The Reggae Sound System: Sound, Space and Politics

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Abstract:

As the popularity and scope of reggae has grown in the recent decades, most studies involving the genre have produced debates relating to gender, identities, racial and politico-religious struggles, as well as simple historical accounts. However, there has been very little geographical academic analysis on the space of the sound system: the dancehall. Following post-anarchist theory on radical spaces, this dissertation puts forwards the argument that the space of the sound system session can be understood as an ‘insurrectional space’, by looking at how the dancehall is effectively produced and what it represents for the crews behind the sound systems.

Drawing on qualitative interviews with crews both from the United Kingdom and France, this paper explores how these spaces are created and how this space becomes part of a wider oppositional discourse; finding that they effectively create a temporary autonomous zone which covertly resists modernist and capitalist conceptions and relationships between the body, space and perception.
Acknowledgements

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1. Introduction: Chant Down Babylon

“Truly it is no place for the weak heart... The bass hits your chest. That’s where you hear it, rather than with your ears. They’re under assault from the treble, which is threatening to take your scalp off. Your rib cage resonates alarmingly and your trousers appear to shift around your legs as if in an effort to escape the fearsome roar that is all around. ‘Awesome’. Suddenly everything is still. After the fourth cut is run Shaka plucks the unidentified dubplate from his antiquated deck. “Give thanks and praise to His Majesty, Emperor Haile I Selassie, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Conquering Lion of Judah”... and drops the needle onto the next selection....ssshhhhtttt-pop-crackk-ssshhhtt, the run-in groove plays a symphony of surface noise before the familiar intro to the beloved ‘Kunte Kinte/Beware of your enemies’ tune... it’s all treble at first, and everyone is holding their breath anticipating the pressure once Shaka drops the bass. Twice he hauls and pulls up before letting the rhythm run for about half a minute. All the while the crowd is screaming its encouragement...'whip them Shaka!' someone cries. The tune reaches its first chorus and Shaka finally lets the weight go, BOOM! The crowd succumb to the beat and abandon their souls to rapture.... This is Jah Shaka, King of the Zulu Tribe in Session.”

Christopher Partridge (2010, 137)

This quote is the closest that comes to translating the experience of attending a sound system session. The first time I attended a real sound system dance was in 2010, at the University of Dub in London. I was already aware of the reggae sound system scene in France, as several friends had begun building their own systems and organizing small events. But this was nothing I’d ever experienced before. Similar to what the quote describes: the combination of the sheer power of the music, the dim lighting, the spiritual and militant chanting by both the records and the operators, allows one to go from simply ‘hearing’ the music, to actually ‘experiencing’ it. It therefore reaffirmed my interest in reggae and
sound system culture, which is why I chose to explore this issue as part of my dissertation. Although many people might assume there is nothing geographical about music aside from soundscapes, the fact that reggae sound systems build a physical space dedicated to feeling a music and to the discourses associated with it does call for a geographical study.

Referring to the title, in Rastafari culture “Babylon” represents the oppressive institutions which trap the individuals within a corrupt and unequal system. “Chant Down” refers to the symbolic power of reggae music that has through historical developments become the main medium through which Rasta thought is translated and spread (Bradley 2000; Kebede & Knotterus, 1998; King 2007).

Reggae music itself is played, aside from live bands, through ‘sound systems’. The sound system apparatus is a collection of speakers, record decks, amplifiers – that reproduce sounds at very powerful levels, with emphasis on the bass. However, the sound system is not only a collection of technical objects, but also consists of skilled performances of the crewmembers. Sound system culture in turn has spread from Jamaica to England and since the turn of the millennium has found great support in continental Europe, Australia and Latin America.

Through the use of qualitative interviews with several leading sound systems from France and the United Kingdom this dissertation will explore how sound systems utilize and create the space of the dancehall, and how this space is shaped by processes that bring together sound, space and politics.
2. Birth of Reggae and Sound System Culture:

Sound systems have been a feature of popular struggle, entertainment and performance since they appeared in early 1950s Jamaica (Partridge, 2010; Bradley, 2001; Henriques, 2011). Sound systems were a result of the power relations at play. They were the main source of entertainment in Kingston’s inner city, and as those areas had little access to radio or record players, were often the only opportunity for people to hear recorded music (Bradley, 2001; 2002). Thus from their inception, sound systems had a crucial political and societal role, creating a democratic space outside of normal “state-people” power relations.

