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Sounds in the City: Street Technology and Public Space
An Introduction

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More than six decades have passed since an anonymous person decided to place a loudspeaker outside of a liquor shop in Kingston, Jamaica, in the hope of attracting more customers. Little did the mysterious figure know that such a simple action would influence the popular music of the twentieth century so deeply. The echo of the sound emitted by that extemporary loudspeaker has resonated throughout the planet and across time, right into the new millennium. And nowadays it can be heard louder than ever.

Enveloping the planet in a web of collectively engineered sound vibrations, contemporary sound system culture provides a site for music production, cross-cultural exchange, technological innovation and intergenerational encounter. While amalgamating analogue, digital and popular street culture

in a peculiar formation, it connects the local urban and social spaces to a global network of sounds, techniques and crafts. Despite the growing cultural attention in the last decade, sound system culture remains a mainly underground phenomenon, thus articulating what should be named an alternative knowledge system: a specific cultural formation through which people experience, value and interact with music, race, sound, technology, freedom of expression and their circulation in a globalized world.

Today, the technologies for unity and transformative creativity that sound system culture has been fine-tuning for the past sixty years should be regarded as an infinite archive and arsenal of tools for resisting debilitating isolation and exploitation, both consequences of the many forms of management of the pandemic that have systematically "extend[ed] to the whole of the population the political measures of immunization that had until then been violently applied onto those who were considered to be aliens both within and at the borders of national territory" (Preciado 2020).

Therefore, this special issue "Sounds in the City: Street Technology and Public Space" is not only based on the community-building work of the Sound System Outernational (SSO) research and practice network (established in 2014), neither will it only reflect some of the many contributions hosted by the fifth SSO event held in Naples, Italy between 4–6 April 2019. This special issue will amplify the knowledge and intervention of sound practitioners and researchers in order to address questions that have naturally arisen out of the global lockdown imposed by the epidemic: How are we to imagine the street after 2020? What public spaces is there still room for? And, more importantly, how can sound provide a foundation on which to build unity and agency when faced with pressure from states and corporate actors?

In this sense, this special issue aims to acknowledge and widen the steadily increasing research interest for the Jamaican-born cultural institution of the sound system and its endless resonance in contemporary popular music cultures by bridging the work of a growing community of scholars and researchers. Moreover, it also aims to consolidate and further enhance a specifically tuned "practice-as-research" methodology which, we believe, may provide ground for reflection in the wider field of popular music studies.

Central to the approach established by Sound System Outernational is the valorization of the practitioners' experience and their active role in the development of the culture. In recognizing the epistemological value of the practice of selectors, MCs and box-builders, the aim is to challenge a vertical, language-driven concept of notions such as culture and knowledge through the horizontal, inclusive, shared, multisensorial experience of the sound system session. Here the embodied knowledge of soundman and soundwomen stands not as the mere object of inquiry, but as an alternative

research methodology. The practitioner becomes investigator, scholar, researcher in the broader sense, and the practitioner's activity becomes the necessary complement and balance to the academic work.

Our activity is intertwined with fields of study such as ethnomusicology, reggae studies, science and technology studies and philosophy, but also draws on the impressive history of organization and sound practice as a social, economic, artistic and political enterprise. Finally, with the event in Naples, our network has activated a crucial connection with the infrastructure of activist outlets out of which the sound system movement was born in Italy in the 1990s. Alongside reading the works of Carolyn Cooper, Louis Chude-Sokei, Sonjah Stanley Niaah, Julian Henriques and Kodwo Eshun, we *listen* to the full extent of the complex social parallel universes brought to life by sound practices that go from roots to dub and reggae, to grime and afrobeat. Understanding how these sound practices ground forms of resistance, organization and education is what informs our epistemological stance in terms of conceptions of time, knowledge production, space, history and body that are able to transcend and parasite the Western metaphysical dogma of modernity.

According to this approach, the issue features a multi-faceted composition concerning the style of contributions, including essays from leading and upcoming scholars, as well as dialogues, interviews and hyperlinks to audio and video materials, in order to allow and give value to the participation of all practitioners beyond the limits of mere academic writing. As with the Sound System Outernational #5 (SSO#5) event—"Sounds in the City: Street Technology and Public Space", the overarching intention is to acknowledge the way academic research can interact with local and global grassroots music movements in a transformative way, establishing connections, nurturing skills, promoting mutual recognition—in other words: amplifying the street culture of sound systems bottom-up until the output peaks into red.

