Stonesound
A Collaborative Experiment in Stone Sounding in Moulay Bouchta

Gilles Aubry

Introduction

This article retraces the findings and observations resulting from my collaboration with the artist Abdeljalil Saouli in Moulay Bouchta as part of my doctoral research on sound and aurality.[1] Born in 1984, Saouli studied visual arts at the National Institute of Fine Arts in Tetouan (INBA) and made a name for himself as part of a new generation of artists who emerged around 2010 on the national art scene. Unsatisfied with his situation in Tetouan, he decided to relocate to his native village of Moulay Bouchta (60 km north of Fès) and built himself a house on a family-owned plot of land. This gave him enough space both for his sculptural art practice and direct access to the natural materials needed for it. I became familiar with his artwork in an initial visit to his house in 2017. The artworks displayed in his house and the surroundings had a strong and almost animated presence. They were made of wood, clay, metal, grass and paper paste, soil, or polyester. The house itself was impressive; it had been built by Saouli with the help of villagers and family members, using primarily local, natural materials such as stone, rammed earth, and wood. In September 2018, Saouli invited me together with the architect Carlos Perez Marin to collaborate in a project that aimed to combine art, sound, and architecture. His proposed working theme was "la maison," which translates from French into English as both *house* and *home*. We spent about ten days researching vernacular architecture and building techniques, remaining attentive to how local constructions adapt to the region's steep and uneven topography and the environmental conditions more generally. We also visited local saint sanctuaries and several houses in the neighborhood, studying their architecture and conversing with their owners. We made a series of experiments in stone-sounding, which is discussed in this article as a material and affective en-

1 Gilles Aubry: *Sawt, Bodies, Species: Sonic Pluralism in Morocco*, Hamburg: Adocs Verlag 2023.

gagement with sound and listening, given that we wanted to include sound in our research. The video *Stonesound* is an output of our project,[2] presented later in Moulay Bouchta as part of the "Sakhra Encounters" exhibition.[3] The video documents one of our experiments and is layered with fragments from Saouli's comments, thereby offering a sensuous account of some of the ideas discussed here.

Global turn in Sound Studies and object-oriented ontology in anthropology

The present study aims to join current conversations on the necessary 're-mapping' of Sound Studies from perspectives situated in the Global South.[4] Early contributors to the field proposed important new narratives of 'modern sound' by historicizing sound, listening, and technology as socially constructed practices beyond the determinism of scientific innovation. As Gavin Steingo and Jim Sykes aptly remarked, these early contributions appear limited today in that they have arguably sustained universal categories of listening subjects (secular, white, and middle-class), of urban spaces characterized by "the increasingly sharp division between public and private space" (the global city), and of notions of sound itself as "a concept and phenomenon separable from the other senses."[5] This project seeks to engage with the problem of Western-centered sound categories and other disciplinary boundaries via artistic collaborations in Morocco and is informed by such critiques, and by both postcolonial and decolonial theories. While Morocco and North-Africa remain barely represented in Sound Studies, a few accounts relevant to my study do exist.[6] They address aspects that simultaneously both confirm and

2 Gilles Aubry/Abdeljalil Saouli: *Stonesound* [Video], 2019. The video can be accessed via the following link: https://archive.org/details/stonesound (accessed 04/08/2021).

3 The "Sakhra Encounters" was a public art event and exhibition held in Moulay Bouchta (15–17 March 2019), initiated by Gilles Aubry, Abdeljalil Saouli and Carlos Perez Marin. Information and documentation is available through the following link: http://radioappartement22.com/?s=sakhra (accessed 04/08/2021).

4 Cf. Gavin Steingo/Jim Sykes (eds.): *Remapping Sound Studies*, Durham/London: Duke University Press 2019.

5 Gavin Steingo/Jim Sykes: "Introduction: Remapping Sound Studies in the Global South", in: Gavin Steingo/Jim Sykes (eds.): *Remapping Sound Studies*, Durham/London: Duke University Press 2019, pp. 1–38, here p. 7.

