

A Popular Culture Research Methodology: Sound System Outernational

by

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Résumé : Ce papier explore une méthodologie innovante de recherche par la pratique qui rassemble praticiens et aficionados d'une culture populaire avec des chercheurs académiques, dans l'espace partagé de symposiums sur la culture sound system du reggae. En tant qu'organisateur, nous décrivons ce qui a rendu ces symposiums différents des conférences académiques habituelles, en termes de participants, de sujets de discussion, d'ateliers, de démonstration, d'expositions, de projections de films et de sessions sound system par Roots Injection et Young Warrior. D'une manière autoréflexive, nous considérons que les résultats de ces événements incluent des échanges intergénérationnels, le soutien aux sound system menés par des femmes, et la reconnaissance et l'encouragement que les praticiens de cette culture populaire disent avoir ressenti de la part de l'institution académique qu'est l'université. Cela peut être identifié, à travers des enregistrements vocaux ainsi que des commentaires sur les réseaux sociaux, comme un renforcement mutuel de la culture de recherche et de la culture populaire du sound system elle-même.

Mots-clefs : *communauté – méthodologie de recherche – participation – recherche par la pratique – culture populaire – reggae – sound system*

Abstract: This paper explores an innovative practice-as-research methodology that brings popular culture practitioners and aficionados together with academic researchers in the shared space of symposia on reggae sound system culture. As organizers, we describe what made the symposia different from the normal academic conference in terms of the range of participants, discussion topics, workshops, demonstrations, exhibitions, film showings and the sound system sessions from Roots Injection and Young Warrior. In a self-reflexive fashion some of the outcomes of the events were considered to be the intergenerational conversations, the support for women-led sound systems and the recognition and encouragement that the practitioners of the popular culture said they felt they were receiving from the academic institution of the university. This can be identified via voice recordings and social media comments as a mutual strengthening of the research culture and the sound system popular culture itself.

Keywords: community – research methodology – participation – practice-as-research – popular culture – reggae – sound system

Reggae-as-research

Sound system culture originating in Jamaica is now a global popular music movement. This paper outlines an example of a practice-as-research methodology with reggae researchers and practitioners participating. Sound System Outernational 1 and 2 took place at Goldsmiths, University of London, in January and July 2016. First to declare our interests, the authors were the organizers of these events, having founded an on-going research group called Sound System Outernational, “dedicated to recognizing, stimulating and supporting sound system culture worldwide... [it] creates spaces for dance and discussion.”¹ This makes the article a self-reflexive piece, where the events themselves are considered as an example of practice-as-research.

Practice-as-research is itself a departure and development from conventional university research models such as participant observation and ethnomethodology. These methodologies, despite the researcher being immersed in the field, maintain the clear divide between the researcher and the researched. This is something the symposia—unlike the conventional academic conference—sought to challenge. Practice-as-research recognizes that knowledge is not exclusively epistemic, that is, defined in the traditional arts and humanities manner as a *text*. It also recognizes that creative and other practices of the researchers themselves—including organizing symposia—can and do generate knowledge. Indeed Goldsmiths runs a successful

theory-practice PhD programme where theses include a very productive circulation of between “thinking/reading” and “making.”

As against most practice-as-research, Outernational was concerned with sound system as a *collective* rather than *individual* creative practice, as part of a *popular* rather than high art or avant-garde cultural tradition. Also some of the value of the symposia lay in the fact that mainstream media have traditionally not recognized sound system culture as having any significant value. Until very recently the UK urban music of Grime was exactly in this position of being entirely excluded from mainstream media, as one participant, Joy White addressed in her presentation *Calling the Past into the Present: Sound Systems and a Decade of Grime* at the second event (White, 2016). Even if it may occasionally surface on a mainstream level, such as with Channel One’s surprise victory at the Red Bull Culture Clash in 2010, reggae sound system culture is not a fully commercial music culture (in the way that Grime is rapidly becoming with Grime artist Skepta winning the UK music industry’s prestigious 2016 Mercury prize), but conforms more to the idea of a subculture, often operating in the margins in an informal economy and retaining its Caribbean identity. So the *popular* culture of sound system culture indicates grassroots, lumpen proletarian or subaltern, as distinct from the mass popular culture of *Beyoncé* or Major Lazer. The third respect in which the creative practices considered here differ from traditional ones is in the role of *technology*. Sound system culture is almost entirely phonographic,