However, much of the academic study on sound system culture has tended to focus on the more modern ‘Dancehall’ reggae genre, especially regarding performance (such as Henriques, 2011; Stolzoff, 2000; Stanley-Niaah, 2004; Zips, 2011). This has caused the space of the dancehall (where people dance) to be associated with ‘dancehall’ (the sub-genre of reggae). In this dissertation, the use of “dancehall” will refer to the former, unless stated otherwise.

In terms of geographical literature, many works relating to sound systems, music and spatial politics have either focused on the rave culture and alternative politics (such as: Riley, Griffin & Morey, 2010; Gibson, 2006; Gibson, 1998; Ingham, Purvis & Clarke, 1999; Halfacree & Kitchin, 1996; Partridge, 2007; Bey, 1991), or have studied reggae and dub’s links with soundscapes, discourse and identity (such as: Veal, 2007; Baker, 2009; Chude-Sokei, 1994; Gilroy, 2005; Gilroy, 1993; Hebdige, 1987). Although some do provide a
geographical perspective of the reggae-dub sound system (such as: Henriques 2003, 2011; Partridge 2010) all of these have taken an Afro-Caribbean focus.

However, this study will explore what the reggae-dub sound system means to and how it is recreated by what I will refer to as the 3rd generation of sound systems: groups who despite having no physical links with Jamaica or Black culture, nor having experienced particularly harsh economic, racial or political inequalities, have assimilated and now promote reggae sound system culture.

Cruse (2010), Bradley (2001) and Partridge (2010) observe that reggae, like many musical genres, is a result of geographical interactions. Its roots lie in the era of slavery, where a vast number of slaves from Africa were brought to the West Indies, and therefore brought with them cultural artifacts, notably music. The genre itself is a result of Jamaican musical experimentations and innovations (Bradley, 2001). These evolutions were in many ways linked to the political, economic and social changes that Jamaica faced in the twentieth century.

In addition, as Bradley (2001) and Partridge (2010) describe, the advent of Rastafarianism injected reggae with political, conscious and spiritual layers. The Rasta movement had grown considerably since its inception in the slums of Kingston, Jamaica during the 1930s; as it promoted equality, independence justice, black pride and spirituality within inner city areas that were surrounded by poverty, inequalities and a loss of identity (Bradley 2001; Simpson, 1985). As Chad Spiker (1998) explains, Rastafarianism is a religion based on social change – and reggae has become the means of spreading this belief. This linkage between belief and music stems from the Rasta philosophy “that word-sound is
power” (Niaah, 2005), where ‘dread talk’ or the modification of Jamaican slang used by rastas “express their heightened consciousness and profound awareness of the true nature and power of the spoken word” (Savishinsky, 1994, 21). Consequently, through the Rasta movement, the tradition of popular resistance became integral to reggae (Campbell, 1980; King, 2007). Furthermore, both Partridge (2010) and Fair (2005) have shown that the Rastafarian concept of “Babylon” later transcended “not only Rasta culture and black culture per se, but went on to heavily influence punk, post-punk and even cyberpunk-influenced countercultural thought” (Partridge, 2010: 39).

As mentioned previously, according to Henriches (2011), Partridge (2010), Bradley (2001) and Gilroy (1993), the sound systems became important social and cultural institutions. Aside from allowing a democratic medium for music, they were a constantly evolving apparatus. As Bradley (2001) remarks, it is precisely the close link between the sound system and the public that allowed Jamaican music to develop as it did. They became the medium through which reggae music and subsequently Rasta thought was understood.

But sound system culture was not limited to Jamaica. The subsequent spread of reggae sound system culture to the United Kingdom was a result of waves of immigration from the West Indies in the 50s and 60s (Bradley, 2001; Partridge, 2010; Sabelli, 2011). Partridge (2010), Sabelli (2011) and Gilroy (1991) argue that faced upon arrival with racism, exclusion and poverty, many Jamaicans clustered in the sound system dances – also called ‘blues nights’. These would allow a familiar environment, “a safety valve, sometimes a sanctuary, for the frustrations to be aired, discussed, or left behind” (Partridge, 2010, 121).
Similarly, they point out that racism and poverty in England replicated the trends in Jamaica, and within this second Babylon, “many increasingly identified with the religio-politics of Rastafarianism and with the sense of racial pride this engendered” (Partridge, 2010, 116). But these alternative spaces also left segregations behind and brought in many white people, who felt attracted to the anti-establishment message as well as to the music (Sabelli, 2011; Bradley, 2001; Partridge, 2010). As Partridge (2010) explains the white subculture perception of black music was that of an authentic counterculture. It is for this reason that reggae and dub had such a profound impact on punk and post-punk.