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Depending on one's location, listening to an echo is qualitatively different. The metaphor of the echo will provide one navigation tool to engage with this special issue.

"Sounds in the City: Street Technology and Public Space" was born out of a particular set of echoes. The first echo was informed by our design of the event in Naples. The intention was that of amplifying the value of a local scene—Naples' sound system scene—by placing it in connection with worldwide technologies and practices for which the city's university and community centres provided an infrastructure for exchange and encounter.

The second echo, the event itself—meant to extend the already existing network of researchers, sound practitioners and activists—went way beyond

our expectations. Perfecting an already established format, that would intertwine academic, sound practice and performance communities in the hope of stimulating synergies and collaborations, SSO#5 brought together 38 speakers from more than ten different countries, alongside 12 artists who performed during three music sessions, some of which shared their skills in two workshops. We also hosted two important premieres: the first time that veteran soundmen and soundwomen who made the Italian sound system history lectured in a university, and a commissioned photo exhibition on the country's sound system culture. Talks reached as many as 200 participants, with people crowding the floors, while the music nights held in the city's squats reached as many as 800 participants, as with the closing dancehall session held on Saturday night, showing the non-Italian guests the levels of self-organization that are made possible by the Naples social movement, the same to have fostered the birth of the local sound system scene.

As the map indicates (Figure 1), the outernational dimension of this event—involving sound systems, research institutions, educators, activist organizations and artists from four continents—was made possible through a deep focus on locality, in terms of skills, professionalities, locations, communities and grassroot politics.

Figure 1: Map of the participants to Sound System Outernational #5 in Naples, Italy. Downloadable at https://maphub.net/oana41/SSO.

We heavily relied on local professionals and groups to brand our event, film it, curate its exhibitions and conceive of its performance nights. The proximity generated by this gathering would not have been possible without the collaboration of local researchers, bar managers, photographers, film makers, activists, sound crews and journalists. We believe that any Sound System Outernational event is meant to intensify the value of an already existing scene, while strengthening connections and collaborations that can stimulate new ways of thinking, doing and feeling. This intention is expressed in the way we share resources and focus our organizational budget and attention on local professionals, venues and needs.

The third echo that this collection is the result of is the now. Almost a year later, as we write this introduction, epidemic global lockdown is still unfolding and we are weaving together a series of academic, poetic and musical traces of the entanglements that occurred in Naples.

What these interventions say to us now resonates in different ways. In fact, a year into the new epidemic organization of many of the societies we inhabit, our attention peaks around discussions about lockdown, noise reduction, imminent or past rebellions, technologies of recovery and global citizenship. As music often does, the thoughts contained in "Sounds in the City", first shared at the SSO #5 event in Naples 2019, were often punctuated by premonitory insights with regards to forms of survival that many interrogate themselves about after 2020.

The works collected in this special issue are innovative for the different ways in which they capture the complexity of the process of "thinking through sound". Research pieces are accompanied by poetic interventions, interviews and dub essays from sound systems worldwide, in what we attempted to animate as a space of outernational communities united in sound. We suggested the format of the dub essay as a sonic option for encountering some of the participants to the event. Thus, three young emerging sound systems—Tikur from Frosinone (Italy), U.N.I.T.Y. from Tunis (Tunisia) and Feminine Hi Fi from São Paulo (Brazil)—will punctuate this collection with stories, sounds and voices addressing their experimentation with technology and politics.

We have imagined the structure of this collection as a series of concentric waves following the metaphor of the echo, starting from a symbolic articulation of the root or source—Lee Scratch Perry's Black Ark visited by Louis Chude-Sokei—and ending with Feminine Hi Fi's dub essay on the Brazilian feminine soundscape, yet another wave originated from within the prolific sound system culture. The concentric waves of the echo will touch upon Kingston, resonating more widely with Naples, Frosinone, Mexico City, Tunis, London and, finally, São Paulo.

