to record and listen to the cicadas, who I imagine were the last sound that thousands of people heard before they perished in the atomic atrocity. And finally, it turns to the most famous literary reference to cicadas in the West, which is the story of Phaedrus and Socrates, and their dialogue outside of the ancient city to the accompaniment of cicadas. I also went to that place, Ilissos, in Athens – Evanthia knows it well I am sure – and I sat under those platanus trees to record and film. I juxtaposed that with sounds of heatwave weather reports from Greek television. This piece combines thinking about the Anthropocene, heat, and climate change in three different places. So the four lectures attempt to sensuously evoke a broad expanse, move through my multiple projects and assess varieties of knowledge production in and through sound. I hope it will release in November.

**Iracema:** That is pretty soon. I look forward to watching it. The last question I would like to ask concerns something that you mentioned during our discussion on the documentary *J.C. Abbey: Ghana's Puppeteer*. In it, music and puppet theatre emerge as sites where politics and pleasure can converge. During our seminar you talked about the puppet as this ambiguous figure that is able to challenge things politically. And yesterday we were talking more informally about the times in which we live, politics, and how hard it is currently. I was wondering if you would like to say something on the relation between music, pleasure, and politics.

**Steve:** Well, I guess the first thing I would want to say is that I think it is becoming more and more clear how much we cannot do without pleasure, how much we are all thirsting for pleasure: aesthetic pleasure, interpersonal pleasure, intellectual pleasure, physical pleasure. I

use “hunger” as a cover term here because I think it relates the mental and physical need that we have to flourish and continue. That desire resists being depressed, resists being overwhelmed, resists being pushed up against the wall by some of the horrific things that are happening. The hunger I speak of is also the need to resist being consumed by anger.

And I find myself in my conversations with people constantly confronting this. We start to talk and before I know it we are talking loudly and passionately; and then before I know it, we are really angry. We are really sounding like kids again on the parking lot or in the school yard, wanting to throw something, to relieve ourselves of this exasperation we feel about a system that is so destructive. The kind of people who have taken control are making more and more lives miserable; it is almost as if they get pleasure out of it. And that cruelty is why I think it is hard to avoid certain feelings of anger right now. So, what do we do with our hunger? I think the ethics of care, as Foucault called it, could not be more important. Doing what we have done the last three or four days is a way of taking care of each other, is it not? It is a way of saying “We’re here. We care about ideas. We are going to share and nurture them. And nobody is going to take that away from us.” We are going to insist on the pleasure of being able to laugh and have a drink at the end of the day, and to talk about what is meaningful to us. Which is a way to say that we will not be reduced to anything less than fully human as a result of the horrific forces that surround us. So for me, pleasure and engagement with the aesthetic and with all of its political ramifications is more and more necessary.

And this goes back to what attracted me to anthropology when I was young. I was trained as a musician and visual artist. I went to university and was interested in physics. I thought I might be an acoustician and do architectural acoustics. My father was a musician who became a builder and I was very interested in the building and architectural side of things, and how much it was like music and mathematics and things that were familiar to me. Then, in my first year in college, in the spring semester of 1968, in April, some fellow students and I organized a teach-in about the Vietnam War. In the midst of that somebody walked into the room and announced that Martin Luther King had been killed. An anthropologist, at that moment, stood up and gave a speech about the connections between militarism and racism. I was totally blown away. He linked everything from World War II to Korean War to the Vietnam War, explaining how governments dehumanized people to erase debate about whether it was OK to kill them. Two other anthropologists got up after him and they too spoke about race, civil rights, social justice, and militarism. I was in tears, I was so blown away. And the next semester, instead of taking the two math courses I was supposed to take, I took

*Introduction to Social Anthropology* and *Introduction to Biological Anthropology*. That was in the fall of 1968. And I have never looked back from anthropology ever since.

It was a very powerful part of my own history and always makes me feel a direct connection between the anthropology I have done and a commitment to anti-racist, anti-colonial, anti-war politics. All the same, I have always refused to do anthropology with a sledgehammer. Writing loud theory or loud ethnography does not interest me; doing research to rave doesn't interest me. What I think I can do much better is to bring out the political power of creativity and agency. Like by bringing the *Jazz Cosmopolitanism* book to a close by stressing the importance of solidarity in difference. And I think that that is still what is most political about my relationship with Nii Noi and Nii Otoo, with Melanesian people, with people in Japan and Europe and every place where I have worked. Collaboration performs a politics of solidarity and I am much more interested in the subtlety and nuance of that than I am in throwing rocks. Making a film like *J.C. Abbey, Ghana's Puppeteer* was a way to let people recall colonial history and postcolonial politics through the way they have engaged these times, through their creative agency. And their creative agency, I still think, even in politically compromised times, is an inspiration. It is an inspiration to observe that desire for expansive agency in the world. And it is an inspiration to witness how that expansiveness is foundational to getting beyond the horrors, and not having to live our lives as post-traumatic stress victims of the Bolsonaros and Trumps of the world.

**Iracema:** Thank you so much. It has been a real pleasure, all of these days, to talk to you.

**Steve:** You are very welcome. I enjoyed your questions. They were really terrific.