6 An abundance of literature has been published in the field of cultural *music* studies in Morocco over the last twenty years, a.o. Aomar Boum: "Dancing for the Moroccan State: Ethnic Folk Dances and the Production of National Hybridity", in: Nabil Boudraa/Joseph Krause (eds.): *North African Mosaic: A Cultural Reappraisal of Ethnic and Religious Minorities*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2007, pp. 214–237. A few other contributions address cases of direct engagement with modern sound technologies on the continent, cf. e.g., Charles Hirschkind: *The Ethical Soundscape: Cas-*

Figure 1: View of Abdeljalil Saouli's house in Moulay Bouchta (left); the village of Moulay Bouchta with Mount Amergou in the back (right). Photos: Gilles Aubry

contradict the Western ideals of modern sound and listening: technologically mediated listening finds social meaning in linear streams of information as much as in technical noise, in fragmentation, and in inefficiency;[7] audio media is consumed privately as part of neoliberal markets, whereas local understandings of *privacy* entangle deeply with both notions of collectivity and specific forms of associational life, community, and authority;[8] the affective and sensory dimension of listening experience pertains to secular rationalities as much as it does to the moral and religious sensibilities that mediate between people and virtual realms of being.

We were concerned with stones simultaneously as material, and as natural and socially relevant *things* during our experiments. Thus, this study also draws on contemporary accounts on object-oriented ontology in anthropological studies. Sounding stones together with Abdeljalil Saouli provided a concrete starting point for a reflection on the nature of both stones and sound. This approach was inspired by Steven Feld's "acoustemology"[9] and by the heuristic method of "thinking through things."[10] This study also benefited from recent ethnobotanical studies

sette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics, New York: Columbia University Press 2006; Brian Larkin: *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria*, Durham/London: Duke University Press 2008. More recent ethnomusicological studies increasingly engage with aurality beyond music, covering listening experience, the voice, gender aspects, and Sufi spiritual practices, see Deborah Kapchan: "Body", in: David Novak/Matt Sakakeeny (eds.): *Keywords in Sound*, Durham/London: Duke University Press 2015, pp. 33–44.

7 Cf. Larkin: *Signal and Noise*, pp. 14, 54, 259.

8 Cf. Hirschkind: *The Ethical Soundscape*.

9 Steven Feld: "On Post-Ethnomusicology Alternatives: Acoustemology", in: Francesco Giannatasio/Giovani Giuriati (ed.): *Perspectives on a 21st-Century Comparative Musicology: Ethnomusicology or Transcultural Musicology*, Udine: Nota 2017, pp. 82–99.

10 Amiria Henare/Martin Holbraad/Sari Wastell (eds.): *Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*, New York: Routledge 2007.

in the *Jbala* region[11] which were helpful in further interpreting our experiment's findings on a broader local social scale.

Artistic research methodology: performative listening and collaborative practice

This study follows recent trends in artistic research in the humanities[12] and in sound art.[13] Both Abdeljalil Saouli and myself alternated between performative interventions in the landscape and conversations about our activities. In this manner, we engaged in the form of an aesthetic "theory-practice."[14] In such a practice, knowledge is produced by the interactions between the subject and the matter of the experiments – of sounding stones together in our case – rather than being determined beforehand by disciplinary assumptions that are subject to verification. I entered into a collaboration with Saouli and found myself no longer in an observational position of exteriority, but as having been inserted as a co-partner whose presence was one of the forces that shaped the process. The collaboration between us turned into a "co-creative" process by being responsive to Saouli's needs and interests and by partially aligning the research to *his* ideas.[15] "The 'co' denotes sharing of power and authority, while the 'creation' denotes doing things in new ways that improve on past practice."[16] Co-creative practice relies on mutual learning between the participants, thereby helping individuals develop skills to support their aspirations.

As one example of the collaborative dimension of our project, the idea for our stone-sounding experiments emerged as I was beating stones on the wall inside Saouli's house with a metallic object as a test. "Did you really find the sound of stone in the recording you just did?" he asked, and I replied: "I do not know yet. I find it interesting to sound stones by beating them." Then, he added: "You should hit a stone with another stone, in order to keep the 'stone sound'. Not with metal. We are going

11 Malou Delplancke/Yildiz Aumeeruddy-Thomas: »Des semis et des clones«, in: *Revue d'ethnoécologie*, Supplément 1 (2017), pp. 1–27.

12 Cf. Martin Blain/Helen Julia Minors (eds.): *Artistic Research in Performance Through Collaboration*, London: Palgrave Mcmillan 2020. See also Harriet Hawkins: *Geography, Art, Research: Artistic Research in the GeoHumanities*, New York: Routledge 2021.

13 Cf. Michael Bull/Marcel Cobussen (eds.): *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Sonic Methodologies*, London: Bloomsbury 2021.

14 Jan-Erik Lundström: "Introduction", in: Ursula Biemann/Jan-Erik Lundström (eds.): *Mission Reports: Artistic Practice in the Field: Video Works 1998–2008*, Umea: Bildmuseet 2008, pp. 7–12, here p. 11.

