

# Sounding the World

Imagining ontologies as mobile through sound and song

**Abstract**

In exploring the field of ontological anthropology, I have found many traces of song and sound in several scholars' works, which speak to musical ways of knowing and being in the world. The aim of my paper is to provide new modes of imagining how ontological ways of being are affected by the displacement of peoples. I seek to intervene at the intersection of anthropology and ethnomusicology and argue that sound and song-making can and should be taken into account within an ontological framework. To embark on this task is to weave together several seemingly disparate historical and narrative threads, exploring, ultimately, the sounds and songs of the Tuareg of North Africa. I intend on first briefly exposing what I see as the gap between ethnomusicological and anthropological research in the domain of sound ontology, as well as exploring some reasons why anthropologists may be overlooking sound as a constituting force. I will then examine how several anthropologists and ethnomusicologists have understood and written about sound and song-making, in order to demonstrate the ways sound and song are shown implicitly to be part of ontological practices. Finally, I will engage with the sound-stories of the Tuareg, a group who, though nomadic and increasingly displaced, nonetheless carry with them very particular ways of relating with the world, which transcend the binary of home and wilderness. I intend on engaging with ontologies that lie in the relations invoked through sound, and the cosmologies brought into being through music. When sound is understood as a primary act of being in the world, it opens the possibility for understanding ontologies as not only embedded in a singular place, but as potentially mobile and flexible.

The most popular Tuareg band on the international stage is called Tinariwen. The band got its name from the plural of *tenere*, meaning, in Tamasheq, “desolate, unpopulated plain”<sup>1</sup>. But it can also refer to a feeling of nostalgia for the Sahel desert landscape from which many Tuareg have been displaced due to conflict or climate change<sup>2</sup>. *Tenere* is also a place where spirits reside. *Kel Tenere* or *Kel Essuf* are referred to as “people of the wild or solitude”<sup>3</sup>. On their latest album, Tinariwen sing a song called *Sastanàqqàm* or “Can you tell me”, in which *tenere* is both a spiritual and physical place:

“Tell me, Ténééré,  
how you and I  
Can remain united,  
with no hate for each other.  
Ténééré, I can now admit that  
I have travelled far through this wide world.  
Ténééré, I give you my oath  
That as long as I’m alive,  
I will always come back to you.”—Tinariwen, 2016<sup>4</sup>

For the band, and for many Tuareg people, *Tenere*, is a true place in both spiritual and physical senses. One can get trapped in *Tenere* or *essuf* as it is also called, and often the only way to leave is through ritual and song. Tinariwen is interacting with the spirits and place of *Tenere*, not in a metaphorical sense, but as a way of knowing and being in this desert landscape they yearn for, which includes all aspects of *Tenere*, through their music<sup>5</sup>.

In exploring the field of ontological anthropology, I have found many traces of song and sound in several scholar’s works, including works about the Tuareg, which allude to similar

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<sup>1</sup> Susan J. Rasmussen. “The people of solitude: Recalling and reinventing *essuf* (the wild) in traditional and emergent Tuareg cultural spaces”. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14 no. 3 (2008): 613.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 618

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 613

<sup>4</sup> Tinariwen, *Sastanàqqàm*, video, Anti-Records, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 619.

kinds of relationships with the world, where songs are part of ontological practices; in effect speaking to musical ways of knowing and being in the world.

Such works include those of Julie Cruickshank, whose engagement with oral narratives of the Tlingit is rich with accounts of sound relationships with glaciers. Cruickshank tells us that “details of glacier travel are recorded in songs...”<sup>6</sup> and even more explicitly, “songs figure centrally in clan histories”<sup>7</sup>. Clan songs are a way of keeping a historical record, but they are also developed in relation to the environment around the singers at the time<sup>8</sup>. Noise made by nature is also central to the oral narratives Cruickshank examines<sup>9</sup>. Travelers “listen carefully” to cottonwood trees to know whether it is safe to walk across an ice bridge. This aural relationship that various migrant groups have with their environment is, I want to suggest, central to their conceptions of the world around them and therefore part of the “entanglement” between humans and things, the social and the physical that Cruickshank recognizes and urges scientists to recognize as well<sup>10</sup>.

Cruickshank’s mentions of song and sound offer an implicit understanding that such acts of sound-making are not only ways of bringing oneself into the world, but also of being in relation to others, be they human or non-human. Tim Ingold’s essay on the Ojibwe is another, more explicit example of how humans interact with nature through sound and sound-making<sup>11</sup>. Non-humans, Ingold recounts, are recognized by the Ojibwe to have agency through the

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<sup>6</sup> Julie Cruickshank. “Glaciers and climate change: Perspectives from oral tradition”. *Arctic* 54 no.4 (2001): 380

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 383

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 380

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, 383

<sup>10</sup> Julie Cruickshank. *Do glaciers listen?: Local knowledge, colonial encounters, and social imagination*. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005), 257.

<sup>11</sup> Tim Ingold “A circumpolar night’s dream” in *The Perception of the Environment: essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill*, by Tim Ingold (London: Routledge, 2000), 103

witnessing of either movement or sound-making. Ingold's example of how the Ojibwe understand and relate to thunder is of particular interest to me. "The thunder," Ingold writes, "does not exist separately from the clap...the clap *is* thunder. It is the acoustical form of thunder's phenomenal presence in the world"<sup>12</sup>.

