

SOUND SYSTEM
OUTERNATIONAL
PERSPECTIVES

DOWN

SYSTEM

OUTERNATIONAL

GOLDSMITHS,
UNIVERSITY OF
LONDON

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Sound System Outernational (SSO) is a practice-research collective of MA and PhD students and staff based in Goldsmiths, in New Cross, London. We investigate theories and practices in sound system culture with the notion that research and practitioner discussion can provide meaningful contributions to this culture. We approach sound system culture as a system of experience, knowledge and practice: a method and positionality as well as an object of study. Our main collective activity to date has been organising symposia which bring together sound system researchers, practitioners and audiences for discussion, working to build a physical “third space” for people to gather and

from the established musical culture of Jamaica (Bradley 2001: 36). As the street technology of sound systems proliferated across the island, rivalries developed amongst operators for the most powerful stacks and the most original selection of music (ibid).

The early sound systems largely played Black American R&B, often sent by emigrant relatives or, as rivalries intensified, by envoys sent to New Orleans or New York for the specific purpose of hunting down new music (Katz 2012: 16). Eventually, sound system operators determined to outshine their rivals started to commission and record original music, laying the foundations for a Jamaican popular music industry in the context of

radical movements for decolonisation (see Sylvia Wynter’s comments in Scott 2000). The sonic techniques and political forms developed in Jamaican dancehalls and studios during these crucial decades of political contestation and social change continue to reverberate across the world.

The “outernational” of Sound System Outernational is a word from the Rastafarian practice of altering the syllables to convey the speaker’s



meet each other, building networks and exchanging idea [...] what the space of the dancehall session aims to provide through the sound of the phonographic reproduction. In the Rastafarian nomenclature the events would be considered as a “groundation” at which we were “reasoning.” In one sense this was our aim for the symposium: to create a shared space that is achieved at the best dancehall session and at the best academic conference. [D’Aquino et al 2017: 168]



Sound system culture has, of course, offered a space to dance, dream, think and struggle from its very inception. Hedley Jones – Jamaican former RAF electronics engineer, typesetter and trade unionist – built the first sound systems in the early 1950s. Building on the skills he developed setting up transistor radios or record players in rum shops and grocery stores, Hedley’s innovation brought recorded music to a popular audience excluded

intended meaning.¹ Rather than being a relationship between distinct national entities, outernational suggests a positioning beyond the national, an outer space, not a space between. Outernational recalls the Relation of Edouard Glissant, a

1 Dedicated becomes livicated, as such a commitment should be lived actively: it is never ded. Oppression becomes downpression, as a person is kept down by their oppressors. The practice both arranges words in a distinct cosmological ordering that emphasizes the word as performative utterance, but also destabilises concepts by reimagining their etymologies, opening them up to new interpretations and analyses. See Chevannes 1994.

complex tangle of relationships perhaps best approached through its poetics (Glissant 2010: 138). Sound system culture was an integral part of Jamaican and Caribbean popular culture in Britain. It also provides a framework for a distinct Black and radical art and literature (Chambers 2017: 116). Its idioms of dance, lyrical prowess, political militance, and sonic experimentation would also come to shape wider British popular music, inspiring a dizzying array of cultural forms (Sullivan 2014). Sound system culture in Jamaica itself has given rise to dancehall music, a sound and aesthetic that is increasingly influential in art and global popular music (Moystad 2018).

Sound systems patterned on Jamaican practices have also proliferated, constituting a global scene in complicated communication with Jamaica and the Jamaican diaspora. As Marvin D Sterling argues in respect to Japan, Jamaican musical forms can be effectively deployed by people elsewhere, whether for sonic joy or the articulation of emancipatory politics. However, their encounter with Jamaican culture is always shaped by the context of a neo-colonial capitalism² (Sterling 2010: 244). Other scholars have emphasised sound system culture as a technological response to concrete political junctures, as in the work of Louis Chude-Sokei (2016) and Julian Henriques (2011).

