

‘WHO FEELS IT KNOWS IT’

Re-thinking
knowledge,
resistance and
community
through the
sub-bass of the
reggae sound
system

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**Every man thinks his burden is the heaviest,
But (ooh, yeah, come on) they know because
they feel.
Who feels it knows it, Lord.
Who feels it knows it, Lord.
Who feels it knows it, Lord.**

The Wailers (“He Who Feels It Knows It”, Coxsone J.A., 1966)

**That’s the nature of sound system.
I can tell you about sound system from
now to tomorrow morning, but you have
to feel sound system to know what
sound system is really about.**

**Mikey ‘Dread’ (Operator and Founder of Channel
One Sound System, UK)**

**Playing music, for me right, it gets some heads
together...get a little tribal thing going on, you
know. Get the frequency up...Everyone’s on the
frequency. It’s always been about that...and
exciting people and changing their frequency.**

Robbo Dread, Birmingham 2017

Following the turn of the millennium, swathes of urban communities have been threatened by the march of inner city ‘redevelopment’. This process has dismantled vital infrastructures that supported diverse intersections of trans-Atlantic urban life, through the systematic pasteurization of the post-industrial city by overwhelmingly inflexible legislation and privatized investment. In addition to the spatial and economic pressures felt by these communities, their expressive cultures now face eradication. They are interpellated or ‘hailed’, borrowing from the work of Louis Althusser (2001), into a rational of free market expansion and increased social regulation, an ideologically defined set constituted through operations of neoliberal governance. Either this renders underground cultural artefacts

into trendy consumer objects in a highly regulated world of hegemonic, ideologically sanctioned ‘night culture’, or banishes expressive cultures to the margins of our cities, through an aggressively enforced doctrine of silence in the inner city.

The reggae/dub sound system suffers most from this double-edged sword of (sonic) regulation. Its discursive critique of power, as well as its formal inability to conform with the norms of club-culture, positions the sound system in direct opposition to the forms of sonic culture designated as ‘acceptable’ under this neo-liberal program of ‘aesthetic moralism’ and entertainment consumerism (Thompson 2017). Scholars such as Paul Gilroy (1991; 1999), Horace Campbell (1987), and William ‘Lez’ Henry (2012) outline the sound system’s opposition as such; the means

by which the residues of a spiritual-cultural politics of resistance, long prevalent in the Afro-diasporic communities of the Atlantic, became embodied in the first reggae sound systems and their self-deterministic mode of musical reproduction. At the heart of the sound system are the “irrepressible rhythms of the once forbidden drum” – the life-blood of the traditionalist West African rites and spiritual practices that made up what very well may be the first instances of (black) underground culture in the Western hemisphere (Gilroy 1999: 76). Today, these rhythms, coupled with the sound system ‘deejay’s didactic articulation of community and material critique of the present, stand as testament to a history of black “resistance and transcendence” against deeply structural racial subordination and systematic exclusion (Henry 2012: 360).

As William ‘Lez’ Henry recalls, “wherever significant black communities existed, local sound systems formed to provide a site of protest and resistance”, qualities the neoliberal order is less than accommodating of (ibid: 357).

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Yet, the reggae sound system continues to assert itself upon the cultural fabric of our cities, despite such adversity. This assertion calls to question once more issues of opposition and cultural heterogeneity: how does the reggae system continue to resist and persist within the neo-liberal management of culture? How can it shape our understanding of resistance and community from the cultural fringes of our cities? And by what means can it consolidate the oftentimes divergent and conflicting social, political, and cultural constellations of contemporary trans-Atlantic urban life, into diverse, passionate, and altogether stronger communities that counter the alienating logic of the post-Fordist city? As Mikey Dread, Channel One Sound System’s veteran operator, outlines at the beginning of a recent documentary into contemporary sound system culture, the answers may lie in the formal qualities of the sound itself.