Goldsmiths, University of London, Topology Research Unit in association with Echoes Magazine and Sound System Culture presents

SOUND SYSTEM OUTERNATIONAL

SONIC ENTANGLEMENTS - JAMAICA, EUROPE AND BRAZIL

Originated in Jamaica in the late 1950s, the vibes of sound system culture resonate nowadays on an international scale, scattered across a diasporic network of hand-crafted technologies and radical sonic practices. The symposium aims to contribute to the understanding of sound system as global cultural phenomenon, with researchers, journalists, soundmen and sound women from Brazil, Italy and across the UK. The day will focus on historical and social features, performance techniques, the distinctive technological apparatus and the different music styles that make the global sound system culture.

AFRIKAN SIMBA - AYAMBA RECORDS
BRIAN D'AQUINO - UNIVERSITA' L'ORIENTALE (ITALY)
NADINE DOGLIANI - ECHOTRONIX SOUND SYSTEM (ITALY)
JULIAN HENRIQUES - AUTHOR, 'SONIC BODIES'
DAVID KATZ - AUTHOR, 'SOLID FOUNDATION'
JOHN MASOURI - AUTHOR / ECHOES MAGAZINE
MANDEEP SAMRA - SOUND SYSTEM CULTURE PROJECT
MICHAEL McMILLAN - CURATOR, 'ROCKERS, SOULHEADS AND LOVERS' EXHIBITION
ELIETE MEJORADO - TETINE / SLUM DUNK RADIO (BRAZIL)
PAX NINDI - GLOBAL CARNIVAL CENTRE
BRUNO VERNER - TETINE / SLUM DUNK RADIO (BRAZIL)
LEONARDO VIDIGAL - UFMG UNIVERSITY (BRAZIL)
YOUNG WARRIOR - SON OF JAH SHAKA
VALERIE ROBINSON - V-ROCKET SOUND SYSTEM
SOFT WAX - DEPTFORD DUB CLUB

GOLDSMITHS
 UNIVERSITY OF LONDON
 ST.JAMES HATCHAM BUILDING
 NEW CROSS - LONDON - SE14 6NW



ECHOES

SATURDAY
JANUARY 16
 11AM>7PM PLUS AFTER PARTY

Figure 1: First Sound System Outernational poster, 16th January 2016.

this is to say, the music played by the Selector is not a “live” artist performance, but a recorded one, re-presented, as it were, by the technologies of the sound system set of equipment.

Arising from the most deprived areas of 1950s Kingston, Jamaica, later displaced along the routes of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora, this wisdom or “sonic intelligence” is a collective, transnational, multi-layered body of knowledge. Ranging from the affective qualities of sound to the techniques for its re-production, this practice-based wisdom mainly relies on a radical approach to audio technology. Working with one foot in the recording studio and the other in the dancehall session, as recently accounted by Ray Hitchins (2014), Jamaican engineers have always made clean sweep of the manuals. Pushing technology far beyond its intended limits, they eventually invented a sound the rest of the world strives for, with the sonic extravaganza of dub to be considered one of the most perfected achievements, as argued by Michael Veal in his classic work (Veal, 2007). It is always difficult to find ways to convey the affects of the sound system experience and its visceral impact. One Brazilian in her comments from the floor of the first Outernational put this very well. She said that as a student she couldn't afford to travel back to Brazil—so going to sound system sessions was the only way she could experience herself as an embodied person, in the way she was at home.