15 T. J. Ferguson/Stewart B. Koyiyumptewa/Maren P. Hopkins: "Co-Creation of Knowledge by the Hopi Tribe and Archaeologist", in: *Advances in Archaeological Practice* 3 (2015) 3, pp. 249–262.

16 Ibid., p. 250.

to try this out." So we did; we conducted a series of experiments the goal of which was not entirely clear to us ahead of time, but the main idea was to engage in an exchange about sound produced by stones. Stones rarely emit sound by themselves; thus, our approach relied on basic sounding techniques while listening and recording simultaneously. *Sounding*, as Stefan Helmreich suggests – in the proper sense of *measuring the depth of something* – is "appropriate for investigating things not yet known, things whose limits are not clear or whose boundaries may be obscured."[17] We engaged in a close sonic investigation of the materiality of stones, sounding them through beating, inquiring about their matter, hardness, weight, and inner structure. In Saouli's own words, this was a way to ask them "many questions." In so doing, we were also able to dwell at the unclear borders of abstract terms like 'matter', 'stone', 'sound', 'life', 'the human', 'the self', and their complex entanglements.

Listening was another essential aspect of this research methodology, firstly as a modality of "participant observation"[18] and secondly as an artistic research practice. Listening participates in group formation and collective processes concerned with the possibility of social and political change; I was, therefore, interested in exploring "what listening can do rather than just what it is."[19] Our method also relied on definitions of listening as an experience that is "resolutely ontological, because the various peoples of the world understand that which is heard in radically different manners."[20] Listening deploys its capacities along a material-affective continuum that can include the "virtual"[21] and the "possible" by dwelling at the borders of audibility.[22] Listening "acts" generate a form of "sounding,"[23] that is, the creation of a particular material reality that cannot necessarily be heard in a cochlear sense. In other words, performative listening is transformative on an affective level, and arguably on a material and *bodily* level too.[24] These aspects were equally present in this research, leading to the emergence of a particular sound concept, 'stonesound', which is at odds with the Western rational understanding of sound. A brief description of our experiments follows before an introduction to this concept and a discussion of its possible implications for the field of Sound Studies.

---

17 Stefan Helmreich: *Sounding the Limits of Life: Essays in the Anthropology of Biology and Beyond*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2016, p. xi.

18 Kathleen M. DeWalt/Billie DeWalt: *Participant Observation: A Guide for Fieldworkers*, Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira 2002.

19 Lucia Farinati/Claudia Firth: *The Force of Listening*, Berlin: Errant Bodies 2017, p. 10.

20 Steingo/Sykes: "Introduction", pp. 11f.

21 Steve Goodman: *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear*, Cambridge/London: MIT 2011, p. 48.

22 Salomé Voegelin: *Sonic Possible Worlds: Hearing the Continuum of Sound*, London: Bloomsbury 2014.

23 Feld: "On Post-Ethnomusicology Alternatives", p. 86.

24 Cf. Kapchan: "Body".

Experiments in stone sounding

We carried out four experiments during my stay in Moulay Bouchta in September 2018, which were documented through recording and reflected on through conversations held thereafter. They took place at three different locations and lasted for about 30 to 60 minutes each:

Experiment 1 (3 September 2018, 4 p.m., Mount Amergou)

The first experiment took the form of a long walk on top of Mount Amergou, which overlooks the village and where I made recordings by inserting my microphone in stone cavities carved by wind and water erosion. These cavities acted as natural resonators and filters for the ambient sounds and the strong wind in particular. The process resulted in rather abstract wind recordings, with differences in 'colors' between them, according to each cavity's size and shape. Distant voices of kids playing in the valley are also audible on the recordings, along with cars, birds, and other animals. I also recorded Abdeljalil Saouli's comments and textural experiments in rubbing stones against each other. Overall, this experiment was an interesting first step in our collaboration, showing differences between our respective approaches to sound and ecological voices. I was searching for unusual listening points with my microphone, approaching sound in terms of resonance, soundscape, and as a series of short, comparable recordings. Saouli focused instead on the tactile and textural qualities of stones and other things, actively sounding them by rubbing or hitting them, also pointing to particular landmarks.

Experiment 2 (4 September 2018, Moulay Bouchta, 6:30 p.m.)