There are now thousands of such encounters across the world – in Brazil, India, Italy, Japan and South Africa, to name but few – with an attendant blossoming of sonic and political responses to this problem (see, for example, Manfredi 2011). The sound system world today is a complex and often contradictory interplay of sonic techniques, economic transactions, heavy lifting, delicate tuning, temporalities, geographical locations, cultural imaginaries, and social conflict.

2 We recall Stuart Hall's comments in *Creolite and the Process of Creolisation*: the vernacular or indigenous 'ground' which emerges out of this collision of cultures is a distinctive space – the 'colonial' – which makes a whole project of literary expression and creative cultural practices possible – 'the good side', if you like, of creolization and the essence of the argument about *créolité*. But there is always also 'the bad side': questions of cultural domination and hegemony, of appropriation and expropriation, conditions of subalternity and enforced obligation, the sense of a brutal rupture with the past, of 'the world which has been lost', and a regime founded on racism and institutionalized violence (Hall 2015: 16).

This collection of texts emerges from SSO #4, *Strictly Vinyl*, our most recent symposium in collaboration with the *Let's Go Yorkshire* photo exhibition, *Let's Play Vinyl*, in January 2018. A unique intersection of practical workshops, performances and debates – both unraveling oral histories and unpacking theories – has enlivened the academic space quite literally, as our own sound system was showering the Stuart Hall building with its warm reggae flows.

It was obvious that the previous years had sedimented a considerable ground for the community of participants to expand. And it did so to such an unexpected extent, that it pushed us to experiment with thoughts and terms that could help us transmit the reverberations and energy released by the encounters of those days. One such term is sonic engagement, which we will try to play with in the following paragraphs.

Alongside the over 400 participants to the events, this symposium has been actively organized with the utmost dedication and love by a team of ten students of the Postcolonial Theory module alongside their tutor. This fortuitous team was coming from all corners of the world: the UK, but also Chile, Tunisia, South Africa, China, Turkey, Italy and Romania. Some of them hadn't been familiar with the ramifications of the sound system culture. Most of them had never formulated any critical reflection on their interactions with sound systems.

In fact, this speaks to the main feature of the phenomenon we are here choosing to call sonic engagement. Namely that it is based on a form of knowledge that is deeply embodied, visceral (yet that goes way beyond the viscerae). This type of knowledge short circuits rationalizing reductions of the experience that constitutes it. In this sense, the sonic engagement that we've witnessed is based on what we could call vibrational knowledge. In fact, what it connects are the deep physical and emotional effects of the vibrations of the music (peace, joy, excitement, trance) to the collective construction of the dancehall or listening session (often associated to feelings of home, community, familiarity, mutual trust, collaboration and acceptance). In this sense, the sounds present at the event – the omnipresent sound system in the hall, the Gregory Isaacs listening sessions, the final dancehall, the party organised weeks after the event – have contributed to setting an environment for community building that wasn't, as it commonly happens in universities, monopolized by intellectual speculation. The sounds renegotiated the terrain of speculation, rather inviting to get lost into dub improvisations (performed live by Dub

Morphologies) and experience hearing with the entire body. Moreover, panels such as the one that hosted the UK women-led sound systems were able to fire up the audience sharing stories about struggles that so many different participants were able to relate to and be inspired by.

We have described these aspects – that many of us keep discussing – in order to at least attempt to sketch what the event was like for those of us who had never before been directly involved in sound system practices. How it educated us in political lessons we didn't know about and the infinite listening and knowing capacities of our entire bodies.

So far, we've argued the phenomenon of sonic engagement to hold an introspective dimension (one made of the impact of reggae/dancehall/dub vibrations on one's body and mind) and one associated to the social, collective dimension of experiencing music together, able to establish a temporary community marked by unity and mutual enhancement. It is from this second dimension that a third level of the sonic engagement is made possible. This third level is the one of potential, imaginary, open-ended projections. It regards all of the interactions that could be articulated from that second level of mutual enhancement, able to reach out and expand the community of all those who make the sound possible: from the people who build and carry a sound system, to the people who listen to it and produce the sounds that animates it.