These two anthropologists were evoking sound relations quite some time after the Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer coined the term 'soundscape' in his book "The Soundscape: Our sonic environment and the tuning of the world". Schafer's conception of a sonic environment was fundamental for thinking about how sound makes our world familiar or unfamiliar<sup>13</sup>. Schafer was more concerned with "improving the orchestration of the world soundscape"<sup>14</sup>. Nevertheless, 'soundscapes' have become an important methodological tool for ethnomusicologists. Steven Feld is probably the most widely known ethnomusicologist who, in his book "Sound and Sentiment: birds, weeping, poetics and song in Kaluli expression" provides "an ethnographic study of sound as a cultural system"<sup>15</sup>.

I have found myself straddling the academic line between anthropology and ethnomusicology. In doing so, certain gaps became apparent between the two, when it comes to sound and sound-making and ontological theory. I find it odd that sound is not explicitly presented in an ontological framework in these and other works of ontological anthropology. At the same time, I find it odd that ethnomusicologists have not yet made the leap from discussions of sound-relations between humans and non-humans as metaphorical, to sound relations as ontological.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>13</sup> Murray R. Schafer. *The soundscape: Our sonic environment and the tuning of the world*. (Rochester, Vermont: Destiny Books, 1977), 5.

<sup>14</sup> Schafer *The soundscape: Our sonic environment and the tuning of the world*, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Steven Feld. *Sound and Sentiment: birds, weeping poetics and song in Kaluli expression*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 3.

My aim therefore, is to intervene at the intersection of these two academic fields and argue that sound and song-making can and should be taken into account within an ontological framework. Not only will this enrich anthropological studies of different ontologies, it will also provide new ways of imagining how ontological ways of being are affected by migration among displaced peoples for whom sound plays an important role. In the works of Cruickshank, Ingold, Feld and others, those being researched are in a fixed space. Though Cruickshank's oral narratives offer accounts of migration, the Tlingit at the time of her writing were not in the process of leaving their home. If the ontological turn in anthropology is being used for the purposes of understanding how people relate to non-humans in the face of ecological crisis<sup>16</sup>, then it must account too for those who have been moved by climate change and its narratives. I contend that acknowledging the constituting of the world through sound means we can ask new questions about the omissions of sound and mobility in ontological anthropology.

To embark on this task is to weave together several seemingly disparate historical and narrative threads, returning ultimately, to the sounds and songs of the Tuareg. I intend on first briefly exposing what I see as the gap between ethnomusicological and anthropological research in the domain of sound ontology, as well as exploring some reasons why anthropologists may be overlooking sound as a constituting force. I will then examine how several anthropologists and ethnomusicologists have understood and written about sound and song-making in order to demonstrate the ways sound and song is shown implicitly to be part of ontological practices. I will then engage with the sound-stories of the Tuareg, a group who, though nomadic and increasingly displaced, nonetheless carry with them very particular ways of relating with the

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<sup>16</sup> Eduardo Kohn. "Anthropology of Ontologies". *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 44:311–27 (2015): 312.

world, which transcend the binary of home and wilderness<sup>17</sup>. In the case of the Tuareg, and in other cases that I will bring into this paper, I see an opportunity to engage with new ways of being in the world. I intend on engaging with ontologies that lie in the relations invoked through sound, and the cosmologies brought into being through music. When sound is understood as a primary act of being in the world, it opens the possibility for understanding ontologies as not only embedded in a singular place, but as potentially mobile and flexible.

### **The Cracks in Between**

Ethnomusicology has come a long way in the last three decades. As a discipline however, it was slow to include anthropological methodologies into its practices, though since its inception, the focus has been on understanding music of the ‘Other’<sup>18</sup>. The study of music more generally has also tended to focus on Western canons, prodigies and theoretical practices of certain composers<sup>19</sup>. However a shift did happily take place and one of the primary catalysts of this shift was R. Murray Schafer’s book on soundscapes, which argues for the incorporation of “natural” sounds into a musical field of study. Schafer’s romantic and above all poetic prose list examples of the ways in which sound is implicitly presented literature (Tolstoy’s description of bee sounds in *Anna Karenina*)<sup>20</sup>, mythologies (Zeus as creating the sounds of thunder)<sup>21</sup> even in our study of animal behaviour<sup>22</sup>. Natural sounds are part of our “soundscapes”.

Soundscapes are everywhere. They are geographic spaces where populations hear the same sounds. A city will have a soundscape. A bachelor apartment will have one as well. The

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<sup>17</sup> Cruickshank. “Glaciers and climate change: Perspectives from oral tradition”, 613.

<sup>18</sup> Bob W. White. *Music and globalization: Critical encounters*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012): 5.

<sup>19</sup> Timothy Taylor, *Beyond exoticism: Western music and the world*. Durham: (Duke University Press 2007): 4.