The second experiment originated from Saouli's idea to record a "sound wall," as he called it,[25] by tapping on each of the stones of a wall bordering his land plot with a small stone. The wall was about 30 meters long by 60 cm high, made of limestone rocks layered on top of each other without cement. He started by tapping each stone two to four times at one end of the wall, slowly moving along the wall while I was recording. It took us about fifty minutes to reach the other end, stopping at times for additional comments. Despite its simplicity, this experiment turned out to be pleasantly surprising for both of us, firstly as a shared aesthetic listening experience and secondly because of the interesting conversation that it triggered. Abdeljalil Saouli's soft beating on the limestone rocks produced a rich variety of sounds, with subtle and endless variations in pitch, resonance, density, and texture. After

25 The declarations by Abdeljalil Saouli reproduced in this text stem from our conversations in French between September 2018 and March 2019. All English translations by the author.

about fifteen minutes, our listening had reached an intense degree of concentration, floating freely between the stone sounds, other sounds in the background, and something more interior to ourselves. The wall itself was the score for this experiment, guiding our progression and helping our concentration. The soundscape around us was quite vivid when we started shortly before dusk. We could hear donkeys, sheep, birds, the voices of kids playing, and someone hammering in the distance. The scene quietened as the light diminished, with crickets progressively blending in, soon followed by the barking of distant farm dogs. Sounding stones reminded Abdeljalil Saouli of his experience in breaking stones while building his house, leading to more comments on stones and sound in general.

Experiments 3 & 4 (5 September 2018, Moulay Bouchta, 11 a.m. and 5 p.m.)

The third and fourth experiments took place at the top of the hill overlooking Abdeljalil Saouli's house, a karstic area covered with large limestone blocks. Carved by water erosion, the rocks look like they have been placed on top of each other by a 'giant hand', leaving empty spaces between them. Their surfaces are irregular and contain many cracks and interstices, resulting in essential differences in mass and density between blocks of a similar size. We explored a zone of about 50 x 50 meters, sounding rocks by hitting them as we were progressing without following a systematic plan. Saouli used the flat of his hand for the third experiment, which lasted about thirty minutes. Later on that day, we returned to the same place for a fourth experiment, this time using a rock to beat stones. We made a video using a GoPro camera attached to Saouli's forehead who was very familiar with the terrain, progressing fast between the stones, while I was moving more slowly after him with the microphone. Other sounds in the background also attracted our attention during the experiments, with cicadas dominating during the day and more voices from the village later at dusk, including the call for prayer from mosques which could be heard in the whole valley.

The results of these last two experiments were quite surprising because of the physical and structural complexity of the karst rock formation that we were exploring. While I initially expected little difference between the stone-sounds, our approach revealed a remarkable variety of pitch, resonance, density, and texture and was clearly audible in the soundtrack of our *Stonesound* video. Experiments 3 and 4 became a kind of auscultation of the internal physical complexity of karst rocks and their interconnections, thereby producing an impression of relative fragility and hollowness from the entire mountain. In other words, we sounded the effects of water erosion and geological time on limestone. These experiments became a way for us to enter into a particular relationship with the mountain and with the stones, one which involved our bodies and their senses, ultimately affecting the perception of ourselves and of the environment.

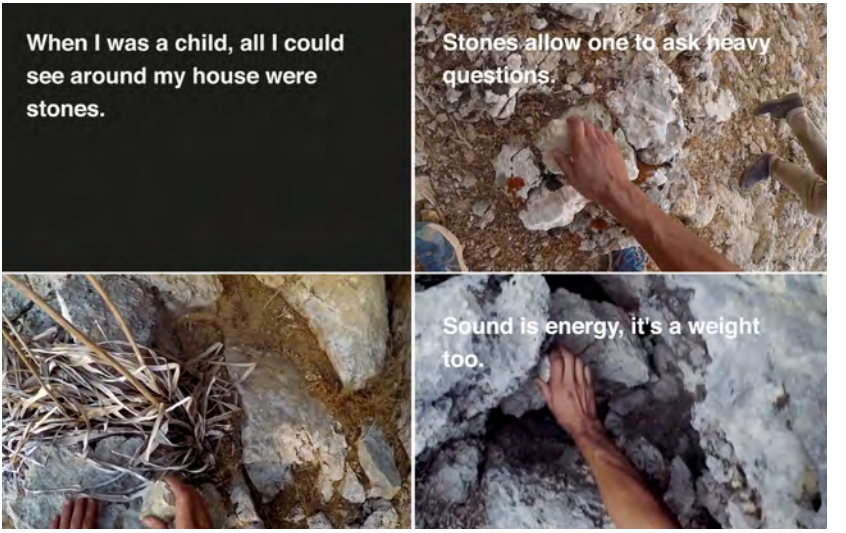

Figure 2: Stills from the video Stonesound. Source: Gilles Aubry and Abdeljalil Saouli, 2019