Nevertheless as a result of these trends and due to its popularity among the white population, during the 1970s and 1980s many reggae-dub bands and sound systems emerged operated only by young white operators, who were attracted to this message and music. Since the 1980s and 1990s, reggae spread to Europe and several commentators have observed France and Italy as becoming new hubs for dub sound system culture (Partridge, 2010; Traini, 2005) despite little direct relationship with Jamaica itself. Many crews in these countries have even adopted reggae and sound system culture’s medium and adapted its politics to fit their own local struggles (Traini, 2005).
3. Space, Sound and Politics

Therefore the reggae sound system offers a link between space and politics. As observed by Partridge (2010), for the black population of London in the 80s, the all night entertainment of the blues party represented “a suspension of the ordered time and space associated with wage labor and the dominant culture” (2010,114). Sabelli (2011, 140) expands on this, arguing that the dancehall creates a space “where one could be free and express oneself without a stage separating the performer from the audience”. To understand how this comes about it is helpful to look at Lefebvre’s understanding of “lived space”, where to construct space, one must not merely enjoy a vision or a spectacle, but act and situate oneself as an active participant (Chen, 2005; Elden, 1998).

However, within this space, sound plays a crucial role. Henriques (2011) provides an in-depth study of the relationship between sound, space and performance. Despite his focus being on the dancehall genre, much of his technical analysis is very helpful for this dissertation. Henriques (2003; 2011) puts forwards the notion of “sonic dominance”, which occurs “when and where the sonic medium displaces the usual or normal dominance of the visual medium” (2003, 452). According to him, the sound system’s emphasis on bass and sheer power of sound – the sonic dominance – allows it to create “its own particular state of being and its own particular logic and distinct form of rationality” (Henriques, 2003, 470).
This echoes many geographical studies on the Rave scene of the 1980s and 1990s. The works of Ingham, Purvis and Clarke (1999) have focused on the Blackburn rave scene, and how these allowed a heterotopic reappropriation of abandoned industrial spaces. Gibson (1999) similarly studied the rave culture in Sydney following Maffesoli’s concept of ‘lived space’ and ‘neo-tribes’, in the same way that Halfacree & Kitchin (1996) analyzed the production of regional identities through the ‘Madchester’ sound of the 1980s. According to Henriques (2011), much of this capacity stems from the fact that within sonic dominance, unlike when one listens to music from an iPod, it is the whole body that is immersed within sound. Through the amplified vibrations of the bass, the sound becomes physical (Partridge, 2010; Henriques, 2011).

For this reason one needs to break away from a visual representation of place. Instead, as Ingham, Purvis and Clarke (1999) argue, a focus on the sensory appreciation of place and environment has the capacity to create new spaces, or to change the function of existing spaces. It reveals the extent to which places are by varying degree discontinuous, dynamic and heterotopic. Much of the theory can be understood through the works of Merleau-Ponty (1945), whose study on phenomenology puts the ‘being’ at the centre of perception.

One theoretical framework that is useful in understanding this linkage between space, performance and politics is that of anarchism, and especially the more recent approach of postanarchism. As Saul Newman reminds us, anarchism is more than simply the anarchic disruption of space: “anarchic thought and politics suggest an alternative construction of space” (2011, 345)
It is not that I claim reggae sound systems and their members are pushing an anarchist philosophy or are in any way associated with it. However, I will argue that the anarchist thought on space and politics from the likes of Bey (1991), Vaneigem (1973) and more recently Newman (2010a; 2010b; 2011) allows a framework through which to understand how space, performance and politics interact within the sound system session.

The concept one would most likely compare the reggae sound system to would be that of the ‘carnival’, as noted by Hakim Bey (1991) and Veneigem (1967). The “Carnival” celebrates:

“temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and established order; it marks a suspension of all hierarchical ranks, privileges, norms and prohibitions” (Grindon, 2004, 148).