<sup>20</sup> Schafer. *The soundscape: Our sonic environment and the tuning of the world* 34.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, 25.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, 38.

term has become almost as amorphous as that of ontology, but at its core it is a geographically bounded place—the distance of which depends on how far the particular sounds in question can be heard<sup>23</sup>. Schafer wanted to make explicit the sounds in our world, in order to warn us about the dangers of certain “modern” noises. Noise pollution, in the urban soundscape, comes to us in the form of cars beeping, construction sounds, and to use a personal example, snow plows trundling down snowy roads in the middle of the night<sup>24</sup>. Ironically enough, though Schafer is cited in practically every work article or book I have read that speaks to attending to sound relations so as to understand a group of people, none take up his request to solve the problem of noise pollution. Rather, they concern themselves more with how making sound can also bring beings into the world, and can represent a particular way of knowing the world<sup>25</sup>. It is those who have taken it upon themselves to use Schafer’s soundscape concept in new and provocative ways who have something to offer anthropology.

Schafer concerned himself with two aspects of the soundscape. His primary concern was the loss of religiosity in our modern world. It is due to the absence of religion that we have moved away from “hearing”, so his argument goes<sup>26</sup>. This is necessary to dwell on for a moment. Schafer is unapologetically dismissive of the sounds of the modern world and laments our “hearing loss”, privileging certain sounds over others and preaching for a nostalgic past to which we cannot realistically return<sup>27</sup>. What this may speak to more usefully, in the context of this work, is a shift in how the world is known and constituted in the Western world<sup>28</sup>. Following Ian Hacking’s line of inquiry which examines the epistemological shifts that occurred in Western

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, 9.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, 4.

<sup>25</sup> Feld. *Sound and Sentiment: birds, weeping poetics and song in Kaluli expression*. 45.

<sup>26</sup> Leigh Eric Schmidt. *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 29.

<sup>27</sup> Schafer, *The soundscape: Our sonic environment and the tuning of the world*, 7.

<sup>28</sup> Ian Hacking, *Historical ontology*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press 2002), 6.



scientific study, one can begin to understand why anthropologists may not have been drawn to sound as method of ontological being.

Why has sound, as Schafer contends, become a less important way of knowing our world? Several scholars have taken it upon themselves to answer this, the majority of whom are researchers of religious music. Charles Hirschkind's book "The Ethical Soundscape" explains the ways in which understanding the importance of sound is fundamental to understanding the proliferation of cassette sermons in Muslim countries<sup>29</sup>. Hirschkind argues that sound has been overlooked by previous scholars because of the shift during the Enlightenment from valuing the sense of hearing, to valuing vision as the superior sense<sup>30</sup>. Sight was designated as the sense of objective observation, particularly in natural history and concerns of scientific inquiry. It was the only sense "with an almost exclusive privilege"<sup>31</sup> of being able to determine proof, or what was true<sup>32</sup>. This shift paralleled a move away from religion where the sense of hearing was of central importance.<sup>33</sup> The privileging of sight, the rise of the printing press and an excitement over new ocular-centric technologies in the realm of science, meant that sound in a religious context was losing ground.

Sound too was being re-framed by the lens of science. New technologies were giving sound and song materiality, through objects like the phonograph and stethoscope<sup>34</sup>. Intangible, unknowable sound, and the ambiguous meanings surrounding it had no place in an epistemology of visual categorization. Much in the same way that non-Euclidean geometry was eventually

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<sup>29</sup> Charles Hirschkind. *The ethical soundscape: Cassette sermons and islamic counterpublics*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 29.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, 13.

<sup>31</sup> Michel Foucault, *The order of things: An archaeology of the human sciences*. (English ed. London: Routledge, 2002), 133.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, 134.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Stocker, *Hear where we are: Sound, ecology, and sense of place*. 2013 (New York: Springer Online Service, 2013), 47.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, 25.

embraced as the superior method for practicing certain mathematics, seeing was embraced in an epistemological shift—a slow one, to be sure, not without its dissenters<sup>35</sup>—but a shift nonetheless. If we understand ontological anthropology as the ability to “discover which world is being expressed by the other”<sup>36</sup>, then perhaps the reason sound is so rarely included in this recognition or discovery is because certain ways of knowing are still conceived by researchers as givens. Hirschkind’s account of the Islamic soundscapes of Egypt makes strange the primacy of vision. Listening in Enlightenment parlance was equated to passivity. Listening, in Islam, is a choice. One in fact constitutes moral conduct through listening, through one’s entire body being “engaged with the world” and with God<sup>37</sup>.

Schafer’s second concern when writing his book was ecology; an overlapping concern shared with many anthropologists who now use and engage with an ontological framework in their research. Schafer’s soundscapes are inherently bounded within a geography and can be polluted with unpleasant or modern sounds<sup>38</sup>. His ecological queries centered around sound and society. How they meet, interact, and change. This aspect of Schafer’s work was not taken up with quite as much excitement as his call for more aural awareness. No doubt he is one origin point for what is now termed “eco-musicology”, but such scholars have taken a rather different tack on the topic than I think Schafer would have wanted.

It is always a surprise to realize that certain disciplines speak at cross-purposes, even while going down similar theoretical paths. Both ethnomusicology and anthropology are in the midst of grappling with how their fields relate to and can contribute knowledge about our current

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, 26

<sup>36</sup> Vinciane Despret. *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* Trans. Brett Buchanan. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2016), 166.

<sup>37</sup> Hirschkind. *The ethical soundscape: Cassette sermons and islamic counterpublics*, 34.