The sound of stones vs. 'stonesound'

Sounding stones like we did during our experiments is not a very common thing to do, even for a sound artist. It was neither our intention to turn stones into musical instruments, such as lithophones, nor did we seek to create musical effects like rhythmical patterns or timbral compositions. Our sounding by tapping was much more a 'questioning' of the stones, as Abdejalil Saouli said, a way of knocking at their 'ontological door', or perhaps a kind of artistic auscultation. A specific affect attached to the ontological category of 'stone' progressively emerged through our conversations. To a naturalist's mind, the stone affect is often conceived in terms of 'the inert', 'non-life', and 'death'. In Saouli's wording, however, lithic affect appears vitalized, closer to 'stability', 'stagnation', and 'resonance' – what stone is 'searching for', the becoming of stone. All of these terms point toward a possible connection to a slow temporality of being, bringing new affordances for imagination and perception, as expressed by Saouli:

> "Stones change in shape, color, smell, temperature, and weight under the effects of time, light, weather conditions, seasonal cycles, and erosion. When you touch a stone, you can feel the connection between the space and the object. Each stone is its own shape, texture, and color. These material qualities respond precisely to what you need on the level of your imagination of what is touchable. I live together with stones in a very serious, physical way."

We did not spend much time on each stone throughout the course of our experiments, instead preferring to move relatively quickly from one to the next. Throughout this process, Abdeljalil Saouli repeatedly made comments on what we were hearing and on sound as a phenomenon, as in the following excerpt:

> "Sound is energy, it's a weight too. Sound is the sounding weight of matter. When you rub one matter against another, sound is a result of their confrontation."

In Saouli's words, sound appears as a byproduct of material encounters and, as such, retains the characteristics of the material objects from which it originates. As acoustic traces of things, sounds vary in type from the things themselves, described by Saouli in weight, hardness, hollowness, size, and texture. "It's better to hit a stone with another stone," he says, "in order to keep intact the stone sound." The stone sound importantly comes as a category that is distinct from other materials such as wood or concrete and, as such, carries with itself the specific affect of stones. Thus, it is possible to 'reconstruct' a stone wall by sounding it, which Saouli also compares to a "sound drawing" of the wall. Therefore, a recording also maintains a direct analogical connection between things and their sound.

From my perspective of a sound artist, I faced contradictory feelings. On the one hand, the microphone was 'telling' me that stone sounds, like any other sounds, are simply the audible manifestation of material vibrations. On the other hand, though, I shared a sincere understanding of Abdeljalil Saouli's affective history of relating to stones through sound. Thus, two different material sound concepts confronted me: one abstract, autonomous, universal sound concept, and one particular 'stonesound' concept, situated, and affective. While tactility and analogy predominate in Saouli's listening, he occasionally also points to the possibility of sound analysis and abstraction:

> "It's a whole sound analysis of the stone by the ear and the working method. […] I become a thermometer of the stone through the gesture of hitting it. […] Through the sound you can hear a void inside, you can feel that the sound entered the stone to create an echo. […] You can feel gravity in the contact between a stone and a human."

Saouli has no formal training in acoustics, but he is aware of the scientific study of sound. He knows that the scientific method relies on technical measurement and analysis. His uses this principle in his own method, where the body and the ear become instruments of measurement and analysis. Describing the sound of stones in terms of physical waves, frequencies, amplitude, and resonance would certainly seem pointless in the case of our experiments. Instead, Saouli and I joined in on a kind of plural sound practice, in which the terms of acoustic science, geology,

technology, embodied knowledge, and affect could be re-negotiated in favor of a meaningful co-habitation between people and stones.

Saouli engaged in a reflexive process about his life as an artist in that particular context by returning to his village of origin to design a space that was compatible with his needs. As the following lines attest, this reflection touches on deeper existential and ontological questions:

> "I ask myself such questions… why am I here? Why stones? Why not elsewhere? But it depends. I really feel comfortable here. I also search in matter, in earth. In the Qur'an, they say we are born from earth. The Earth for me is an ensemble of all the materials of this planet. I am matter too. This means that my own matter and the one of stones are close. Physically, stone is stagnating matter. Stone is the matter that gives me more breath. Crossing a mountain is hard, but there's breath. The body has to move more, to work more, and becomes more alive. It gets a lot of breath. When you walk on stones, you walk on more risks, as you may fall if you're not concentrating. Risk means that you have to be in balance, it's a study of the relationship between your own weight and the space."