This special issue opens with an essay by Brian D'Aquino and Oana Pârvan entitled "Amplifying Street Knowledge through Practice-as-Research: Sound System Outernational #5 in Naples, Italy". The authors draw theoretically from the literature on sound as research method, while directly referring to the SSO#5 event called "Sounds in the City: Street Technology and Public Space" held in April 2019 in Naples. "Sounds in the City" originated this special issue, taking Naples as an example of the relevance of the sound system scene in the cities of Southern Italy, many of whom resound with Mediterranean echoes of the Caribbean. This essay employs ethnographic tools alongside the knowledges shared at the event to literally write the history of the Italian sound system culture in general and that of the Naples scene, in particular—from the first physical arrival of technological sound knowledge in Rome via Brixton in 1992 to Naples' emerging young sounds, who hosted us in their liberated spaces almost three decades later. In learning the work of amplification from the history of sound practices, SSO#5 is described as a four-stage feedback loop. The stage of the wiring—referred to the endeavour of connecting several devices in an audio chain—is the effort put into networking an international researcher community with local Neapolitan practitioners and, most importantly, the city's social movement. The stage of the reading implies the collection of information through durational closeness, physical contact, even friction. The stage of transduction—the conversion of one type of energy into another—is entrusted to the veteran soundmen and soundwomen able to *tell* the history of the sound system movement in the amphitheatres of the academy and *play* it at night in their selections through that same public's bodies. The stage of the transmission describes the unexpected plethora of outputs and new collaborations that the event brought about, including this special issue. In this way the amplification of a local scene—that of Naples—becomes an outernational intensifier of global sonic connections.

In "Return to the Echo Chamber: Race, Sound and the Future of Community", Louis Chude-Sokei departs from his seminal 1997 writing "Dr. Satan's Echo Chamber: Reggae, Technology and the Diaspora Process" and his 2007 intervention "When Echoes Return: Roots, Diaspora and Possible Africas" and builds on these reflections to theorize on the potential of technical reproduction via sound and race. Inspired by the ruins of Lee "Scratch" Perry's Black Ark studio in Kingston, the author develops his argument by departing from this symbolic root of reggae, while reflecting on the power of ruins. The root—prismatic, recursive, constantly manifested in new forms— is thus reimagined as "a metaphor" rather than "its assertion of place or truth or culture or history" while ruins—unlike walls and borders—"can be gotten into; they do not exclude", and therefore operate as an invitation to

reinvention and porosity. With the work of Edouard Glissant in mind, Chude-Sokei's return to the Black Ark isn't a return to the origin, but to the point of entanglement of race, sound and technology. This understanding of the origin allows for ways of listening to the ever-changing spectrum of "sonic Africas", from reggae to post-dub and grime, with an attention to futurity, stratification of diasporas and counter-publics. "Africans", the scholar argues, "sought and needed something else from sound: not its roots, but possibility; not ruin, but futurity". It is in this sense that contemporary resonances of sonic Africas—from afrobeat to grime—show in what way "music is premonitory: it foretells not the future, but new and emergent social formations and cultural relations, [as it] articulates not what is real but what is possible".

"Journal Entry with D'bi Young Anitafrika" is a poetic echo to Louis Chude-Sokei's writing by Christopher Oliver. The verses engage with Anitafrika's dub poetry entangling theory with poetic practice, previous sound essays and fragments of Caribbean diasporic history. Emerged from the activist experience of the Fxrum group at Goldsmiths, University of London and the use of dub as a research tool, this intervention is an experimental act of "listening at the ruins of the Black Ark".

In "'Sounding' the System: Noise, In/Security and the Politics of Citizenship", Sonjah N. Stanley Niaah develops a poignant critical discussion around the long history of legal tools employed to construct black music as noise and police it in the Caribbean, from 1688 to 1997. Sound system culture derives from a long genealogy of resistance and community building under pressure in times of enslavement, plantation economy and labour migration. Rather than a source of disorder in need of being repressed, the alleged noise of sound systems in Kingston's working-class neighbourhoods hints at a "political, cultural, moral, epistemological and ontological (metaphysical) struggle that is not yet complete, as the structures against which it struggles are 'in many ways intact' [from colony to nation]". As such, the author argues, it not only propels the collective process of *smadditizin'* (that of "becoming somebody"), but it also represents a form of cultural labour deserving of respect, a redistributive model of economy and, very importantly, a foundation for imagining a form of citizenship based on "the putting together of a new self that is the power of the communal gathering". Pushing against discrimination, lockdown politics and commodification, alongside three centuries of legal suppression, the "noises" of Kingston continuously show the world that entertainment cannot be curfewed and that it still constitutes an implacable weapon against racial, sexual, cultural and economic injustice.