Central to the notion of ‘carnival’ is a “suspension of the division and separation in social life, particularly in the often high realm of aesthetics”, where joy and desire “allow moments of utopia to occur here and now” (Grindon, 2004, 149). Bey expands on this by arguing that the carnival should thus be used not simply as a ‘safety valve’, but should also allow for the creation of temporary spaces that step outside capital to embody anarchist social relationships: the Temporary Autonomous Zones [TAZ]. Many works on rave culture have noticed the inherent aspects of autonomy and politics that are linked to sound and space. Hakim Bey’s work on the “Temporary Autonomous Zones” (1991) has in many ways initiated the geographical focus on the rave and carnival culture. One has to understand the TAZ as:

“an uprising which does not engage directly with the state, a guerrilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and
then dissolves to reform elsewhere, else-when, before the state can crush it.”

This emphasis on the uprising stems from its temporary nature where:

“the vision comes to life in the moment of uprising – but as soon as the revolution triumphs and the state returns, the dream and the ideal are already betrayed.”

The instalment of sovereign states led to a closure of physical maps and as a consequence one should not focus on a permanent revolutionary zone, but on temporary power surges within geographical, social, cultural or imaginational spaces. As such the TAZ’s natural anthropology is not the family but the paleolithic model of the band, which is “open, part of a horizontal pattern of customs, contract and alliance, spiritual affinities” (Bey, 1991).

Furthermore, in the same way that Stephen Pearl Andrew used the metaphor of the dinner party to represent Anarchist society, Bey sees the TAZ as a festival, as “participants in insurrection invariably note its festive aspects”. It therefore considers central the place of music as a revolutionary social force and the desire to “keep on the move and live intensely”. In addition, those within the TAZ counter the trend of modern society’s speed and commodity fetishism that “blurs all cultural diversity and individuality” through psychic nomadism. This concept, built on Deleuze & Guattari’s work (1986) argues that individuals can take elements from different systems, “from philosophy to tribal myth, from natural science to Taoism” (Bey, 1991) to construct their own individuality.

Newman (2011) further explores the qualities of what he refers to as postanarchist thought within radical space imaginaries. In a similar way to Bey,
he argues that we should think of revolution not in terms of an “all-encompassing event that emancipates us all from oppression” (2011, 350-1), as this inherently relies on seizing state power, and thus falling into the risk of reifying oppression. Moreover, as Max Stirner (1995) argued, revolution is aimed at new arrangements; whereas insurrection allows a moment when we do not let ourselves be arranged, but arrange ourselves.

As such, Newman rather sees revolution in terms “of a multiplicity of insurrectional spaces”, shaped by the idea of autonomy, which emphasize “fostering alternative ways of life, new relations and intensities” (2011, 353). Many academics have linked the TAZ to rave culture as these provide a temporary space for more hedonistic, heterotopic values and roles to be played out, and often, as Ingham, Purvis & Clarke (1999) point out, causing the priorities and values of partygoers to conflict with the prevailing values of mainstream society. Furthermore, Riley, Griffin & Morey (2010) build on Maffesoli’s notion of “neo-tribalism” to point out that the rave culture was in effect a resistance to the political context of neo-liberalism and alienation from traditional politics through aloofness and play, rather than direct challenge.

However, although Partridge (2010) and Henriques (2011) touch upon these ideas, little geographical work has linked these concepts to reggae sound systems. It is important to note that as reggae sound systems influenced in part how the rave culture of the United Kingdom developed, many of the notions discussed concerning raves can enhance our understanding of how the space of the reggae sound system is used.
4. Methodology:

The methodology used in this dissertation has been purely qualitative. As Braun & Clarke explain, qualitative research “seeks to understand and interpret more local meanings, recognizes the data as gathered in a context”, and more importantly allows “detailed and complex accounts from each participant” (2013).

Sound, according to Ingham, Purvis & Clarke “has the capacity for setting moods, stimulating memories and influencing emotional responses [...]”. Overlapping sound events depart from neat pattern of categorization and meaning” (1999, 285). For this very reason, only qualitative methods can be used in order to see the influence of sound on different individuals. In a similar way, interactions with space and place cannot be reduced to numbers and different meanings are ascribed to different places. As Henriques (2011) describes, the qualities of a session are appreciated in terms of its “vibes”, the ambiance, atmosphere and feeling generated within and between the embodied presence of the crowd.