Using a symbol dear to the Rastafarians, we could argue that the sonic engagement we're describing is similar to a tree. The deep vibrational effect its root; the collective dimension reaching out like branches and the potential expansion as its flowers, promises of fruits to come. Yet at the same time we must imagine these three aspects as simultaneous and interlaced; a constant cycle able to re-invent itself breeding a wide diversity of flowers. In order to ground this metaphor and show why it addresses some of the synergies we've experienced on this occasion, we'll exemplify how each dimension unfolded during the event.

The first two dimensions are indispensably personal and intertwined. They belong to a particular body's memory and – simultaneously – speak about the communities that the body has been a part of. So, for instance for me (Oana), reggae sounds are distantly dug into my childhood; Bob & the Wailers cassettes accompanying the quiet family road trips in my native country, Romania, before I knew a word of English. Later, as a young immigrant in Italy, it was the anthems of Sister Nancy and Anthony B that made me and my girlfriends buzz and bounce at the dancehalls in smoky

squats. Damian Marley instructing us how to move synchronized during countless anti-racist marches across the country. Italian reggae blossoming like it had always existed in Italy, with Africa Unite, Sud Sound System, Alborosie and Brusco filling our bedrooms and the students' parties. The first time I went to a dub night in Bologna all I remember is the excitement of all my comrades for the new genre and my guts bursting with sounds. The unease and wondering for the first time if those stacks weren't too high. In what way was that ticklish echo connected to Sister Nancy's flirty and reassuring horns, I wondered. Fast forward eleven years, and, now an immigrant in London, my body had learned to grasp different lengths of the dub experience. Here's how I captured Jah Shaka's dub session in my diary:

15 December 2017

If I close my eyes, I am convinced that there is nobody around me, that the music envelops me alone. Yet if I open my eyes I see a highly populated womb. I look around and I smile, as if I were altered by some endorphins-inducing substance. It feels a bit as if I were looking at the others through water; my ears numbed. The air is thick.

This is just one example of how the sound system can be incorporated, of how it regards psycho-physical dispositions (warmth, coquetry, bursting guts, ticklish echoes, confidence, happiness, wholesomeness), alongside the reassurance that derives from temporarily sharing a sense of kinship and synchronized action, whether choreographic or lyrical. This memory (and often the prospect) of kinship is what substantially strengthens the bonds around sound systems, in ways that are hardly rationalized or verbalized. This partially explains how different workers of the university have magically materialized and supported us in the most critical moments or how an international team was able to transform itself into a sound system crew. This is testimony to a collective knowledge practice based on doing collaboratively, fueled by the power with rather than the power on. In this practice hierarchies are overshadowed by everyone's particular contribution to the afore-mentioned collective sense of kinship, which is enhanced by every single person who was invested in it: from the organisers to the performers, from the panelists to the audience. This brings us to the last dimension of our sonic engagement, to the generative force of imagination. To what was made possible by the shared sense of kinship brought into being by the event's synergies, which gave us courage to think into existence ways to extend and re-invent the community we felt part of.

The first open-ended extension we felt as an urgency was the intergenerational one. In a period in which

youth music subcultures are increasingly stigmatized in London, we felt the need to recognize the value of the work of the local young performers, while sharing with them the powerful resonance tool of the sound system. On the 30th of June the members of the Lewisham-based sound system, Unit137, shared their knowledge during a workshop that involved 6 local young people interested in improving their music writing skills. In less than an hour the participants, aged 14 to 16, wrote an original song and performed it, showing us how sharing music practices can enrich the dialogue between generations in an historical moment in which listening to the young people is more important than ever before. As one of the young participants put it: ‘we were able to express ourselves for ourselves without boundaries and we worked together.’