<sup>38</sup> Schafer. *The soundscape: Our sonic environment and the tuning of the world*, 237.

ecological crisis.<sup>39</sup> Both seek to be more self-reflexive in how they think about ecology and our relationship to it. In anthropology, this has manifested itself in an interest in traditional ecological knowledge, which has led to re-thinking of how said knowledge is understood and respected as “true” or “metaphorical”<sup>40</sup>. In ethnomusicology, what has occurred is a study of soundscapes as unique objects with agency and can act in the world. The focus is less on non-human ‘beings’ than on the way sounds become singular active environments<sup>41</sup>. Sounds are objects in the world. Musical studies that focus on the environment have placed their emphasis on the scientific aspect of sound analysis<sup>42</sup>. Music is deployed as a tool. In asking what music can “do” in a given scenario, ethnomusicologists fall into a development discourse that ultimately misses the need to reassess how and why we think about music and sound the way we do. In this realm, it is anthropology that has the upper hand. Though it is certainly not true that ethnomusicologists have made no move towards the ontological turn as it has been conceived in anthropology, it is certainly true that there are few who would go so far as to say they have encountered a place where song is more than metaphorical.

This section has been an attempt to expose the cracks in between the disciplines of ethnomusicology and anthropology, when it comes to sound, ecology and ontology. Now having seen the cracks, I intend to search for traces: Traces in anthropology of sound as constitutive, though perhaps not recognized as such, and traces of song in ethnomusicology that are too, I suggest, generative of ontologies though not perhaps explicitly so. From a focus on Schafer as one (of many possible) starting points, we shall turn to those who have adopted theories up in the

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<sup>39</sup>Ana María Ochoa Gautier. “Acoustic multinaturalism, the value of nature, and the nature of music in ecomusicology”. *Boundary 2* 43 no. 1 (2016): 114.

<sup>40</sup> Cruickshank. *Do glaciers listen?: Local knowledge, colonial encounters, and social imagination*, 6

<sup>41</sup> Iain Foreman. “Uncanny soundscapes: Towards an inoperative acoustic community”. *Organised Sound* 16 no. 3, (2011): 266.

<sup>42</sup> Ochoa Gautier. “Acoustic multinaturalism, the value of nature, and the nature of music in ecomusicology,”120.

field, and to those who are searching for a more fruitful way of discovering “from which world the other is the point of view”.

### **Sound and Song**

Our search for traces begins with sound. There have been a few anthropologists who address sound as a force of relationality. Sounds in nature help to constitute worlds. The Ojibwe according to Tim Ingold, consider many different things, objects, or animals to be persons<sup>43</sup>, and many make themselves known to humans through sound. A Thunder Bird is known by the sound of a thunder clap. Objects are persons based on their relationality to humans. A stone, the example Ingold uses, is alive when it moves in the world<sup>44</sup>. Similarly, a tree is alive when it makes sound—when its leaves make sound in the wind. To be able to make sound is to act in the world. Sounding is an act of being. What is crucial here is the idea that to make noise is equally constitutive as to move in the world. Ingold is undoubtedly more concerned with movement. His compelling idea that “living beings do not move upon the world, but along with it”<sup>45</sup> emphasizes this. However, when an Ojibwe couple listen for the sound of a thunder clap and wonder what was being said, sound and listening become part of the constituting of the self<sup>46</sup>. Ingold gets close to what I am trying to get to here. Speech, he concludes, “is a way of being alive”<sup>47</sup>. It is not so far a stretch to argue that speech could just as likely be construed as sound, or song.

Eduardo Kohn makes similar statements regarding dogs who live with the Runa in Ecuador. The Runa and their dogs have developed a “trans-species pidgin” through which to communicate. The Runa interpret certain dog sounds to mean a variety of things—that they will

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<sup>43</sup> Ingold “A circumpolar night’s dream,” 93.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, 98.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*, 99.

<sup>46</sup> Agostino Di Scipio. “The politics of sound and the biopolitics of music: Weaving together sound-making, irreducible listening, and the physical and cultural environment.” *Organised Sound* 20, no. 3 (2015): 282.

<sup>47</sup> Ingold, “A circumpolar night’s dream,” 104.

be killed by a jaguar, or that they will be successful in a hunt. They similarly incorporate dog sounds in rituals relating to dogs, usually as forms of discipline<sup>48</sup>. Though Kohn discusses the phrases used in these rituals and the “barking” of men, he does so in a purely linguistic framework. Sound and language are closely tied together. Yet sound, more than language, can be used to demarcate social spaces, and can evoke the invisible world of dreaming (in the case of the dogs) not so much to communicate something about that world, but to bring that world into being<sup>49</sup>. If the dogs did not bark, would they be considered part of the spirit world the Runa inhabit?

In his encounter with the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea, Steven Feld also initially interpreted the Kaluli’s understanding of bird sounds as linguistic. The birds that spoke to the Kaluli, however, were only voices because this was how the Kaluli most related to them: through the sounds they made<sup>50</sup>. Furthermore, in Kaluli cosmology, the birds are embodiments of ancestors. This led to Feld completely revising how he intended to understand bird taxonomy and Kaluli relations with them. The sounds the birds make are their primary ways of ‘being’ in the world in relation to the Kaluli. Subsequently, Feld found that sound and mythology relating to bird/Kaluli relationships defined the categorization of certain birds. For example, birds that shared sad or “mourning” sound would be part of the same ornithological family<sup>51</sup>. Feld is another one of those foundational ethnomusicologists who came as close as one has gotten to ontological anthropology. The conclusion of his work argues for the naming of a new form of epistemology; an acoustemology, a way of knowing “in which sonic sensibility is basic to

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<sup>48</sup> Kohn, Eduardo. “How Dogs Dream: Amazonian Natures and the Politics of Transspecies Engagement”, *American Ethnologist* 34 no. 1, (2007): 10.