Practice and knowledge systems

The term “outernational” rather than international was adopted for the name of these events as an indication of our respect for the Rastafarian has made such an essential contribution to sound system culture and whose nomenclature eschews internationalism (Chevannes, 1994). “Outernationalism” might also be considered as one of the few a progressive aspects to globalization. To give an example, the Italian band Roots Defenders travelled from their home base of Napoli to perform at Hootananny venue in Brixton, south London. There they performed with veteran Jamaican (currently Brixton-based) reggae singer Earl 16. Then D'Aquino's cut a 12 inch released on his Bababoom Hifi label, which was recorded between Naples and London and the record pressed in France. As was confirmed by Ras Muffet, operator of the Roots Injection sound system and label based in Bristol, this is typical of the kind of “outernationalism” by which the scene operates.²

The field of popular culture offers countless examples of different paradigms at work in the production and transmission of knowledge. As an example the idea of an embodied knowledge, proposed by phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (1964) and later expanded by the feminist critique, resonates throughout a long tradition of scholarly research on dance and choreography, from Afro-American dancer-theorists Katherine Dunham (1947/1983) to Barbara Browning (1995) and Ann Cooper Albright (1997). But we could also claim the call into question of the primacy of the rational mind to be already at work in the artistic practice of self-

taught musicians, from Louis Armstrong to Jimi Hendrix. The idea of *ways of knowing* and the *sonic logos* challenge the conventional epistemic monopoly of the nature of knowledge itself, as explored elsewhere (Henriques, 2011: 242-274). This line of thought also resonates with idea within the Jamaican popular culture itself, where “reason” is not a thing, a noun, but rather an activity or verb, where the expression “to reason” and “reasoning” are commonplace.

Location and resources

The circumstances—or what Stuart Hall would discuss as contingencies—appear self-evident in retrospect. The three organizers had a common research interest in reggae music and experience with sound systems. D’Aquino owns and runs the Bababoom Hifi sound system and record label (and previously the Roots Defenders band) in Italy for the last twelve years and is currently a PhD student at University L’Orientale (Naples, Italy), making use of the critical tools provided by the cultural studies tradition, relocated from the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies to the Mediterranean area by Iain Chambers.³ Vidigal is a member of Deskareggae Sound System, from Belo Horizonte, his hometown in Brazil where he teaches Film Studies. His experience combines 24 years in documenting and studying the Brazilian reggae scene, since the release of the *Massive Reggae* fanzine in 1992, with a theoretical work on the interaction between popular music and the visual element in feature films and documentaries. *Weapon is My Mouth*

was his new film shown at the event, as described below. In terms of a research and practical knowledge base in reggae sound systems, Henriques has documentary and fiction films, numerous journal publications (e.g. Henriques, 2014) and a monograph *Sonic Bodies* to his name (Henriques, 2011).

Outernational’s confidence was also derived from the wider British cultural context that was witnessing a renewed interest in reggae sound systems, which for decades has been at the heart of Caribbean popular culture in the UK and indeed pop culture as a whole.⁴ While popular culture has been sustaining itself at a community level since the first wave of Jamaican settlement in the 1950s, what was new was its recognition in the wider culture. It is also interesting to note how the popularity of sound system culture has been reinforced by the comparatively recent “reggae revival.” While dancehall music has been the leading popular genre in Jamaica since the 1980s, the roots reggae that has been the staple of the international audience is becoming increasingly popular in Jamaica itself with a new generation of artists such as Chronixx, Protoje, Kabaka Pyramid, Busy Signal, Roots Underground and Raging Fyah (Henriques, 2012). This music indeed serves as new fuel for the sound system fire. Both rhythmically and lyrically the “peace and love” vibes of roots reggae is certainly less threatening than the hard-hitting rhythms and lyrics of dancehall. Known in the UK as “bashment” this presents a more aggressive energy that is less easily assimilated.⁵

The renewed recognition of the value of reggae is also evidenced in two 2015 exhibitions, namely Michael Macmillan’s *Rockers Soul Heads* and

Lovers and Mandeep Samra's Sound System Culture national touring exhibitions, the latter accompanied by the beautifully illustrated and produced book *Sound System Culture* that chronicled its origins in Huddersfield (Huxtable, 2014; see also Bateman & Newman, 2016).⁶ So the publishers One Love Books and the Sound System Culture organization were obvious choices as associated partners for the Outernational venture, as was *Echoes* magazine, long established authority in this area. With these working relationships and what we found to be the kudos attached to Goldsmiths—from those outside the university sector—it was comparatively easy to reach out to local sound systems and for them to consider our request for their participation seriously. An essential factor for the positive outcome of the event was the mutual trust between organizers, academics and practitioners. The marginalized nature of the reggae scene is largely outside the mainstream music industry that means that it is not immediately accessible for research purposes or even participation.