The following reflections, therefore, take a dive into the sub-bass expression of the reggae

sound system to respond to these queries and the growing pressures placed on the (sub)culture. They re-think notions of resistance and community, by considering the means through which knowledge is communicated and (re)produced in sound; specifically, the event at which sub-bass frequencies encounter the physical, materiality of the (human) body. The affective nature of this interaction will be explored within an ontology of ‘noise’ and in tandem with an underground form of utopian hermeneutics, prompted by José Esteban Muñoz’s reading of Ernst Bloch’s notion of the ‘Not-Yet-Conscious’ (1987). At this encounter, the reggae sound system has the ability to invoke radically utopian and entirely unique communities at/as its expression. These communities form from parallel ontological trajectories; common planes of ‘frequency’ in being – to recall the words of Robo Dread that frame this issue of *Riffs* – which transcend the racialized identity logic of trans-Atlantic history, without disavowing the unique and often conflicting nature of the diverse, respective experiences of this past in the present.

A piece of footage showing the last song played at a Channel One Sound System ‘dance’ in London (September 2016), supplemented by a YouTube link to the song, supports this claim by framing the analysis as a whole. This is not to say that this footage is representative of all sound system dances nor the actual experience of a working sound system. Rather the footage provides an excellent frame of reference for the reader to the object in question: the relationship between the sub-bass frequencies produced by the sound system and the

physical materiality of, in this case, the human body – an object which is entirely contingent on the presence of a working sound system, as it occurs in a moment of interaction between the sonically excited, liquid gaseous medium of air and the individual’s physical flesh and bone. As something inherently noisy, this relationship traverses the boundaries of the conceptual/material, process/event, discernable/incoherent. It is continuously caught in a fleeting past-ness, as the immanence of the sub-bass expression inevitably recedes from bodily experience, leaving little or no objective trace. As such, the object threatens to dissolve to a point of abstraction that evades effective analysis outside of the event itself. Therefore, it is from this referential point, the YouTube footage (and the specific sound system dance shown) that the noisy, affective method for deciphering the above relationship can be explored in one specific context. Once understood there, it may possible to apply it more generally to other auditory cultures of this kind.

Understanding the Ontology of Noise: Systems of Meaning

The reggae sound system, like any system, consists primarily as a composition of “points and lines, beings and relations” (Serres 2007: 10). These represent its hand-built speaker boxes, pieces of audio equipment, and its human crew. As a Spinozan ‘body’, it “consists of a series of dynamic relations” and has an affective capacity; the “power to act upon and be acted upon by other,

distinct, bodies” (Thompson 2012: 21). Along these lines of relation, however, lies the possibility of an event, static, a parasite – known as noise – that will “steal” the meaning of a relation by disrupting, sidelining, corrupting, reflecting, or displacing the meaning of the relation and fundamentally altering the way in which that point interacts with the system around it and its state of being-in-the-world (Serres 2007: 11). However, as Michel Serres rightly states, this noise in the relation is not “something added to the system... (but is, rather,) quite simply the system itself” (ibid: 12). Under this framework, noise is to be understood as a by-product of the material properties of the relation itself, not as that which intercepts the relation from an outside position as “extraneous material” (Weaver 1964: 19). Noise, then, is the fundamental expression of this state of being, the “trace or index of a relation that itself speaks of ontology” (Serres 2007: 13). It is the resonance of a body as it is excited by the ‘frequency’ of the world around it, the means by which it exists meaningfully in time and space.

Furthermore, by identifying the noise produced by a system, as a form of “meta-operation” or trace of an expression, noise provides a better understanding of the “mechanics at work in the system” itself and how they may adapt at the reorganisation of the system as a whole (LaBelle 2006: 224-5). Rather than merely a negatively entropic force, noise forces the system to recalibrate to a new state of relationality that previously would have been impossible under the old systematic conditions. Noise is the herald of a new order;

it “interrupts at first glance, consolidates when you look again” (Serres 2007: 14). Noise casts the system into the state of raw potential, the virtual, from which the system contracts back into actuality, imbued with new relations and meaning (Hainge 2013: 14).