<sup>49</sup> Feld, *Sound and Sentiment: birds, weeping poetics and song in Kaluli expression*, 61.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, 45.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, 53.

experiential truth”<sup>52</sup>. Feld has come close to naming a place where songs are true. Certainly, the Kaluli believe them to be, there is no question of that in Feld’s ethnography. The Kaluli orient much of their lives around the sounds birds make. They constitute their world through the sounding of birds and through their own responses. The majority of Kaluli songs incorporate bird sounds<sup>53</sup>. Feld does not however, go this far, and throughout refers to Kaluli songs or cosmological beliefs as metaphor. To refer to it as metaphor is to arrange atop the Kaluli ontology a sense of control and comprehension. Surely, if Feld could only understand it as metaphor, then it must be just that. Rather, to make the leap from epistemological to ontological, Feld must be built upon, not looked to for answers. It is certainly easier for us to understand the link between sound and song when one thinks of birds. We understand birds as song makers. Is it as easy to make the link for wolves? Or reindeer? Or glaciers? In order to conceptualize how such things can be sung, or how they in fact are vocalists, it is necessary to make strange song.

From a cultural standpoint, songs are understood to be carriers of meaning, be that cultural or not<sup>54</sup>. When not filled with culturally relevant meaning ready to be extracted, songs or music, are bridges between nature and culture, themselves understood as torn asunder<sup>55</sup>. Not only does this presuppose a rift between nature and culture, but it also presupposes an audience for which the songs are made. Among the Saami of Norway, *joiks*, a particular kind of song, are sung to animal audiences<sup>56</sup>. They are sung at times to call up ptarmigans, wolves, or

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<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, 187.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, 35.

<sup>54</sup> Ochoa Gautier. “Acoustic multinaturalism, the value of nature, and the nature of music in ecomusicology”, 131.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*, 127.

<sup>56</sup> Tina K. Ramnarine “Acoustemology, indigeneity, and joik in valkeapää’s symphonic activism: Views from Europe’s arctic fringes for environmental ethnomusicology”. *Ethnomusicology*, 53 no. 2 (2009.):198.

landscapes.<sup>57</sup> Importantly, the Saami are not the only beings who can *joik*. Animals and landscapes may have *joiks*. The singer who brings a wolf into a room, or the wind, is not the sole agent of composition<sup>58</sup>.

Such accounts of song are not dissimilar to the traces of song found in Julie Cruickshank's work "Do Glaciers Listen". In oral narratives of the Tlingit, glaciers hear careless speech, laughter or slaughter and correspondingly act<sup>59</sup>. Similarly, the Tlingit choose their actions based on the sounds they hear and interpret in their travels through what is now the Yukon<sup>60</sup>. Cruickshank's data is oral narratives that are historical. Yet, like *joiks*, Tlingit songs are included in these oral narratives, as acts of "recalling".<sup>61</sup> It is partially through song that Cruickshank is able to hear the relationship between the Tlingit and glaciers. Listening glaciers are themselves constituted through song and oral narrative<sup>62</sup>. Next to such accounts, the designation of music as an object is difficult to grasp. What these accounts show is that song and sound, if they are objects, are ones of inherent flexibility that are shaped in the act of experience<sup>63</sup>. Cruickshank mentions in passing that songs "took on additional meaning as they were performed"<sup>64</sup>. She does not go further in her analysis; song is not the focus of her project.

Tina Ramnarine in her research of the Saami takes that step: "The *joiker*, the *joik* and the *joiked* are one and the same."<sup>65</sup> The song-maker, the song and the sung-of, are constitutive of our place in the world. To sing a landscape is, in essence, to affirm its existence in relation to the

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<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*,191.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*,209.

<sup>59</sup> Cruickshank "Glaciers and climate change: Perspectives from oral tradition," 385

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, 384.

<sup>61</sup> Ramnarine, "Acoustemology, indigeneity, and joik in valkeapää's symphonic activism: Views from Europe's arctic fringes for environmental ethnomusicology", 209.

<sup>62</sup> Cruickshank. *Do glaciers listen?: Local knowledge, colonial encounters, and social imagination*, 40.

<sup>63</sup> Foreman. "Uncanny soundscapes: Towards an inoperative acoustic community", 266.

<sup>64</sup> Cruickshank. *Do glaciers listen?: Local knowledge, colonial encounters, and social imagination*, 46.

<sup>65</sup> Ramnarine "Acoustemology, indigeneity, and joik in valkeapää's symphonic activism: Views from Europe's arctic fringes for environmental ethnomusicology", 205.

singer<sup>66</sup>. Through the search for traces, it has become clear that sound and song have the potential to play an important role in understanding and constituting worlds. This is not to universalize, for we have also seen that the Western ontology's relationship with sound has changed and shifted with time since the enlightenment. What this section has done is opened the possibility for new understandings of the effect sound-making has on environments and on the sound maker<sup>67</sup>. The next step in this journey is to reimagine how we understand place.