Shared space, structure and flow

The Outernational events were only possible on the basis of the already-established trust and support of the sound system community that operates largely with its own venues and promotional mechanisms, such as the pirate/community radio station advertising. Also the events were facilitated by the fact that they were feeding an already existing appetite—from researchers to be in conversation with practitioners and for practitioners to

have their work and contribution to the culture being recognized. Several participants mentioned “starving” for the kind of conversations that flowed so readily at the events. Although temporary, the academic symposium provides a physical “third space” for people to gather and meet each other, building networks and exchanging ideas. This is in fact 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—but where those two usually different sets of participants came together.

The two symposia had several themes in common.⁷ One was their outernational perspective with presentations from Dr Sonjah Stanley Niaah (Jamaica, researcher via Skype) and Taru Dalmia (India, Delhi Sultanate sound system via Skype), and practitioners such as Pax Nindi from Zimbabwe. Also with the second symposium the outernational scope widened further to Brazil with addition of Bruno Verner (Goldsmiths, Tetine sound system) and Eliete Meorado (Slum Dunk sound system and Brazilian punk-funk duo Tetine), and Norway with researcher Vincent Møystad. Another common theme was their intergenerationality. Participants from both older and younger generations were very keen to make the connections and indeed learn from the other. Young Warrior advertises himself as son of Jah Shaka for instance, and there was a contribution from Everaldo Campbell



Figure 2: Sound System Outernational social media logo, designed by Liv Santos.

as son of the pioneer soundman Count Suckle. The third common theme was of course the mix of backgrounds of presenters and participants as practitioners and academic researchers, some with both backgrounds such as Dr Mykael Riley (University of Westminster and a former member of Steel Pulse band) and Dr William “Lez” Henry (University of West London and a former member of Saxon Sound System). There were also curators such as Dr Michael McMillan and writers on reggae David Katz (*People Funny Boy: the Genius of Lee “Scratch” Perry*) and John Masouri from *Echoes* magazine, as well as sound system owners

such as Steve “Soft Wax” McCarthy, in addition to those already mentioned.

The first event also encouraged us to be more ambitious for the second to include parallel sessions with discussion, film screenings, workshops and exhibitions. For example in one of the workshops, *From Circuit Bending to Circuit Dubbing: A Dub Electronics Interactive Showcase*, presented by French engineer Antibypass, it was possible to test some of King Tubby type original studio equipment. A research paper was presented by Enrico Bonadio’s (City University, London), *Dissemination of Records*



Figure 3: Young Warrior addressing the first Sound System Outernational.

and *Creative Appropriation: The Evolution of Vintage Jamaican Music in the Absence of Copyright*. There was rare screening of the 1983 film *People Sounds* on the sound system and titular record store in Notting Hill Gate, West London. There was also a virtual reality exhibition in which we could hear the voices of the Caribbean community that built the Notting Hill Carnival—the biggest in Europe—made by the Marcio Cruz from Brazil (Goldsmiths); and a roundtable on sound system aesthetics presented by

Khadijah Ibrahim, with dub poetry readings and demonstrations of skanking dance. *I'm Ugly but Trendy*, Denise Garcia's film about the Brazilian Funk Carioca culture was also screened, showing the diversity of the outernational sound system culture in depth. The lunch break Jamaican delicatessen menu of rice and peas, ackee and salt-fish and dumplings was provided by a local small restaurant and outdoor musical entertainment from the Jim Frize's 12 volt sound system Bada Boom Box.⁸

SOUND SYSTEM OUTERNATIONAL²

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GUEST SELECTOR DON LETTS

The Rebel Dread

+OUTERNATIONAL SELECTORS

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DESKAREGGAE (BRAZIL)

TETINE-SLUM DUNK (BRAZIL)

Sound System Outernational in
association with Goldsmiths, University
of London, Topology Research Unit,
One Love Books, Echoes



1



Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Figure 4: Poster for Outernational 2, 2nd July 2016.