This process is reflected in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s notion of the ‘territory’ (Colebrook 2006). This describes the framing of a point or moment in the system into a hardened state of meaning and of being-in-the-world. In other words, in the virtual there is the raw potential of a point in the system to differ, to form new relations with the world around it and resonate at a different ontological ‘frequency’ than before. This is lost to a reified code of signification or meaning, as that point or body is contracted from the virtual into the actual (ibid: 6). The ‘territory’ forms the “habitual relations and recognition”, the perceptions and affects, that structure the “actual world” – that which is deemed possible at this moment in time and space within our “own regular and self-perpetuating rhythms” of expression, impression and interaction (ibid: 105). By transforming the fundamental properties of a relation from within, noise initiates a process of breaking open the reified code framing the relation and casting it into a brief moment of potentiality. Noise has the power to deterritorialize, take back into the virtual, the relationship between two actors in a system and, subsequently, the system as a whole. From this wavering, entropic state, in which the system’s multitude of fractured parts hold the potential to form an infinite possibility of relations, the system then reorganises around the noisy

disruption, and a new system of increased formal complexity is contracted into the actual once more (reterritorialization). By these means, noise has the capacity to keep updating the system, each time imbuing it with new forms of relationality that challenge structures of sameness. With this understanding of noise, then, let us turn to the footage framing the analysis and, with the footage as a reference, attempt a dive into the experience of the sound system’s sub-bass band of sonic frequencies.

Noise and Knowledge in the Sound System Dance: ‘Tides’, Bodies, and Affect

The footage shows the sound system operator, Mikey Dread, play a contemporary reggae/dub record, Reparations by Keety Roots aka Rootsy Rebel (Black Legacy Records: 2016), in a style typical of the genre. He begins by playing the first version of the song (00:00:03); he then plays a second version that contains a more didactic style of lyricism (00:03:40); and last, with the lights on in the space, he plays an instrumental, ‘dubbed’ version of the song (00:08:21). Each time he plays a new version, he blocks the sub-bass frequencies from the song, via a frequency ‘gate’ on his pre-amp or mixer, only to then reopen the sub-bass band at a specific moment. As will become clear, with each extension of the sub-bass frequencies come waves or tides of territorialization. These rush over the scene, first casting the system-bodies within the space into the virtual as they are submerged in an instance of sub-bass frequency.

A moment of deterritorialization, through noise, alters the crowd's relationship to the overall system: the sound system, the space, and to one another. Once this change has occurred, signified by a visible and audible affective response from the crowd, the process of deterritorialization comes to a close as the system consolidates the noisy, sub-bass expression. The tide of deterritorialization draws back to reveal a new system-body as the space and its inhabitants are actualized through the consolidation of the sub-bass change. This constitutes a moment of reterritorialization. The overarching system is altered with updated, modified structures of meaning – a new territory is drawn. This process increases in intensity at each version of the song, as demonstrated by the increased affective response from the crowd. By identifying the nature of the territory before and after the sub-bass is introduced, along with the crowd's growing affective response at each point of noisy interaction, we can pinpoint the constitutive process behind a community whose structural meaning has been radically altered.

