Sharing Science

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'Until the lion tells his side of the story, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.'
African Proverb

Three years ago, I took the decision to leave my country. Having a passport from a place lost in the South of the world didn't make my decision easy, but it was a necessary one. Moving to the UK made me feel alienated sometimes. Not able to express deeply, not able to really connect nor to feel at home. As part of this journey, I eventually landed in Peckham. The mix of different sounds, different smells, different accents made me immediately feel at home. What for some was considered a tough area had for me the South American warmth that I had to leave behind. Warmth that I unfortunately didn't find when I stepped into a university as a student. Due to this search for warmth, I ended up becoming involved in Sound System culture.

Between the 11th and the 14th January of 2018, the fourth edition of the Sound System Outernational symposium happened in the Professor Stuart Hall building of Goldsmiths University of London. I was part of the event as a volunteer assistant organiser. Of course, this participation did not start on the 11thn or end on the 14th. Just as anything involving sound, it seems that magical forces connect practices and people, surrounding us, waiting for the right moment to interact. In this paper, I will explain how these forces worked on me: some may call these forces chance, others may call them science, science in the Jamaican Patois meaning, that of black magic, used to refer to those forces that sometimes one cannot control. I will describe how these forces, in the shape of a series of small events, led me to investigate the reasons behind the underperformance of students of Afro-Caribbean descent in the contemporary UK context. How this connects with the sound system culture, and how, at the same time, this helped me – an immigrant in the UK – find a place in the vortex of the multicultural.

Beginnings

Sound System Outernational (SSO from now on) is an event born from the interest of a group of researchers and practitioners, who approach sound system culture through a practice-as-research methodology, mixing theory, practical skills and performances. From the three previous SSO until now, these events have been created through a process of openness facilitated by the ongoing debate on the popular culture tradition of the sound system. Through different panels, and practitioners of a broad spectrum SSO became an excellent opportunity for dialogue and exchange, as well as a way to challenge existing paradigms on culture not only in the UK but in the global sound system community. The particularly open characteristics of SSO gives recognition and dignity to the vernacular knowledges and practices, transcending the often-opaque walls of the university (the academia) and exchanging different but equally rich types of knowledge. Through this type of practice, vernacular knowledge meets academia, practices that have been historically concentrated within the structures of power, opening up by this a possibility for new knowledges and understandings.

An excellent example of this is the almost magical participation of Jahman 1st.an elderly gentleman who came to attend the sessions but arrived by "mistake" the day before, just when we were setting up Al Finger's sound system in the atrium of the Stuart Hall building. He sat there and started asking us questions such as when the activities would start and what each of us was doing. He pointed with his cane to each one of us giving directions. In the meantime, we were trying to connect up and later to tune the sound system, and although there were people with experience in sound, no one seemed capable of setting a proper tuning. We were walking back and forth listening and trying to figure out what the problem was, until Jahman 1st sat in front of the controls and started tuning it. In a matter of minutes, it was all solved. It turned out he was a sound man, and he himself had a sound system. He even played at The Four Aces (a historical club that was documented in a film presented on the second day of activities). So, he was definitely a person with the perfect knowledge to tune the sound. He started giving us lessons on how to do it. "Last on first off" (the amps) is a lesson that I will never forget. With all that knowledge and experience that he could easily share with us, it was a great surprise to hear that this was the first time he had ever set foot inside the University. Even more of a shock considering he lived for over 30 years in the Lewisham area.

With this in mind, the sessions started. An enriching

set of workshops and lectures allowed us to share and listen to so many stories. In a workshop scheduled during Saturday morning – Gregory Isaacs Listening Session organised by Edwina Peart – people shared different encounters or memories about Gregory Isaacs' songs. Some very personal experiences touched upon different paradigms of education and the communities' relation with it. On how some invaluable pieces of knowledge were acquired by listening to music. On how a part of the history that was not told in the officiality of the classrooms could be learned through the music, the lyrics, the sound.