One of the advantages of organizing two events in quite rapid succession is that the second could develop themes raised in the first. One of these was the issue of the gentrification of sound system culture to which the symposia themselves could be seen as contributing. This came up in discussions with participants after the first one and was addressed specifically in the second with Henriques' presentation on the risks and opportunities of sound system culture, including its commercialization and "authenticity." By this time however it appeared that participants already recognized that the events were attempting to add value to the culture rather than sanitize it. Another issue coming from the first that was addressed in final plenary of the second: "Soundwomen in the XXIst Century" on the rise of all-female sound systems, one of the most important movements in the current scene, that has followed pioneering soundwomen like Valerie Robinson from V-Rocket Sound System. Legs Eleven (UK) Caya (Come As You Are) Sound System (UK, via Skype) and Feminine Hi Fi (Brazil, via Skype) told their stories, stressed the need to develop the narrative of dancehall and to work with music as a tool for social transformation. Sir Lloyd Coxson, a founding figure of the first generation the UK sound system scene, was very supportive of the work the soundwomen were doing and proposed a "clash" between the sounds from UK and Brazil.

Another lesson from the first Outernational was the importance of conceiving of the event as being double-sided with the discussion of the symposium in the day and the sound system session in the night. The evening opened in the music venue

of a local pub, with a screening of a new documentary film *Weapon is My Mouth*, directed by Vidigal in collaboration with Delmar Mavignier, shot at the 2016 United Nations of Dub festival in Liverpool. *Weapon Is My Mouth* was conceived and made specifically as a "danceable film," to be experienced, appreciated and danced to within the environment of a sound-system session. Projected between the speaker stacks, it is a new kind of expanded cinema, as a fusion of cinema and dancehall experience. Thus the Outernational approach of practice-as-research was pushed even further with this presentation of film-as-research. The evening continued with a full session featuring Ras Muffet's Roots Injection from Bristol and Young Warrior from London, both with their own sound systems, in addition to a DJ set by the renowned filmmaker and selector Don Letts.

Evaluation, Exchanges and Conversations

As the organizers of the events, clearly we cannot be considered as neutral in assessing how far the events achieved in their aim of creating a space for exchange between research and practitioner communities. The atmosphere was convivial throughout and as organizers we received a stream of positive comments from practitioners. "Me never know sey that people dem in a university interested in sound system" was one comment. This was from someone on her first visit inside the College, indicating the value of its cultural capital in giving respect to sound system culture and its practitioners. Another comment,

in an email from Jim Frize, one of the creators of the 12-volt sound system movement:

Sound System Outernational (SSO) is a much-needed platform for sound system culture, a long awaited breath of fresh air. SSO presented historic information, first hand accounts, from people who were in Jamaica during the inception of this culture. Seeing these accounts presented at the symposium felt historic. It also showed me that sound system culture is still growing and evolving, it's just as relevant today as it has ever been. Meeting other people at the symposium who have the same love and passion for sound system culture was inspiring and gave me the opportunity to make connections, spark ideas and find collaborators.

Moreover, both academics and practitioners could benefit from a challenging and unusual role-reversal, with the supposed “researched” taking center stage in lectures and workshops, and the “researchers” forced to re-craft their presentations in order to be attractive to a non-academic crowd. Lewis, a 36-year-old vinyl collector from London was alerted by Outernational posters in his local record shop and attended both: “It was such a deep knowledge you can get from those people. Not the same kind you can get from books or the internet... They could share a very *deep*, very *personal* knowledge... And it was for free!”⁹ This suggests the value of the different ways of knowing that Outernational had the ambition to unearth. Young Warrior, after presenting at the first Outernational, commented on Facebook:

... it should be more like this. More talking events, more talking-based seminars and workshops, where it's not about playing but more about learning the technical side, the history, where it's coming from and where it needs to go...¹⁰

There were also practical outcomes from the events in giving confidence to some younger practitioners, such as Caya female run sound system. At the first Outernational this was an idea-in-progress when she spoke about it in the open session.¹¹ This led to a magazine interview to Caya founder Thali Lotus, links with current female sound systems such as Legs Eleven, participation in the second Outernational, culminating in the launching of the new sound system itself in November 2016.¹² We hope that our events will encourage practitioner participation in major initiatives in this field, namely the AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) funded *Bass Culture* led by Mykaell Riley at the University of Westminster as well as the AHRC Reggae Research Network, and the *Jamaica Jamaica!* exhibition at the Philharmonie de Paris.¹³

