

I Hate “Sound Studies” Steven Feld

I am often asked some variant of the question: “what do you think about ‘sound studies’?” Most recently this came up in a conversation in Greece during a series of animated conversations with my colleague Panos Panopoulos in March 2015. My response is clipped below. The full text of our Athens Conversation is at: <http://www.stevenfeld.net/interviews/>

I hate “sound studies”! I love studies of sound; that’s not the issue. I hate the conglomeration phrase “sound studies” because it is a market-rationalized attempt to round up, commodify, and manage diffuse ideas into products with a singular identity. It’s the kind of term that is loved by certain colony-making presses, certain entrepreneurial academics, and, of course, certain administrators who busy themselves manufacturing and marketing packaged programs of study.

“Sound studies” totalizes the object “sound,” and it presumes an imagined coherence to that object that one is supposed to know in advance. Who and what is served by that? More financial and managerial interests than intellectual ones, I think. It’s a perfect microcosm of neoliberal education.

Apart from that, what is most problematic to me about “sound studies” is that ninety-five percent of it is sound technology studies, and ninety-five percent of that is Western. So if I refuse “sound studies” it is because I think plants, animals, and humans everywhere are equally important to technologies, and I think that studying dynamic interactions of species and materials in all places and times are equally important and should be equally valued. That’s a way of saying that I want more “sound agency studies,” more “sound *actant* studies.” I want more “sound plural ontology studies,” or “sound relationality studies.” Or “sound companion species studies.”

Even if sound studies will, happily, increase interest in historical knowledge and the practice of ideological critique, the dominant model will remain the Western cultural studies form of ideological text reading. Anthropologies of sound will only fill the exotic slot here; the real center of attention will remain Western sound technologies, and Western avant-garde music and sound art.

I want to start differently, problematizing sound by asking what it means to know in, with, and through it *differently*. I want studies of sounding with, to, and about, that is studies of sound as a critical mode of relating and relationality across species and materialities. I want “sound *difference* studies.” But I think these things will always be a small sidebar to what is much more marketable: sound *genre* studies and sound *object* studies and sound *technology* studies.

Mind you, I’m not disparaging researchers and their research; there are many terrific projects here, and many dedicated and smart people doing them. I’m responding rather to “sound studies” as a regime, what the phrase signifies now as a corporate formation.