Later that day, four local performers aged 16 to 19 performed their music on the stage of The Stretch (Goldsmiths’ Student Union bar) for the first time with a sound system and received professional feedback that improved their performance skills. Three of the young artists eventually performed alongside the sound system crew on stage at the Lewisham People’s Day, on the 7th of July. This small event was the fruit of countless informal conversations happened during the Strictly Vinyl days about the necessity to reach out for the younger music practitioners and make more space for them in our university. In this sense, we’ve aimed to transform the university into the fertile terrain of encounter for students, local young talents and music professionals, in ways that has benefitted all. The young people mainly wrote and performed RnB, afrobeat, grime or hip hop, and it became clear that the sound system ecology of skills, ethos, community, sounds worked as a tool of connection and mutual enhancement.

It is in this sense that sonic engagement addresses the many cathartic resonances that this event has brought into existence. On the one side, it is rooted in the physical effects of sound, on the other side it is connected to the reassurance of kinship and mutual enhancement, and finally, this embodied and practical sense of being part of a harmonized community opens up unpredictable ways of re-investing and expanding the legacies of sound system culture.

Each of the pieces that follow in this section of *Riffs* Vol. 2 Issue 2 have been written by an SSO member – staff and BA and MA students – active in organising the symposium, writing from a wide variety of perspectives and shifting in scale, tone, and frequency. We have tried to write in a manner commensurate to our experiences.

64 Rather than an exhaustive empirical description, the

writing collected here represents a textual archive of the feelings and thoughts of participants, as well as a range of theorisations of our practice as a collective. For staff and students alike, engaging with the events as part of the SSO has provided a stimulus for thinking about sound system culture, wider societal issues and the place of the university within this, and the ways in which we write about our insights. Rather than merely a standalone activity, these events have become central to our pedagogical and research practices.

Brian D’Aquino’s piece, *Rewinding the Tape of History: King Tubby and the Audiopolitics of Echo*, explores the echo, one of dub music’s most distinctive features, as a sonic image around which to form alternate conceptualisations of the historical.

Nayress Ben Gaga’s text, *Sound Systems and the Bending of Space: Funambulism from Fanon to Albert Einstein*, imagines the sound system as an object of great affective density, generating a gravitational space which we fall into, a field that exceeds and overflows its immediately perceptible dimensions. Drawing on Einstein’s Theory of Relativity and Fanon’s writings on the circle of dance, Nayress proposes to read the sound system dance as a uniquely expansive space generating affective fields and orbital paths through which bodies move and subjects are reconfigured.

The symposium’s location in South-East London features prominently in the pieces. If south-east London is a periphery to be policed and “regenerated” from the perspective of property developers and the state, it is also one of the great metropolises of the outernational geographies of sound system culture, with a long history of popular mobilisation. As a research collective, we see this as crucial point of encounter with our neighbours.

Claudia Nardini’s piece, *From Italian Dancehalls to South East London. An Epiphanic Journey through Sounds and Systems*, reads the SSO symposia an attempt to actualise, however partially, a different relationship between the university and the rest of the neighborhood. Claudia proposes building on popular culture, knowledge, and technique as well as the practices of critical intervention and collective research developed by the tradition of Cultural Studies to reimagine the university as a site of resistance and conviviality.

Pablo De La Cruz’ piece, *Noisy Echoes* reflects on the parallel between sound technologies developed in Chile within the Thrash scene and the ones constantly reinvented by the Caribbean diaspora within dub. Practices of noise, silence and echo are read against the backdrop of the two countries’ histories of oppressions

and resistance.

Margariata Iriarte's, *Sharing Science* reads the sound system as an alternative pedagogic practice developed by Black people in a hostile environment, drawing comparisons to the supplementary schooling movement. For Margarita, sound system culture and the supplementary schools both provide spaces for social articulations of self along different line than those set out by dominant cultural formation.

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Images (in order of appearance)

Sound System Outernational #4, *Strictly Vinyl*, January 2018. Photograph by Margarita Irriarte Carrasco.

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