In conclusion, what came across very strongly from the events was that the intergenerational dimension of the discussions with Sir Lloyd Coxonne and other elders made most valuable contributions, they themselves appearing to value and respect how the younger generation were keeping the music and the culture alive and taking forward in their own ways. This value for the oral histories of the culture in the UK as expressed through its still-living originators and the music artifacts is an important theme for all the current research and exhibition projects and much work remains to be done.¹⁴ In these ways the archive—including the symposia—can serve as an amplifying loop based on mutual respect

and recognition of practitioners and researchers that remains the key value for Sound System Outernational. It has certainly encouraged us to plan to establish a network of Sound System Research Centers at our respective Brazilian, Italian and UK institutions.

One limitation of our reflexive methodology is the difficulty it poses for us as the organizers to be sufficiently self-critical. What is most important to point out to colleagues who might be considering similar events in the future concerns not so much any organizational shortcomings, but rather being aware of their impact on

the scene. Taking up the issue of “gentrification” raised above, there are dangers to turning sound system culture into a “subject area” as the funded research initiatives cited above. To a much greater extent than dancehall, reggae music is essentially a music of rebellion and protest, as it was born in 1960s Jamaica and as it has been adopted by social movements in Italy and around the world. To take the music and the scene into the academic fold – without undermining its *raison d'être*—has to be with the full participation of those who feel and know it. It is this that might present an organizer’s biggest challenge.

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NOTES

1. <https://soundsystemouernational.wordpress.com/> (accessed 8th March 2017).
2. See "Sound Systems Unplugged," Ras Muffet in conversation with Julian Henriques, http://www.thewire.co.uk/audio/in-conversation/off-the-page-2014_julian-henriques-with-ras-moffat_bristol-dub-club_the-sound-system-unplu-33914 (accessed 8th March 2017).
3. There is a well-established official exchange relationship between Goldsmiths and L'Orientale for PhD student exchange and staff participation in seminars.
4. This may be exemplified by the huge popularity of South London sound system Saxon International during the 1980s and 1990s. This popularity eventually had an impact on records sales in the UK and abroad, with Saxon MC Papa Levi topping Jamaican Single Chart in 1982 with "Mi God Mi King." Another prominent Saxon MC, Smiley Culture hit UK charts in the 1980s with hit singles "Cockney Translation" and "Police Officer" which blended British and Jamaican cultures, eventually leading him to host a TV show on Channel Four.
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/mar/11/croydon-bar-accuses-police-banning-jamaican-bashment-music> (accessed 8th March 2017).
6. See <http://www.onelovebooks.com/Sound-System-Culture-1> (accessed 8th March 2017). The concept for the book comes from Mandeep Samra and it was edited and designed by Al Fingers.
7. For the programme in full see <https://soundsystemouernational.wordpress.com/> (accessed 8th March 2017).
8. The full programme is available on our blog, <https://soundsystemouernational.wordpress.com/2016/06/24/sound-system-international-schedule/> (accessed 8th March 2017).
9. Conversation in a music bar in Tottenham, 8th September 2016. Lewis recognized D'Aquino as one of the speakers at the two events he had attended and wanted to share his positive comments.
10. Live Facebook streaming by *Reggae Britannia*, Outernational 1, 16th Jan. 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/youngwarrioruk/videos/vb.184121970371/10156554081430372/?type=2&theater> (accessed 15th May 2016).
11. <http://www.skindeepmag.com/online-articles/skin-deep-meets-sound-system-culture/> (accessed 8th March 2017).
12. *Ibid.*
13. <http://gtr.rcuk.ac.uk/projects?ref=AH/N001826/1>, and <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/newsevents/events/calendar/reggae-research-network-symposium/>; <http://philharmoniedeparis.fr/en/museum-exhibitions/exhibitions/jamaica-jamaica> (accessed 8th March 2017).
14. Recording of the live streaming on the day still available at <https://www.facebook.com/Sound-System-Outernational-740364419397765/?ref=settings> (accessed 8th March 2017) and Goldsmiths Sound System Research, see <https://vimeo.com/180154347> (accessed 8th March 2017).