Power by Enhancement

By transforming the record player into a musical instrument and by taking the construction of sound systems into their hands, Jamaicans developed and transformed sonic technology and democratised music, sound and the embodiment of the music and the dance. That tradition travelled all the way to the UK with the West Indian migration becoming an important space of sharing and maintaining Caribbean culture in the UK, but also expanding it as a place of encounter for the Afro Caribbean diaspora worldwide, sharing knowledge and educating communities. Covering the needs that an education historically based on maintaining the hierarchical structures of the dominant Western episteme could not cover.

Unfortunately, this knowledge did not receive institutional recognition. And although progress has been made, the lack of representation of the Black British citizen within the National Curriculum remains. This lack continues even though black people embody a history of the development of technology, and that through vernacular knowledge and reverse engineering they have revolutionised the way music is produced and experienced. There are common assumptions that tend to dismiss the work that non-western ways of knowing have created and developed.

> "It is likely that much of the intimacy between blacks and technology has not been explored due to the all-too-easy assumption that blacks, again, blacks are either in an adversarial relationship to technology or fundamentally opposed to it due to lack of access or differential conceptual and political priorities"(Louis Chude-Sokei 2016: 7).

These easy assumptions (among others) deeply entangles historical hierarchical factors, placing black culture, black history and communities in the shadows. Shadowed by what is considered proper: proper knowledge, proper education, ultimately white-western education. And this is precisely what, as part of the practice-as-research of the SSO, has brought to light. As a Chilean, those hierarchical and colonial processes are not unfamiliar to me. So, identifying those practices of vindication of communities feels equally as a personal as it does a political task.

This historical lack of acknowledgement, and the fact that we create a place not just to recognise the work and contribution to technology but a place to listen, is what brings to the table declarations such as the one that follows. Practitioners like De Bo General, who ran the Let's Play Toasting workshop happening on the fourth day of activities said:

> "[Sound system] is about creating something of our own, where we could be respected. There was nothing for us in school, no one recognised who we were there, there was nothing for us when we came out, sound systems were all there was…"(De Bo General, 13th January 2018)

The same day that this conversation happened, a woman from one of the panels offered me a ride home in her car since we were neighbours. While riding, she started asking me about my experience as a newly arrived person in the UK. I told her a few things about myself without really knowing how personal the conversation could become. Through migration we both ended up confessing – me as an immigrant for less than one year in this country, she having been born in Deptford from Jamaican parents – how tired we both were of being asked where we came from all the time. How weird it was for her, born and raised in South East London, to have to explain over and over again that she is actually from here, when white British people asked her where she came from. She talked about her worries when she realised she was pregnant, and that her son, now an adult, would have to face the same situations that she did as a woman of West Indian descent in a hostile environment like the British context. Moreover, that through the construction of a sound system and her active participation in the sound system culture she was able to construct a sense of community. As someone new in the immigration game, I cannot do more than respect the courage of her black British identity. Not a fixed fetishized one, that looks to standardise the properimmigrant, the proper black in the multicultural game. But an identity that is a dynamic ongoing process of searching and constant evolution, as Stuart Hall (1996), another West Indian immigrant, would say.

The discrimination and disparities that historically have faced black British individuals generally, and

people of West Indies descent in particular, contribute to increase the gap between ethnic groups, leading to several problems that perpetuate a system of inequality. These systems of inequality are extremely marked in the educational system, and are particularly entangled due to a wider issue relating to the predominance of white teachers in the British education system, itself a product of racial and class-based discrimination at all levels of education. As presented in a report by Runnymede Trust based on surveys to the National Union of Teachers by 2015, only 7.6% of the total teaching workforce in England was from a non-white background, and the disproportionality is most marked at at leadership level. The number is in sharp contrast with the 30% of pupils in state-maintained schools on average. As one school teacher of Caribbean origin mentioned to The Independent:

> "If the children see SMT [the senior management team] as being all white and the cleaning staff from ethnic minorities, that is all they aspire to be. Especially if they do not see people around them or members of their families in senior positions." (14th April 2017)

The lack of teachers of diverse ethnicities produces in the student a distance with the institutions. As presented in a report by UPP Foundation and the Social Market Foundation (2017), it is shown that black students are 50% more likely to drop out of university. Students cannot identify with their teachers, which also prevents the generation of possible close relationships and a sense of belonging.