Prior to the introduction of the first sub-bass line, each body within the crumbling remains of the post-industrial urban space – the inorganic components of the sound system, its human crew and the individual members of the crowd – fulfill a relation to one another (00:00:03). However, semantically, these bodies carry strong associative identifications that meaningfully delineate one body from the next; historical-social classifications such as race, class, gender, nationality, and cultural background; as well as more physical characteristics such as spatial-temporal personhood,

organic-inorganic form etc. The 'territory' at this point in the dance is based on these markers of identity. The lyrics of the song give a sharp critique on the advent of occidental capitalism and triangular trade, as well as their residual traces visible in the neoliberal economic and political world order. Such a critique exemplifies the forms of Gramscian, organic intellectualism typical of expressive black cultures of this kind (Gilroy 1991: 196). The sonic meaning making of the dance centers on the shared, Afro-Caribbean heritage of diaspora experience. The territory describes a "mystical unity outside the process of history or even a common culture or ethnicity which will assert itself regardless of determinate political and economic circumstances" (ibid: 158). Enshrined within the territory, there is a sense of past-ness that constitutes the community within the space as those with and those without access to the collective cultural milieu of the black trans-Atlantic experience.

This should not be discredited. It provides a crucial means of accounting for and expressing a history of black subordination and resistance, at the heart of (white) trans-Atlantic imperialism and cultural supremacy. Nevertheless, by taking a "doggedly monocultural, national, and ethnocentric" form, the territory of the space, at this point, may risk losing any effective, long term analysis to the vast spaces in cultural accessibility and mnemonic praxis that form between groups and individuals of differing relationship to the past, and its experience in the present (Gilroy 1999: 80). As such, the following noisy, affective method

attempts to fill in these spaces. By re-thinking the above issues through the visceral embodiment of sub-bass expression and not the semio-text of the song's lyrics or MC's calls, it provides a means by which all members of the space can access the content of the historical critique, towards a social and political cohesion of greater longevity than the previous territory.

The scene changes noticeably at the extension of the first sub-bass line (00:01:35). The sub-bass lines roll in two bar stretches of low end, sub-bass frequency (35-50 Hz), driving through the crowd to culminate at the 3rd and 4th beats of each second bar in a burst of sub-bass in the higher range (50-80 Hz). Once a number of discrete bodies, "distinguished from one another in respect of motion and rest, quickness and slowness, and not in respect of substance", the crowd are now excited into action as one mass (Spinoza 1996: 41). They leap into the air and cheer as they are "set in motion at a specific rate... through being acted upon by another body in motion" (Thompson 2012: 21). This affective response points to the "in-between-ness" of the noisy relation taking place between the liquid gaseous medium of the air, excited by the sub-bass sonic vibrations, and the organic matter of the crowd's physical bodies (Gregg & Seigworth 2010: 2).

As the speaker cones, or 'drivers', begin to vibrate within the handmade plywood boxes, according to the signal being sent to them from the technical components of the sound system, they produce longitudinal waves that the listener's ears interpret as sound. However, as a by-product of this system at work, raw kinetic energy (vibration) is also

produced as noise from the back of the speaker cone at the same frequency as the longitudinal waves from the front. This kinetic energy excites the material properties of the wooden boxes, forming a relation that, in turn, further excites the trapped air in the boxes. In speaker boxes specifically built to accentuate low-register, deep pitches, this kinetic energy is forced out towards the crowd as a noisy expression of the system within the box, longitudinal waves that are interpreted by the human body as physical sensation rather than sound – sub-bass frequency.

As an elastic gaseous medium, the air surrounding the crowd vibrates at the same frequency as the air from the speaker box. Upon meeting the organic matter of the human body, this newly excited air interacts with, forms a relation to, the particles that make up the body's skin, bone, muscle, hair, and organs. The body is excited to the same sub-bass frequency; it begins to vibrate at a rate of 35-80 Hz. The nervous system interprets this as physical sensation, the noisy by-product of the relation between our organic matter and the world around us. This sensation, the culmination of electrical and chemical signals in the brain, causes a further by-product to be released, namely the affective response visible and audible in the crowd as they 'get on' the same frequency as the sound system. Caught up in a series of noisy relations, the body, in turn, becomes noisy. It mediates the translation of sub-bass longitudinal waves into an affective force that transforms the atmosphere within the space. This noisy process continues as the sound system operator and MC interpret the affective response from the crowd and input more effects or changes into

the sound system controls, thus restarting the cycle through the system – perception, to signal, to sound, to vibration, to sensation, to affective response.

