

Anthropology of Music Masterclass *** 26th - 29th of June *** Prof. Steven Feld

Listening for “g Harmony” at the Gibbon Conservation Center: Acoustemology and the Compulsory Reproductive Biopolitics of an Endangered Species Breeding Program

Tyler Yamin (University of California Los Angeles)

Although recent scholarship has debated the ethics of endangered species breeding programs, this work stops short of engaging with the role of listening, or sound more broadly, in either reproducing or complicating what Thom van Dooren calls “the violent-care of captive life” (2014; c.f. Chrulew 2012; Parreñas 2018). Drawing on two years’ fieldwork at the Gibbon Conservation Center (GCC), a private gibbon sanctuary located in Southern California, in this presentation I examine the distinctive, if overlooked, “acoustemology” intrinsic to the practices of care for severely endangered animals famous for their vocalizations. Unique among non-human primates, as mated pairs gibbons (*Hylobatidae spp.*) devote hours each day to singing elaborate vocal duets articulated in challenge to, and coordination with, the analogous songs of other pairs, in order to renegotiate each group’s territory and strengthen their individual pair-bonds. As gibbons initiate and maintain their monogamous relationships through these complex, paired songs, at the GCC their reproductive viability within captive breeding programs is chiefly monitored aurally, entailing a significant investment by the caretakers in interpreting the social information and potentialities indicated within the gibbons’ vocalizations.

But rather than taking the hylobatid chorus of the GCC for granted as a space of sonic relations between entities, in this presentation I treat the GCC’s “soundscape” as a productive, cosmopolitical force, in which sound does not indicate pre-constituted relations as much as it acts as the medium in which both intra- and interspecies relations are simultaneously forged and contested alongside the very versions of nature in which they operate. By attending to the sonic “ontics and antics” (Haraway 2008) of the gibbons and their caretakers, I discuss both the potentials and perils sound offers as a mechanism to hold open a space for multispecies flourishing in the face of contemporary tendencies to reduce nonhuman animals and the spaces they inhabit to material and/or semiotic resources for human extraction. This acoustemological approach to

multispecies ethnography reveals sound not only to facilitate the compulsory reproductive biopolitics enforced “when the survival of a few individual members of endangered species is at stake, [and] their lives come to stand in for the entire species” (Parreñas 2018:85), but further, as an epistemological device in those animals’ own taxonomic individuation and speciation, to constitute the terms by which gibbons are conceptualized, apprehended, and evaluated.

My presentation is divided into two sections; in the first, I devote ethnographic attention to the particular auditory dimensions of care for these animals at the GCC. While Palmer and Malone (2018) have shown that gibbon management in captivity is shaped by assumptions about what counts as “natural” behavior, I argue that the GCC does not simply enact the gibbons as scientifically determined entities; rather, the specific listening practices and techniques deployed to manage the gibbons co-constitute them and their caretakers within a number of “competing philosophies of nature” (Thompson 2002). Putting recent acoustemological studies of science (e.g., Roosth 2009; Helmreich 2016), in dialogue with work that insists on the ontological multiplicity of scientific knowledge and practices (e.g. Mol 2002; Bertoni 2012)—including primatology (e.g., Rees 2007; Alcayna-Stephens 2012)—I show that successful care entails hearing gibbon vocalizations simultaneously as articulations of individual agency and desires, romantic expressions of monogamous mate-choice, and the innate utterances of interchangeable members of pre-constituted biological categories. Each of these practices, then, locates gibbon song as the property of a different taxonomic entity—the individual, the family, or the species—and therefore directs care towards a distinct level of conservation that ontologically subsumes the others.

In the second part of my presentation, I use the GCC caretakers’ tongue-in-cheek nickname for the computer matchmaking algorithm that regulates the genetic diversity of the captive population, “gHarmony,” as a springboard to ask after the implications of the concept of “harmony” as a positive value in the context of nature, environmental conservation, and the Anthropocene more broadly. By referencing the American online dating platform eHarmony, the type of harmony anticipated and regulated at the GCC implies, as in the work of Jacob von Uexküll, that heteronormativity is composed into the “score of Nature” (2010:186), a preordained state waiting to be fulfilled by any given gibbon pair’s duet. I argue that by portraying emergent relations between entities as the results of such a preordained telos, tropes of harmony—whether serious or humorous, sonic or social—implicitly reproduce the underlying, conservative nomos of hierarchical, natural difference so critical to the advent of the current ecological crisis. By following the development of a newly introduced pair’s duet, I show that their eventual attainment

of acoustic and affective “harmony” was an *achievement*, rather than the fulfillment of potentials latent in those gibbons’ very genetic material, and as such was as political and contingent as it was instinctual.

References

- Alcayna-Stevens, Lys. 2012. “Inalienable Worlds: Inter-Species Relations, Perspectives and ‘Doublethink’ in a Catalonian Chimpanzee Sanctuary.” *Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 30(2):82–100.
- Bertoni, Filippo. 2012. “Charming Worms: Crawling Between Natures.” *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 30(2):65–81.
- Chrulew, Matthew. 2011. “Managing Love and Death at the Zoo: The Biopolitics of Endangered Species Preservation.” *Australian Humanities Review* 50:137–157.
- Dooren, Thom van. 2014. *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Haraway, Donna. 2008. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Helmreich, Stefan. 2016. “Gravity’s Reverb: Listening to Space-Time, or Articulating the Sounds of Gravitational-Wave Detection.” *Cultural Anthropology* 31(4):464–492.
- Mol, Annemarie. 2002. *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Palmer, Alexandra, and Nicholas Malone. 2018. “Extending Ethnoprimatology: Human–Alloprimate Relationships in Managed Settings.” *International Journal of Primatology* 39:831–851.
- Parreñas, Juno Salazar. 2018. *Decolonizing Extinction: The Work of Care in Orangutan Rehabilitation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Rees, Amanda. 2007. “Reflections on the Field: Primatology, Popular Science and the Politics of Personhood.” *Social Studies of Science* 37(6):881–907.
- Roosth, Sophia. 2009. “Screaming Yeast: Sonocytology, Cytoplasmic Milieus, and Cellular Subjectivities.” *Critical Inquiry* 35(2):332–350.
- Thompson, Charis. 2002. “When Elephants Stand for Competing Philosophies of Nature: Amboseli National Park, Kenya.” In *Complexities: Social Studies of Knowledge Practices*, edited by John Law and Annemarie Mol, 166–190. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Uexküll, Jakob von. 2010. *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans, with a Theory of Meaning*, translated by Joseph D. O’Neil. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.