The first dub essay of this issue belongs to Tikur Sound System (@tikursound). Much in echo with Chude-Sokei's description of the entanglement of diasporas through sound and with Stanley Niaah's discussion of the

system as an active constructor of citizenship (maybe a global sonic citizenship?), Tikur's sounds and voices take us all the way across the African continent to Frosinone, an Italian city not far from Rome. This is where Tikur (Amharic for "black") Sound System is based. During the last few years, this small Italian city has been witnessing the arrival of hundreds of African migrants and refugees from Lybia. Muse and Stefano, of Ethiopian and Italian origin, decided to bring together the culture of sound system and their work as cultural mediators in order to represent contemporary African diaspora in the reggae scene. Through the crowdfunding project #soundofrefugees, Tikur has been able to gather the equipment needed to spread the message out to cultural centres, public strikes and the disadvantaged ghettoes of Southern Italy, where migrants involved in the agricultural sector are forced to dwell.

With Moses Iten's essay, "The Roots of Digital Cumbia in Sound System Culture: *Sonideros*, *Villeros*, and the Transformation of Colombian Cumbia", the echoes of sound system culture take us on the Latin American shore to witness its Mexican, Colombian and Argentinian variants. Iten investigates the roots of the emerging genre of digital or electronic cumbia, whose roots, he argues, lie in the *sonidera* culture of Mexico's working-class *barrios*. Taking inspiration from Julian Henriques' theory around "sounding" and musicking as determined by sociocultural evaluation, material manipulation and corporeal monitoring, the author looks in detail at the different stages of transformation of the genre and at how a variation in tempo, rhythm, pitch, frequency and bass presence has generated the birth of one of the most popular and potent musical forms of the Americas, and the continent's first electronic dance music genre. Much like the birth of dub in the diaspora, digital cumbia emerges as an electronic reincarnation of elements of sound system culture, in resonance with the original vocation of reggae as a counterculture of unity and resistance.

In "Making Music from below in a Southern Italian Metropolis: The Neapolitan Music Scene between Commons, Latin-American Rhythms, Sound Systems and Self-Produced Festivals", Roberto Sciarelli, Sergio Sciambra, Giulia Follo and Salvatore Cosentino offer a unique practice-informed discussion of how history is written from below through music production and fruition, while building an alternative urban imagination. The essay describes self-managed spaces in general and *Scugnizzo Liberato* in Naples in particular as the emerging commons of the Italian Southern landscape. In a setting like Naples, marked by a colonial past, by contemporary austerity, plagued by touristification and the state divestment from culture (constructed as a "non-productive"—read "non-essential" post-2020—activity), a liberated community hub like *Scugnizzo Liberato* manages to catalyse the relation between democratic processes of self-government and the internal

mechanisms of cultural production, by becoming the fertile ground for both social movements and resistant sonorities of the South(s). Occupied in 2015 and still running, the space belongs to the Italian radical tradition of "social centres" as terrains of experimentation with self-rule and attempts to institutionalize experiences of direct democracy, mutualism and right to the city by nurturing its inhabitants, artists and activists beyond the diktats of the market. As an independent platform for innumerable resistant sounds—from punk to hip hop, dub, cumbia, dabka, Balkan beats, latin urban or afrotrap— "the 'rebellious alchemy' of the city of Naples continues to produce an overlapping of political and artistic heterotopies, in which social movements and subaltern struggles keep expressing themselves through the medium of music".

The second dub essay that punctuates the special issue after the echo waves emanated by the Latin American and Mediterranean shores comes from Tunis. U.N.I.T.Y. is the first Tunisian sound system. It was established in 2014 around the idea of creating a reggae dub local scene and bringing a genuine sound meeting experience to audiences in Tunisia. It has been steadily growing ever since, up until the building of its own first stack two-scoop sound system in 2018 and a second in 2019. The collective organizes regular independent dances in outdoor settings, universities, bars, farms and cultural centres, and aims to promote reggae music and to create a joyful and conscious space for sound system culture in Tunisia.

