

Anthropology of Music Masterclass \*\*\* 26<sup>th</sup> - 29<sup>th</sup> of June \*\*\* Prof. Steven Feld

## **Ethnography at home: listening to the sonic historiography of the Mascarene islands of the Indian Ocean**

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This paper looks at the Indian Ocean as an aesthetic space and presents the Creole language and the *sega* – a polymorphous performative art form consisting of dance, music and songs in Creole – which are common across many islands of the region. Different varieties of the language and *sega* have been recorded: *Moutia* in Seychelles, *sega tambour* in Rodriguez, *sega* with *makalapo* from the Chagos islands performed by exiled Chagossians and *maloya* at Reunion. They are accompanied by similar but different dance moves and instruments. A preliminary study shows that these islands share a similar history of colonization, slavery and creolization.

This research will present three *sega* from the Mascarene islands of the Indian Ocean (Mauritius, Rodrigues, Réunion): 1) the Mauritian *sega* 2) Rodriguan *sega Tambour* and 3) Reunion *Maloya* which have similar but different soundscapes. This paper speculates that these Creole creative practices were produced from the memory of ancestral sounds and instruments (African, Malagasy and Indian) as well as from other cultural influences and the different processes of creolisation which occurred on each island. This paper presents some initial findings on the Creole culture of the Mascarene islands in the Indian Ocean and the preliminary development of a methodology for an empirical study on its sonic aspect.

In the last two decades, there has been a surge of literature on the sonic turn in Sound and Cultural Studies which has invigorated the field of anthropology, linguistic and musicology (Back & Bull, 2003, Henriques, 2011). Back and Bull (2003) bring together a range of scholars exploring the theoretical concept of ‘deep listening’. This requires paying attention to the sound of the space, the accent, pitches and rhythm of language, immersion in musical practices and developing the hearing faculty of understanding beats, tempo and bass culture. My research highlights the oral-aural contribution to the construction of cultures that are predominantly sonic, by drawing from Henriques (2011) who explores the evolution of the music scene in

Jamaica and concludes that the Caribbean culture is predominantly sonic and cannot be analysed from our habitual thinking through images or music that is bound up with language, notation and representation. He develops ‘thinking through sound’ as a method of inquiry and argues that Jamaican music represents a ‘technologizing’ of different ‘folk’ sound, in the sense that the music carried forward ancestral traditions of music – the orality of improvisation for example – and was adapted with technology such as the mixing of sound. This research starts from the premise that the Creole culture is also sonic. This aspect has not been studied within the linguistic/literary/anthropological fields from which Creole Studies has often drawn from.

While cultural theorists have written about the relevance of researching sonic cultures and provided a theoretical foundation, there is a limited literature on methodology to conduct an empirical study of sonic cultures (Nettl, 2005). In that sense, part of the set of methods proposed for this research draws from the work of Steve Feld who explains that by writing and circulating other peoples' histories through their voices (speech, sound, music), there are more opportunities to build narratives that are not authorial based on one language, one voice or one narrative. Feld proposes ‘acoustemology’, as a method to study, so as not to focus on categories and things (instruments, texts, and composers), and find other criteria other than virtuosity, melodic and rhythmic complexity, sophistication, which are developed in the field of music studies. It allows me to think how a practise of listening to my own Creole tongue inform ethnographic work? How to listen to the music in the language as a method of writing new genealogies? Can a sonic way of knowing, being and living on the islands inform a historiography of the region?

I will also present what I am still developing around what I call a Creole sonic historiography. The term ‘sonic historiography’ is borrowed from Holm-Hudson (2001) who looks at rock music in the 1970s and argues that a sonic historiography is a reflection of a decade when music became increasingly imbued with a sense of its own history. This paper will lastly demonstrate the connection between islands’ sonic aesthetics, history and memory and query whether an alternative historiography can be written from the sonic culture of the Creole people. It aims at proposing a framework to understand how musical/sonic practices embody sensuous relational histories spread across the Indian Ocean space.