### **Migrating Worlds**

There are many intersecting qualities between ethnomusicology and anthropology. With respect to ontological anthropology, one stands out in particular. Anthropology engaged with an ontological framework in the context of climate change politics is often bounded by geography. Looking back at the work that was explored and searched for sound and song traces, it is possible to discern a pattern. The research was done in place, sometimes in very small geographic spaces. Anthropologists are not alone in this, for the two ethnomusicologists who entered the discussion were also very much working in a static place. Feld even writes that when the Kaluli people leave their familiar spaces, where different bird sounds can be heard, they lose their ability to navigate. They are effectively bounded by their knowledge of bird sounds to a particular place<sup>68</sup>. It is not unusual for ethnographers of any discipline to write about one place. As it happens, however, I have my own interest in understanding how ontologies and sounds can be made mobile. In my own research on the Tuareg of northern Mali, two important phenomena have displaced large populations from their known geographic spaces. The first is conflict. Since Mali's independence, the government and the nomadic Tuareg have been fighting for decades,

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<sup>66</sup> Stocker, *Hear where we are: Sound, ecology, and sense of place* 34.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*, 12.

<sup>68</sup> Feld. *Sound and Sentiment: birds, weeping poetics and song in Kaluli expression*, 61.



for control, for autonomy, for land rights, for pacification purposes<sup>69</sup>. Though as mentioned, the Tuareg are nomadic, constant fighting has moved them oftentimes to territories that are unfamiliar, for example, the spaces of refugee camps. The second phenomenon is climate change. Two major droughts in the 70s and 80s led many Tuareg groups to stop their nomadic lifestyle, either moving further south, out of the desert, or closer to towns and cities, like Timbuktu or Kidal in Mali, or Niamey in Niger<sup>70</sup>. The droughts also created a new social class of Tuareg, namely the *Ishumar*, a gloss on the French *chomeur* or *chomage* meaning unemployment<sup>71</sup>. *Ishumar* were born out of the shift from pastoralism to a sedentary life. They were the youth who grew up in the midst of the droughts, becoming economic nomads. Some were in self-imposed exile, travelling to Libya, Algeria or Niger to find work<sup>72</sup>. As we shall see, there is ample evidence to suggest that the Tuareg know the world and their environment in part through sound and song<sup>73</sup>. And yet, displaced by conflict and environmental changes in the desert, many Tuareg clans now exist in very different places and environments than they once inhabited. What does this mean for how they constitute their world? And, just as importantly, how is knowledge of the displaced taken into account by those seeking to address the climate change events in the Sahel region of West Africa?

As climate events become increasingly violent, it will not be so easy to meet those groups in their place of knowledge. Climate change displaces people. And if people are forced from their homes, their ways of being in the world are also exiled. This does not however, mean that

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<sup>69</sup> Jean Sebastian Lecocq, and Brill Academic Publishers. *Disputed desert decolonisation, competing nationalisms and Tuareg rebellions in northern Mali*. (Boston: Brill, 2010): 1.

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*, 230.

<sup>71</sup> Susan J. Rasmussen “Moving beyond protest in Tuareg *Ichumar* musical performance”. *Ethnohistory*, 53, no. 4 (2006): 637.

<sup>72</sup> Rasmussen. “The people of solitude: Recalling and reinventing *essuf* (the wild) in traditional and emergent Tuareg cultural spaces” 638.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 613.

such ways of being become invaluable. Rather it requires researchers to re-evaluate how ontologies are recognized, and to consider the ways in which the notion of “home”, as landscape, environment or sonic world, may itself be made mobile<sup>74</sup>. I argue that such concepts can be moved with the help of song. The work of understanding climate change has, often by default, gone to scientists who attempt to integrate their own knowledge with “traditional” knowledge of the region under study<sup>75</sup>. What we have seen in the case studies presented here and in many other ontological anthropology works, is the mobility of “modern” ontology, in which scientific knowledge holds primacy<sup>76</sup>. If scientific ways of knowing can travel the world, then there should be no reason why others could not. Whether they are acknowledged as such is another question. Furthermore, those who have been displaced due to climate events may still provide ways of knowing and relevance to climate change research. For while the origin place of a particular way of being in the world may be a fixed place, that does not mean that it must stay there<sup>77</sup>. In fact, when song is a constitutive force of worlds, such as the Dreaming in Australian Aborigines cosmology, the question of whether home is the place where the body lives or the place the spirit travels, becomes blurred and contradictory<sup>78</sup>.

A similar blurring occurs in Tuareg ways of knowing their desert homeland through *essuf*; a spiritual realm, a place of solitude, safety, loneliness and longing<sup>79</sup>. Songs of *essuf* offer versions of the Sahel that complicate our understanding of that desert region. *Essuf* has rarely been explored in literature on the Tuareg, dismissed as metaphorical cosmology. Yet as we shall

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<sup>74</sup> Stocker, *Hear where we are: Sound, ecology, and sense of place*, 42.