Julian Henriques describes this experience in one of the few first-hand scholarly perspectives into sound system culture. Coining the above sensation as 'sonic dominance', Henriques writes:

The first thing that strikes you in a Reggae Sound System session is the sound itself. The sheer physical force, volume, weight and mass of it. Sonic dominance is hard, extreme and excessive. At the same time the sound is also soft and embracing and it makes for an enveloping, immersive and intense experience. The sound pervades, or even invades the body, like smell. Sonic dominance is both a near over-load of sound and a super saturation of sound. You're lost inside it, submerged under it. This volume of sound crashes down on you like an ocean wave, you feel the pressure of the weight of the air like diving deep underwater. There's no escape, no cut off, no choice but to be there (2003: 451-52)

The sensation of losing oneself in the experience of the sub-bass vibration brings the discussion back to the process of deterritorialization. It is here, in the first and subsequent extensions of the sub-bass frequencies that the individuals in the crowd quite literally lose themselves as they are cast, for a moment,

into the virtual realm. They reach a moment of raw potentiality in their capacity to 'differ', or relate to the world around them. Furthermore, by exciting the material properties of the sound system space, the immersive experience shapes a 'body' with types of relationships that no longer function between or with the world around them, but rather amongst or within the world (Henriques 2003: 464). By permeating the divisions between internal body and external world, the above noisy process causes the individual to be confronted with the bounded nature of their own body mass, within an ontology based on relational multiplicity. This overcomes the Cartesian mind/body, self/other dualism, such that in the place of an identity based on opposition – 'what I am not' vs 'what I have been' – comes identification through situation – 'what I am surrounded by'. Under this new order, the individuals in the crowd bump, smile, shout, and dance together, forward into the temporal fabric of the song, as points in the greater constellation of the sound system dance. They have lost the dogged historical-cultural identities brought to the fore by the previous territory. They are no longer a collection of discrete individual bodies in time and space. Rather, they are one body or mass, acted upon by (and in turn producing) a common affective force, as they are pushed forward into the actual, by the semantic-relational event of the sub-bass interaction. This is not to say they reach a state of sameness. Rather one's trajectory or 'frequency' becomes the unifying factor at play – 'where are we going and at what common rate?'

As the tide of deterritorialization recedes and the system consolidates the above changes, with a pause in the sound as the operator changes the version of the song, the process of reterritorialization reveals the new territory (00:03:35). This pulls the meaningful relations within the system back to a logic based on historical markers of cultural and racial identity, but, crucially, like the water that has seeped into the sand once the sea recedes at low tide, the residues of the last process of deterritorialization are still at work. The excited crowd, sweating, breathless and hearts beating, as one, continue to move as one body; fastened together, so to speak, by the affective glue set in place by the vibrating air. By the time of the last and final version of the song, the above processes have shaped a new territory. It is such that a “logic of futurity” persists beyond the trans-Atlantic, “identitarian logic” of the crowd-body’s original subjective state(s) (Muñoz 2007: 452).

Re-thinking Community and Resistance by way of a Conclusion: The underground utopian hermeneutics of the reggae sound system

The instrumental version of the song begins with the same introduction of chords and drums patterns that play across different modes of memory work from the previous versions (00:08:21). This makes the “abstract concept of a changing same a living, familiar reality” (Gilroy 1999: 106) much like the change in collective identity brought about by the above processes and

didactically marked by the MC’s calls of “family” (00:07:35). The illuminated space reveals the members of the crowd, now aggregate parts of a greater body- assemblage, move and cheer together; they ‘resonate’ with the affective trace of a shared ontological ‘frequency’. They inhabit a newly opened “field of utopian possibility (...) in which multiple forms of belonging in difference adhere to a belonging in collectivity” (Muñoz 2007: 453). On this plane of quotidian utopian impulse, each member of the crowd contributes to a realm of potentiality. This realm goes beyond the sphere of the here-and-now, towards a “future society that is being invoked and addressed at the same moment” (ibid: 454, 452).