With all this in mind, I started wondering how things were where I live, around me and if some of these separations that I could perceive in some experiences, like Jahman 1st who had never been in the University, were maybe related to these issues in education. Through informal conversations and interviews conducted in my local community, in Peckham, South East London, I could develop an in-depth insight into how the parents of West Indian descent students really feel. When I asked how they felt about the education their children were receiving, a common response was that there was a lack of cultural connection to the curriculum. Although efforts have been made in order to include black history in the National Curriculum, it tends to be always in relation to slave history. As mentioned by Femi Akomolafe (2017) in the online article "Questionable Black History in the British Curriculum", to centre black history in the dehumanisation suffered during slavery makes it really difficult for youths to feel proud of their identity.

> "Black history ought to not just be about slavery – the Atlantic slavery only interrupted black history. Black history includes the achievements of African Empires pre-Atlantic slavery."(Akomolafe 2017)

Through my conversations with neighbours, some people have even claimed that centring black history mainly around history of slavery feels – in their own words – "violent" to them. Also, that representing their community in these terms was demotivating or at least not very appealing to the students and that the majority of the families feel the need to compensate this lack of variety in the curriculum with outside school education on the matter.

Having to search for education outside the classroom resonates with those experiences mentioned during the SSO. How the music plays a part in transmitting a history that has not yet been told completely. Or at least, have not been taught within the official curriculum. In the 1977 song Shackles and Chains by Earl Zero asks: "What about the half, the half that never been told?" The ways in which the Caribbean community has reacted to the conditions of education within Britain and the role that the sound system played for the creation of community – through the music, through the lyrics, through the meanings that it was transmitting – meant that sound system was a very important outlet of counter-education for the youngers. I was also very important for the transmission of knowledge between different generations, particularly for transmitting knowledges and values to newer generations.

As a result of the lack of connection with teachers, lack of self-worth and systematic oppression, Afro-Caribbean descent students are the ones that historically have shown to have the lowest performance in schools (Strand 2015). These results are both the expression and the cause of the exposure to a greater chain of inequality, which encompasses many more aspects of life. Based on a survey made in 2008 by academics of Warwick University which tracked 15,000 pupils through their education, Afro-Caribbean students are being subjected to institutional racism in English schools which can dramatically undermine their chances of academic success. Low achievement among some black students is made worse because teachers don't expect them to succeed.

These problems are not new, and have been historically an issue for people of Afro-Caribbean descent in the UK. In 1971, to tackle these problems, Bernard Coard wrote a small book called How the West Indian Child

is made Educationally Sub-normal in the British School System. This book was published by New Beacon for the Caribbean Education and the Community Workers' Association, a group of West Indian professionals who were advocating for the improvement of the conditions of the West Indians in the UK. It was directed specifically to the parents of West Indian descent, and was part of a campaign against discrimination that black youth experienced in the educational system in Great Britain and explained clearly and in a simple language how students were discriminated and mistreated through institutional racism in schools. Through the constant exposure to biases, pupils developed an inferiority complex. According to Coard the education system shapes roles by maintaining the status quo and preserving social order (1971). He suggested a set of immediate actions in order to transform these structures of hierarchisation.

The response to this book by the black community exceeded expectations. Parents started organising themselves, and 'Black Supplementary' schools were formed all around the UK. There were as many as 150 supplementary schools around the country in matter of a few months (Coard 2005).

This way of self-organising is what we could call an autopoietic process (Maturana-Varela 1980), a dynamic way of cognition that through the creation, production and maintenance of a system, is able to maintain itself in time. Self-replicating to maintain the community under their own terms. Taking care of their people and the younger generations. But as the dynamism of any living organisation, neither the community nor their identity are fixed in time. Although living organisms replicate their environment, as a process in constant construction and evolution, their environment mutates with time, sometimes mixing with other autopoietic forms or organisations.

Now, 47 years later, supplementary schools are still working strong. A question that may naturally arise is, what are they teaching different that works with the students? How different are they from regular schools? The answer is: not much. In reality, the biggest difference is that in supplementary schools, professors have higher expectations of their students. The students feel that they have a space there, that they are listened to and that they are expected to perform at their best. Also, and equally important, black studies and black history are taught. All in all, one may say, what pupils found in supplementary schools was the same thing that young people found in the sound system culture. A place of their own, a place to be themselves, a place of resistance outside of the matrix of power and colonisation.