<sup>75</sup> Emilie S. Cameron. “Securing indigenous politics: A critique of the vulnerability and adaptation approach to the human dimensions of climate change in the Canadian arctic”. *Global Environmental Change* 22, no. 1 (2011):104.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>77</sup> Jackson, Michael. *At home in the world*. (Duke University Press, 1995): 35.

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*, 34.

<sup>79</sup> Rasmussen “The people of solitude: Recalling and reinventing *essuf* (the wild) in traditional and emergent Tuareg cultural spaces”, 614.

see, such categorizations are outcomes of unequal encounters between the Tuareg, researchers and in some cases, international audiences listening to famous Tuareg musicians sing about *essuf*<sup>80</sup>.

### **Tuareg Song and *Essuf***

*Essuf* is a landscape. At once considered the “wild” outside of the traditional Tuareg tent, an interior space of contemplation or spirit possession<sup>81</sup>. It does not follow a rigid nature/culture divide. Spirits who exist in *essuf* can threaten the lives of children and rituals are performed to banish spirits back to *essuf* and bring people back from spiritual journeys<sup>82</sup>. Ritual songs are sung to enact *essuf*, and are occasionally accompanied by dancing, described as the “swaying of a tree branch”<sup>83</sup>. Songs are often referred to as the branches of a tandeine tree, or other drought resistant trees<sup>84</sup>. Thus, we can see that song constitutes nature and vice versa. Yet, just as our own ways of knowing shift, so too has the knowing of *essuf*. Tuareg music was popularized in the late 1990s culminating in the development of Le Festival au Desert in 2001<sup>85</sup>. Subsequently up to eight Tuareg bands are currently touring the world, bringing with them the notion of *essuf*<sup>86</sup>. *Essuf* in these contexts is a place of nostalgia, loss, liminality and solitude<sup>87</sup>.

Encountered by non-Tuareg audiences however, the music that constitutes *essuf* is viewed more as a potential tool for peacebuilding or as an exotic example of cultural information.

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<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*, 618.

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*, 609.

<sup>82</sup> *ibid.*, 613.

<sup>83</sup> Susan J. Rasmusen, “The ‘head dance’, contested self, and art as a balancing act in tuareg spirit possession”. *Africa* 64 no. 1 (1994): 74.

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*, 83.

<sup>85</sup> Angela Marie Montague, “Contested nation, global space: Tourism and the politics of Tuareg heritage in Mali.” (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2014): 2.

<sup>86</sup> Nadia Belalimat “The Ishumar guitar: Emergence, circulation and evolution from diasporic performances to the World Scene”. In *Tuareg society within a globalized world: Saharan life in transition 2010* ed. Anja Fischer and Ines Kohl. 155-170. (London: Tauris Academic Studies/I.B. Tauris):167

<sup>87</sup> Rasmussen, “The people of solitude: Recalling and reinventing *essuf* (the wild) in traditional and emergent Tuareg cultural spaces”, 619.

Clearly, the Tuareg like many of the indigenous groups discussed in ontological anthropology works, do not live in a vacuum. Their ontology overlaps with others' ontologies, and they have a long history of political tension with the Malian government<sup>88</sup>. They have also encountered numerous NGOs and UN affiliated groups, primarily in relation to a continual cycle of rebellion and reconciliation<sup>89</sup>. Concerns about the effects climate change has on the Sahel region has also become embroiled in debates about peace and conflict prevention<sup>90</sup>. The rhetoric of climate change science in the Sahel centers around desertification and the impending squabbles for resources<sup>91</sup>. This, despite the fact that occasional conflicts between pastoralists and sedentary farmers have been an ongoing reality in the Sahel for many years, and that desertification itself is a contested issue, with a colonial past. Desertification has been used by both former French colonizers and the Malian government as an excuse to impose land management policies on nomadic groups in the north, ostensibly to encourage a more sedentary lifestyle<sup>92</sup>. While desertification and its impact remains contested, it is a scientific dispute, one that addresses how those living in the region are affected, but not how they, or those who have left the region, understand the desert outside of statistics about rainfall and water scarcity<sup>93</sup>. Climate change, economic viability and conflict are formed into causal chain in the literature. Perhaps then it is more accurate to say that climate change narratives have displaced the Tuareg, as have frequent conflicts between them and the Malian government as recently as 2012.

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<sup>88</sup> Tor A Benjaminsen, Berge Gunnvor, and Dugan Erling. "Myths of Timbuktu: From African el dorado to desertification". *International Journal of Political Economy* 34 no. 1 (2014): 53.

<sup>89</sup> Lecocq, *Disputed desert decolonisation, competing nationalisms and Tuareg rebellions in northern Mali*, 296.

<sup>90</sup> Petrocelli, Tobi, Samantha Newport, and Dennis Hamro-Drotz. "Climate change and peacebuilding in the Sahel". *Peace Review* 25 no. 4 (2013): 549.

<sup>91</sup> *ibid.*, 547.

<sup>92</sup> Benjaminson, Gunnvor and Erling, "Myths of Timbuktu: From African el dorado to desertification", 55.

<sup>93</sup> Benjaminsen, Tor A., Koffi Alinon, Halvard Buhaug, and Jill Tove Buseth. "Does climate change drive land-use conflicts in the Sahel?" *Journal of Peace Research* 49 no. 1. 109.