This last example is striking because Abdeljalil Saouli relies on a metaphysical discourse in order to establish connections between matter (stones, earth), being, and embodiment, as well as natural and spiritual forces. His discourse can be traced, in part, back to the scholarly Arabo-Islamic tradition, and to the notion of 'tawhid' or unity between matter and spirituality in particular (i.e., the idea that body and soul form a continuous whole).[26] His descriptions are possibly reminiscent of Galen and Al-Antaki, who follows him comparing man to elements of the physical world: air, water, fire, and earth. Ellen Amster notes that temperature and humidity produce physiological transformation, while reason, memory, and sense perception are motivated by mechanical powers: "'natural power' directs the beating of the heart, 'animal power' moves the body, and 'psychological power' draws from the sensory organs."[27] Abdeljalil Saouli is not an Islamic scholar, but a contemporary artist whose education also includes natural sciences. As such, he is well aware of modern scientific discourses on matter, body, life, and sound. Saouli's capacity to combine multiple epistemologies is a poetic strategy that is constitutive of his art practice and that both empirically and conceptually informs every aspect of his creative work with materials. This capacity is particularly apparent in the sounding of the stone wall in our second experiment: sounding, cutting,

26 Josep Lluis Mateo Dieste: *Health and Ritual in Morocco: Conceptions of the Body and Healing Practices*, Leiden: Brill 2013, p. 31.

27 Ellen J. Amster: *Medicine and the Saints: Science, Islam, and the Colonial Encounter in Morocco 1877–1956*, Austin: University of Texas Press 2013, p. 43.

playing, and other forms of interaction with stones become a way of "telling a story" and of "speaking through stones." The possibility of 'stonesound' becomes his way of responding to our artistic questioning of what the sound of stones might be. It is the expression of 'gravity', both in the sense of heavy force and of seriousness. He finds "stability," "strength," "balance," "heat," "protection," and "breath" in gravity. Stonesound also expresses the continuum between physical vibration and the felt sense of it, between material ontology and phenomenology, between nature and technology, and between life and non-life.

Sounding and listening as aural domestication

What perhaps struck me most during our experiments was the dialogical character of Saouli's sonic interactions with stones. He said on several occasions that: "There's a whole sound discourse between stones and me" while comparing his beating to a "questioning" and to a "demand to the stones," to which they would respond by 'telling' him about their weight and fragility. He learns about the stones and possible ways to "work with them" for his building and art-making activities from these interactions. Sounding is an "encounter with matter," he continues, and at the same time a "taming" of matter. "The encounter of two matters is your goal," Saouli declares, "it's a training of matter, a relation between forces, when one matter 'eats' the other one, like when you sharpen a knife on a stone for the ritual throat-cutting of an animal." An important part of Saouli's sonic knowledge of stones is the result of his building activities. Even though he started breaking stones only two and a half years ago to build his house, he observed other people working with stones previously in the village and learned from them. He has therefore had a long experience in listening to stones, even before he started working with them. While the domestication of matter represents an important finality of listening to stones as part of local building techniques, this process always prioritizes reciprocity by taking the "reflexive productions of feedback" into account.[28] These are the stones' responses to Saouli's 'demands' to them, as they sound, vibrate, resonate, heat, resist, hurt, and eventually break.

Sounding and listening appear as an interactive, iterative, and multisensory learning process, in which knowledge is "accumulated" rather than "acquired."[29] I argue that this auditory learning process is a form of *aural domestication* through which people are 'made' in return by things and other agents in their surroundings as they interact with them. Relational, iterative knowledge similarly informs practices in silviculture and agriculture in the Jbala region, which likely also applies to

28 Feld: "On Post-Ethnomusicology Alternatives", p. 87.

29 Ibid., p. 86.

other forms of rural activities. Local knowledge aims to produce a functional model of the world and therefore generally *reproduces* locally significant ontological dichotomies such as domestic versus wild, local versus foreign, and mundane versus sacred, as well as life versus non-life.[30] While these categories do matter on a symbolic level, they can be very relative in reality. The status of things, such as stones and trees, is variable and often tends to reinforce continuities between the dichotomies mentioned above. Romain Simenel, Moohammed Aderghal, Mohamed Sabir, and Laurent Auclair have described the complex and "polysemic" ways in which rural communities use stone cairns to negotiate the boundaries between symbolic and technocratic space. While stone cairns are used as cadastral markers in state forest management, they are "also seen as a saint stop-off, as a middle point between the human world (cultivated space) and that of the genies (forest), as a belvedere, and as a ritual space." As a result, they suggest that "the negotiation of ontologies around the cairn engenders hybrid modalities of forest management and, thus, of public policies."[31] While stones generally have a lower recognition status than either animals or plants, they still participate in the reciprocal 'domestic link' between people and their environment. This relationship surfaces in Saouli's comments:

> "Other people here also share this kind of connection with stones. I've spent whole evenings and nights sitting on stones with them, stones are part of the landscape. People know very well the relationship between their own body and stones. Kids are good at throwing stones, they know their environment, the shape and the weight of things."

I conducted a series of interviews with several inhabitants in Moulay Bouchta in March 2019, including with a professional stone breaker and a mason. They were usually quick to explain that breaking stones was 'just a job' for them, albeit a particularly hard and underpaid job. Like Saouli, however, they often referred to their interactions with stones as a kind of dialogue, interpreting every possible visual and audible sign as a form of self-expression of stones themselves. As another example in stone sounding in Moulay Bouchta, I witnessed how kids master a special throwing technique that produces a loud, buzzing sound (var'nen), which they use to guide goats from a distance.[32] Working and playing are, thus, part of

30 Malou Delplancke/Yildiz Aumeeruddy-Thomas: »Des semis et des clones«, in: *Revue d'ethnoécologie*, Supplément 1 (2017), p. 17. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/ethnoecologie/3166 (accessed 4.8.2021).

31 Romain Simenel/Mohammed Aderghal/Mohamed Sabir/Laurent Auclair: »Cairn, borne ou belvédère? Quand le naturalisme et l'analogisme négocient la limite entre espace cultivé et forêt au Maroc«, in: *Anthropologica* 58 (2016) 1, pp. 60–76, here p. 60.

32 An example of this sound is accessible via the following webpage: http://radioappartement22.com/2020/01/10/sakhra/ (accessed 4.8.2021).

the aural domestication of stones, which involves attending to their "agency and positionalities,"[33] As stones are recognized as having a specific agency, the "otherness" of stones is turned into a "significant otherness."[34] Meaning, thus, emerges through aural domestication, as part of the local history of sounding and listening as cohabiting. If the status attributed locally to sound (sawt in Arabic) often mirrored local dichotomies, I observed that it could also accommodate categories of 'modern sound', such as signal vs. noise, private vs. public, and natural vs. cultural.[35] More observations would be necessary in order to demonstrate how the plural and contingent status of sound affect communal life, rural identity, or even public policy more generally in Moulay Bouchta.

It becomes more apparent that the 'nature of sound' – as is the nature of 'nature' – is nothing natural and has always been co-constituted by historically situated subjects. If expressions such as the 'human' and 'non-human' appear to be problematic because they are too universal, then we likely need more concepts such as Saouli's 'stonesound' in order to articulate the complex entanglements of subjectivities, abstractions, and agencies differently. Karsten Schulz argues that we need a "pluri-versal" instead of a universal, one which is "rich with all particulars."[36] For Walter Mignolo, this can be done through "border thinking" and "epistemic disobedience."[37] For Alexander Weheliye, thinking sonically offers an alternative for apprehending subjectivity by decentering the logos and meaning – while not entirely discarding them – to "divine the world" rather than defining it.[38]

Stonesound and white aurality

While the notion of 'stonesound' appears as a key finding of this sounding experiment, it may not be readily available for everyone in sound ecological discourse to use as a new, 'general' concept. This void became evident as I realized that I could not experience the sound of stones as 'stonesound' in the way that Saouli did. Even though we were both hearing the sound of stones as he was beating, it became clear

33 Feld: »On Post-Ethnomusicology Alternatives«, p. 86.

34 Ibid., p. 93.

35 Cf. Emily Thompson: »Sound, Modernity and History«, in: Jonathan Sterne (ed.): *The Sound Studies Reader*, London/New York: Routledge 2013, pp. 117–129.

36 Karsten A. Schulz: "Decolonizing Political Ecology: Ontology, Technology and 'Critical' Enchantment", in: *Journal of Political Ecology* 24 (2017) 1, pp. 125–143, here p. 132.