In "Feminine Frequencies: An Intergenerational Dialogue between Soundwomen" the scholar Monique Charles interviews two generations of all-women British sound systems: the legendary Nzinga Soundz (@NzingaSoundz established by Lynda Rosenior-Patten and June Reid in 1985) and CAYA sound system (established in 2016 by Thali Lotus). How do women claim space and craft their sound practice in a male-dominated arena such as that of sound systems? Nzinga Soundz and CAYA intertwine their gems around intersecting diasporas, the challenges of being a Black woman in sound and the experimentations with different genres, atmospheres and technologies. Mothers, carers, professionals and providers—sound women are often more than just devoted to the artistry of playing a sound, and that instils a deep receptivity into their way of building up space. From the intersections with Panafricanist politics in the 1970s, to the uprisings of the 1980s and the rise of pirate radios, Nzinga Soundz shares the secrets of sounds constantly inspired by the work towards justice, while CAYA describes sound as "not just the hearing", but "the experience of the touch and the vibration and everything that comes thereafter". In this unique interview two generations reflect on the feminine frequencies which engineer and open up space with sound. The landscape of women sound operators is in continuous transformation, and this

piece unearths the challenges and the uniqueness of this experience while underlining how these herstories are the foundation for the next generation of feminine sound practice.

In "Spectral Vibrations: Discovering and Recovering *Lost Bodies* through Jamaican Sound" Trishauna Stewart sets out to travel across time(s) in search of the ghost or spectres invoked by contemporary sound systems as in the performances of Spice or Popcaan. Eventually, the author is looking for (and after) the body of sound. Through a speculative collision between contemporary performances and philosophy of spectrality and processuality, Stewart describes sound as a "spectral body and the life it affords through *sontology*", which accounts for the dimension of "sound-being", of its "bodily existence", as both ghost of the future and reincarnation of the past. In the author's spectropolitical perspective, ghosts of multiple temporalities (the departure from Africa, enslavement, rebellion, diaspora) are managed via the sound system, which operates as a "tomb-like vessel belonging to *lost bodies* ... lost in death and the navigation of global pathways in migration". Against the backdrop of past and future oppression, the sound system amplifies "the haunting of the individual by and in justice of collective recovery". For Stewart, "dancehall is a space in which we *hear\here* the re-processing, re-recordings, re-enactments of Jamaican histories. The sound-life projected by the intra-spectral sound system and the *discovery and recovery* of bodies it affords, allows us to speak of dancehall music and culture *sontologically*" as the "sound system is both alive and dead".

Stewart's writing—articulated from a space of diasporic consciousness—resonates clearly with Chude-Sokei's discussion on hauntology of the ruins (via Jacques Derrida and Mark Fisher) alongside Stanley Niaah's argument on how the practice of dancehall enacts the "putting back together of self", which, like in Julian Henriques' work, is the central hub for future histories.

The third and last dub essay animating this special issue is recorded for us by Feminine Hi Fi (@femininehifi). Founded in 2016, Feminine Hi-Fi is a Brazilian project focusing on women empowerment in the sound system scene and promoting the language of reggae as an expression against gender oppression. Besides the sound system sessions, Feminine Hi-Fi also promotes activities to stimulate the learning and sharing of information (chats, workshops, documentary shows and workshops) as Feminine Hi-Fi Lab, and the recording, promotion and distribution of female reggae artists through the label Feminine Hi-Fi Tunes.

The interventions collected in this special issue clearly demonstrate the productivity of a research and practice approach inspired by sound system culture. Moreover, in the post-2020 context, these voices, sounds and grass-root organizations provide essential inspiration towards new forms of life

able to nurture the collective dimensions we (still) inhabit. It is by *listening* to the expansive potential of ruins—not only those of the Black Ark, but also those of our pre-2020 ways of living—that music is able to become the vehicle of premonitions and future genres, social formations and emancipations. Can the recursive reincarnations of "sonic Africas" empower belonging and unity across a global sonic citizenship in an age marked by renewed division, dispossession and isolation? The answer might be a sontological one. One that is able to activate a process of recovery: of history, of the self and of the body.

Reference

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