How can an ontological framework provide new ways of thinking about the experience of the Tuareg? The mobility of the West's scientific or "modern" ontology can be critiqued as possible due to its ability to appear objective and universal<sup>94</sup>. Only by burying its origins is a scientific ontology able to make itself applicable to a vast number of landscapes. Yet the Tuareg, despite their displacement, have not erased the origin of their way of knowing the world. Rather, through song it has remained situated in the landscape of the desert, which remains tied to referential events in the world in which they exist, and to nostalgic rememberings of a nomadic life constituted by *essuf*<sup>95</sup>. Though the motivations for evoking *essuf* in song-making change, the Tuareg still maintain a relationship with the desert through *essuf*. In recognizing this, we can begin to ask new questions about how the Tuareg constitute the world not through physical relationships with local or traditional landscapes, but through sung relationships that rely on memory, history and cosmology to constitute a knowable world. Forcibly removed from the landscapes upon which their ontological world was formed, the Tuareg do not then lose their way of knowing the world. As a case study, Tuareg ways of knowing collapse notions of distance and intimacy with a space or setting. As Susan Rasmussen concludes, many of the meanings employed for *essuf* "remain embedded 'in spirit' within their particular home community and beckon others to return home"<sup>96</sup>. The concept of home, local and global are blurred in the Tuareg world. 'Place' is fluid; entangled irrevocably with landscapes both spiritual, nostalgic and real. Recognizing how Tuareg ways of knowing are constituted by song opens the possibility for more thoughtful engagement with Tuareg who have been displaced by narratives of climate change and conflict. Cruickshank in her work speaks of knowledge bridges

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<sup>94</sup> Cruickshank. "Glaciers and climate change: Perspectives from oral tradition", 391.

<sup>95</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> Rasmussen "The people of solitude: Recalling and reinventing *essuf* (the wild) in traditional and emergent Tuareg cultural spaces", 623.

between science and local knowledge<sup>97</sup>. To do the same in the case of the Tuareg invites scientists, along with development officers and UN institutions to re-consider questions around the ‘problem’ displaced people pose in international circles and to not only be more reflexive regarding climate change in the Sahel, but to engage with the Tuareg as having an equally valid relationship with changing landscapes and their futures.

## Conclusion

This final case study of Tuareg ways of knowing was presented as a way of thinking through how recognizing song and singing is a constituting force, but can be a crucial way for anthropologists to imagine future research on forced migration, displacement and refugee-hood through an ontological framework. Notions of *essuf* shift and emerge as Tuareg ways of being in the world are reconciled with outside forces, such as conflict, climate change, and the imposition of scientific or development knowledge deployed in reaction to these situations<sup>98</sup>. In a time of uncertainty and liminality, those that fall into *essuf* are categorized as lost or estranged from their home. Rituals to bring possessed or lost souls back from *essuf* is a frequent exercise that speaks to the work that is involved in rebuilding community in new spaces. A return from *essuf* is a re-socialization in a new setting<sup>99</sup>. To recognize this way of knowing is to recognize a way of knowing newness, change and disruption.

The modern ontology so often critiqued by ontological anthropologists can no longer be privileged as the only wandering way of being in the world. Such a framework echoes notions of an all-encompassing globalization that seeps into all localities, while local knowledge is bounded

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<sup>97</sup> Cruickshank. *Do glaciers listen?: Local knowledge, colonial encounters, and social imagination*, 259.

<sup>98</sup> Rasmussen “The people of solitude: Recalling and reinventing *essuf* (the wild) in traditional and emergent Tuareg cultural spaces”, 611.

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*, 616.

and inapplicable to other places<sup>100</sup>. Similarly, the Tuareg are not unaware of the outside knowledges that have been imposed on them. They have adapted and attempted to work with NGO, scientific and even state knowledge, though as often they have defied it<sup>101</sup>. Understandably this has led to clashes, to confusions and to movement. Throughout this paper too we have travelled a fair distance. Place, song and knowing have all been complicated and, I hope, made strange. The snatches of song and sound that have been uncovered in both anthropological and ethnomusicological work have led to the intervention at hand, to make explicit how listening and sound-making bring worlds into being, how song allows worlds to be constituted anew in new geographies. It is not my aim to presume that a recognition of song and sound is necessary for an exploration of all migratory peoples. I consider it instead an additional possibility for ontological anthropologists to imagine while they do their work. There are certainly other possibilities. There may even be other possibilities within the world of the Tuareg. The instinct might be to try and dissect these possibilities to impose an amount of control and predictability upon these ways of knowing, so that we ourselves can know in our own ways. This is what leads to conceiving of Kaluli stories about boys who becomes birds as metaphorical. Or *essuf* as a metaphorical place. Instead, we must fight our instinct to try and possess and own knowledge. Rather, it may be our task to embrace strangeness. To make strangeness static is to make it controllable<sup>102</sup>. Strangeness moves. And in some cases, it comes to us in song.

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<sup>100</sup> Cameron. "Securing indigenous politics: A critique of the vulnerability and adaptation approach to the human dimensions of climate change in the Canadian arctic". 105.

<sup>101</sup> Rasmussen, "Moving beyond protest in Tuareg *Ichumar* musical performance", 633.

<sup>102</sup> Cameron. "Securing indigenous politics: A critique of the vulnerability and adaptation approach to the human dimensions of climate change in the Canadian arctic", 105 .

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