37 Walter D. Mignolo: *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2012, p. xxi.

38 Alexander Weheliye: *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*, Durham/London: Duke University Press 2005, p. 69.

this was not the same sound to both of us. First, this was because he was doing the sounding, and second it was because this sounding meant something utterly different to him. From a transcultural perspective, our artistic experiment highlighted differences in our respective experiences' situatedness. When Abdeljalil Saouli asked me: "Did you really find the sound of stone in the recording you just did?", I perhaps mistook it as a need to confirm that we were both searching for the sound of stone, as something existing on its own, which we could then study together. I eventually realized that he was probably asking if I had found my sound of stone as it became clear that Saouli already knew the sound of stones as 'stonesound'.

As Marie Thompson suggests, searching for "sound-itself" has a long history in the field of Western sound art and experimental music, a position that she generally describes as "white aurality."[39] As the aural dimension of whiteness, white aurality is part of oppressive "processes of racialization" of the sensible, that produces and orders spatial-temporal relations and enhances and limits a body's affective capacities concerning its surroundings.[40] Although race was never a topic of discussion between Abdeljalil Saouli and myself, there is no doubt that our respective positions are differently marked regarding the long colonial history of race and racialization in Morocco and Europe. Processes of exclusion from "the white-defined realm of being"[41] were integral to the French protectorate's racial politics between 1912 and 1956, and are perpetuated up to this day through technocratic governance, exclusive border regimes, and global capitalism. Saouli's lived experience of 'coloredness' certainly bears the traces of this exclusion. This experience is part of the story told by him and other people in Moulay Bouchta by sounding and listening. Because this story is deeply entangled with the coloniality of knowledge, it is also a story of resistance, I argue, one motivated by aspirations of self-determination shared by many people in Morocco and North Africa. This story indirectly questions the hegemony of white Western aurality in Sound Studies and in sound art, including in my own.

If Saouli's 'stonesound' is a concept that remains relatively unintelligible from my point of view, then what it demands from me – and possibly from other attentive readers – is perhaps to attend to my own 'white aurality' in all its historicity, partiality, and privileges. While the history of my socialization as a white male listener certainly goes back to my early childhood, my education as a professional jazz musician in Switzerland in the 1990s was an experience in *institutionalized* white aurality. Since then, I have become familiar with countless instances of 'white sound' as part of my education and practice in electronic music and Sound Studies, particularly regarding 'universal' sound abstractions such as the 'sound object',

39 Marie Thompson: "Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies", in: *Parallax* 23 (2017) 3, pp. 266–282, here p. 274.

40 Ibid., p. 269.

41 Ibid., p. 268.

the 'sound signal', the 'sound sample', 'immersive sound', and the 'acousmatic'. My concern with white aurality later brought me to engage with decolonial sound and listening in Morocco and elsewhere, together with my desire to explore new critical and reflexive sound concepts. Sounding stones together with Abdeljalil Saouli was, thus, a simple but serious attempt in decolonial ecological sonic thinking. If Saouli's 'stonesound' remains somehow inaccessible to me, its mere *possibility* is already enough to significantly challenge dominant categories in Sound Studies.

Concluding comments: learning from Abdeljalil Saouli's 'stonesound' in sound art practice

I often returned to our Stonesound video during the three years that comprised my sonic research with Abdeljalil Saouli and I reflected on its potential to enable new directions in my sound art practice. I also played it to students in various sound art education programs, asking them to respond through performance. While few of us were likely to have a special connection to stones, most of us do have a special connection to sound(s); this is, however, rarely questioned and reflected upon. Noticing this has driven me to think about the video as a possible score for new performances. One possible way to do this is to derive a set of questions to ask oneself about one's relation to sound in art practice and in everyday life. I came to this idea as I noticed that Saouli's descriptions of stones often sounded like personal answers to existential questions about the nature of the self and its relation to things in the world. The fact that these questions were never formulated directly during our exchanges makes his 'answers' all the more surprising and poetic. This observation adds to the relevance of our research methodology because the effects of our collaboration now extend far beyond what was initially imagined. I decided to show the Stonesound video as an introduction to a concert that I played in 2019, writing a simple set of questions to prepare for the performance, based on Saouli's comments in the video. I offer these questions here as an open conclusion in the hopes that they may inspire other sound practitioners and so that they might foster future conversations:

- What does sound mean to you, personally, and how does it participate in your existence?
- What did sound give you so far, and how did it transform you?
- What did you learn from sound(s)? Which ones matter especially to you?
- How do sounds mediate between yourself and your own body?
- How do sounds relate to their sources? What makes sounds different from each other?
- How might we turn these answers into a new sound composition?
- How can sound become a home?