On the ontological ‘frequency’ of the ‘Not-Yet-Conscious’ comes the possibility for communities to form that preserve the heterogeneity of a diverse social-cultural order, for instance that of contemporary trans-Atlantic urban life. By putting differing forms of identity beside one another, rather than instead of or over one another, the Not-Yet-Conscious can constitute communities on the basis of parallel identifications brought together by the same directional movement in meaningful time (ibid: 453). The bodies of the Not-Yet-Conscious experience the same ontological frequency but they resonate through alternate subjective states. This directly opposes the homogenizing effects of neoliberal redevelopment and gentrification, which work through processes of ‘subjectivation’ within the post-industrial inner city neighborhoods that the contemporary reggae sound system calls home. Furthermore, noise indiscriminately forces all

those present at its dissemination to undergo the epistemologically transformative effects of its force. Thus, all those present in the crowd, regardless of social, cultural, or ‘racial’ background, form an aggregate part in the constitution of a community centered on the Not-Yet-Conscious. This community is united as one body in a shared state of being-in-the-world and is comprised of parallel identities held in a common trajectory towards the future.

However, fundamentally, it maintains a connection to disparate senses of trans-Atlantic past-ness that inform and enrich the social code within the system. The bursts of sub-bass weave all those present into the fabric of trans-Atlantic past-ness, through the rolling sub-bass line’s formal conjuring of epistemological, colonial violence within and external to the hulls of the Middle Passage. It is, therefore, the meta-experience of sufferation that lies so deep within the sub-bass expression of the sound system: an experiential trace of bitter colonial violence coupled with the utopian, deferral of the ‘good’, which evokes the notion of Hope, the fundamental striving of all human beings towards the “rejection of deprivation” (Bloch 1986: 11). In the last moments of this sound system dance, the intermarriage between these two processes; the utopian evocation of the ‘Not-Yet-Conscious’ and the meta-experience of sufferation, actualizes a radically utopian, united community that upholds the ardent heterogeneity and resistance of trans-Atlantic, underground culture at its formation.

The contemporary sound system is, therefore, no longer exclusively representative of one resistive cultural politics,

as that of its post-war Jamaican forerunner. Rather it is productive of communities that re-invigorate the heterogeneous politics of trans-Atlantic urban life, at each respective instance of the relationship between the individual and the sound system. This analysis has strengthened such a position by passing the interaction between the organic bodies of the crowd and just one of the sound system's constitutive medial elements, the sub-bass frequencies, through a reading of noise and affect. As the trace of the expression of a relation that casts the host system into a state of potentiality, the virtual, noise forces the meaningful code within a system, the territory, to alter. This occurs as noise forces the body to confront the very nature of its bounded state of being-in-the-world. The change in territories or 'tides' of territorialization across the sound system dance have been identified and described through a theory of affect. These instances show the transformational effect of noise, as the human body comes into contact with the expression of the sound system at work.

Furthermore, this analysis has identified the interplay between the utopian striving of Hope and the shared meta-experience of trans-Atlantic sufferation. This allows the sound system to invoke radically diverse yet unified communities, centered on the quotidian impulse of the Not-Yet-Conscious. These communities counter a hardening code of neo-liberal homogeneity in our cities. By providing a means through which notions of resistance, community, and knowledge can be re-thought through sound; where narratives of trans-Atlantic violence and urban persistence are felt rather than simply heard, the

reggae sound system along with other underground auditory cultures, present opportunities to formulate new understandings of trans-Atlantic life: past, present and future. This affective, noisy model of analysis provides just one means by which the underground may be explored and better understood. As such, it attempts to stimulate further action towards the preservation of these vital cultural actors.

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