As described by Mignolo (2011), a decolonial state of society is defined mainly by the questioning of the conditions that led to build and control structures of knowledge: those structures based on racism and patriarchy and justified through religion or Scientific Reason. What does not fit is marginalised. Just as black people are marginalised in the great history of white western history, African history and diasporic processes are left in the margins in this one-way path of the creation of The History and The Knowledge. In the same way when we tend to think about technology of sound, it is easy to dismiss the incredible and pioneering contributions of sound system culture globally.

Concluding thoughts

Sound system dances, the gatherings and the maintaining of the sound culture in the UK played a fundamental role in these communities, and in building a net that connected them and gave them a space in which they could feel validated on their own terms. And with this, a different way of constructing community, and of thinking and knowing through an embodied understanding of processes and of systems. The photographer Dennis Morris explains in relation to the dances:

> "They were a way for people to unwind and for people to meet and to exchange stories about their week, how they were progressing in England and what was also happening back in Jamaica. The music played was coming from Jamaica, and the music was like a social comment in the same way rap music is a social comment on black lives in America. That was the importance of the sound system, of the music and the records in those days." (Morris in Cafolla 2015)

The sound here generated social cohesion. The dances organised around it, just as supplementary schools, were some of the autopoietic mechanisms. Creating a space within what appeared as a rigid closed structure of what being British meant. Where there was no such thing as a hierarchy. No such thing as one universal history and one unique truth. Not one proper way of being British. As the Jamaican philosopher Sylvia Wynter explains in relation to aesthetics:

> "The imperative of Aesthetic 1 is to secure the social cohesion of the specific human order of which it is a function. It aims to produce the "unitary system of meanings" able to induce the altruistic psycho-affective field whose cohering mechanisms serve to integrate each specific mode of ultrasociety or "form of life" (Wynter 1992: 244)

Aesthetic 1, the hegemonising one, in place in opposition to Aesthetics 2, the one surged in each place from the below as part of the natural ways of being of the communities. This dominance of Aesthetic 1 generates and maintains the idea of one truth and one development. It is utilised in order to maintain status quo and it makes coexisting with new cognitions look like an impossible deal. In this sense, the necessity of addressing these hierarchies and issues within educational are crucial. As Nia Imara, head of the National Association of Black Supplementary Schools noted in an interview on the subject, there are still many flaws as to how to shorten the gap that separates students of Afro-Caribbean descent from the others and this needs to be addressed:

> "[The government] is not interested in the advancement of the black community(...)The main challenge is the financing. The government is not going to do it so black businesses need to step up to the challenge."(Imara in Duncan 2013)

The same goes for cultural manifestations like sound system culture. But unlike the old colonialist notion of the monocultural nation, and beyond the essentialised and commodified way of dealing with subaltern subjects (suppressing them under multiculturalist policies), the everyday actions of organisations such as Sound Systems and Saturday Schools offer a pluricultural aim where everyone has a place and a contemporaneity. Through mechanisms like sound system culture and supplementary schools, communities of West Indian descent in the UK maintain a spirit of unity and tradition that allows them to keep strong, Additionally, despite the adversities they faced historically, the ways and systems of transmission of knowledge allowed sound systems to transform the way in which we perceive and experience music.

When these are the imperatives around us, the need to create a counterculture and a counter-education becomes a survival mechanism. The need for acting under the radar. The necessity of building an autopoietic community that through collaboration and reproduction of their self-categories and knowledges are able to maintain their heritage and constantly reinvent themselves. Therefore, the decolonising aim of generating knowledge from the borders, from the dialogue of epistemes, becomes particularly important. Where the popular and the academic, the locals and the foreigners merge. Interventions in the canonical structures of knowledge like the SSO, gives recognition to the practitioners, performers and aficionados, the ones that through practice and embodiment of this counter-culture and counter-education have told their own history, as I have told mine. Of diaspora and identity, of construction of processes of recognition on their own terms, decolonial ones. Developing a unique way of establishing their dignity on the grounds of an empire that has historically pursued the elimination of this dignity, these cultures and of their value systems.

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Discography

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