Consequently, “it is our own subjectivity as with a sound event itself, that needs to be recognized and appreciated – rather than sacrificed to the altar of objective science” (Henriques, 2011, xix). Therefore in order to explore any of these themes, one needs to go further than simply aggregating numbers, and instead focus on how people experience and live them.
As the focus of this dissertation has evolved over time, so has the research design. Exploring the geographical shift of sound system culture from Jamaica, to England, and then to continental Europe was much too broad and time constraints made this study impossible. Even a simple comparative study between France and the United Kingdom could not be achieved within the ascribed deadlines. Thus I decided to limit the study to the general ‘space’ of the sound system session – that is, where the event happens, and explore how those involved create this space and what this new space means to them.

In order to study how these actors build their space, eight qualitative interviews were carried out. Similarly to Howard Becker in his 1963 study on Jazz musicians and deviance, I also gathered material through participant observation as well as informal conversations with people active in the sound system scene or attendees to sound system sessions.

The sample group of interviewees was found mainly through the “snowball” sampling strategy, in which people relevant to the research question propose other participants who also have experience and characteristics relevant to the research question (Bryman, 2008, 424). Personal experience of the French sound system scene allowed me to approach the actors relatively easily. After initial enquiries with friends, I made contact with the desired respondent through email. I was thus able to interview four sound systems from France, and four sound systems from the United Kingdom.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format, which allowed issues and topics that I had not anticipated to be raised. In addition, this approach
generates more informal discussion which encourages the interviewees to speak more openly.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewees:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benoit [After All Sound System]</td>
<td>13 – 06 – 2013</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lion Roots Sound System</td>
<td>20 – 06 - 2013</td>
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<td>OBF Sound System</td>
<td>21 – 06 – 2013</td>
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<td>Albah [Welders HiFi]</td>
<td>18 – 07 - 2013</td>
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<td>Earl Gateshead</td>
<td>03 – 10 – 2013</td>
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<td>Tom [Mungo’s HiFi]</td>
<td>12 – 11 – 2013</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wayne [Argonauts Sound]</td>
<td>07 – 01 - 2014</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jerome [Mungo’s HiFi/Bass Alliance Sound System]</td>
<td>04 – 02 – 2014</td>
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The interviews were carried out at sound system sessions (OBF, Lion Roots, Earl Gateshead), or in more informal meetings such as at the interviewee’s residence (After All, Welders HiFi), at the sound system’s studio (Mungo’s HiFi, Bass Alliance Sound System), and in a café (Argonauts Sound). In all cases except OBF, the interview was a one on one session between the interviewee and I. In the case of OBF, both the sound system operator and the selector were present, as well as an MC (Shanti D). This allowed a conversation between them to expand several of my questions.

All the interviews were audio recorded, and transcribed. Those in French were subsequently translated into English.
5. How do sound systems set up the dance

One cannot reduce a sound system session to a collection of technical objects onto which a group of people play music. As Henriques observed in his study of Stone Love sound system, one of the main elements of a sound system is “the skilled techniques for playing these instruments. The crew’s performance techniques embody a particular way of knowing, or techné” (2011, xxii).

This requires an understanding of the space and of the participants that is both technical and sensory. Thus the preparation of the session is vital, as it is first and foremost a performance. The following sections will therefore present how the sound system is set up and organised within the space of the dancehall, before focusing on the different aesthetic considerations that ultimately help create what is referred to as ‘the vibe’.

5.1 String up a sound:

The sound system session is not restricted to the moment the music is playing. The crews and operators first must set up the system and organize the space of the dance which requires both technical knowledge as well as sensory appreciation.
Therefore much of the organization of the event – from flyers, booking, and organizing drinks – is handled by the crew. As a result, the sessions very often appear ‘informal’ in comparison to standard nightclubs and concerts, with friends or acquaintances taking up the role of doormen, boxlifters, and any other roles. Wayne as well as Albah, Benoit and Lion Roots pointed out that this organizational trait stems from the fact that the main drive for sound systems is pleasure. Many crews who run sound systems do not live from their sessions or music, rather they continue through passion. For the crews who do live from their events and music – such as Mungo’s Hifi and OBF – this aspect is still present. Therefore crews do not separate themselves from the ‘public’, but communicate with them and very often involve them, allowing an exchange.

Nevertheless when organizing a session from a purely technical aspect the size of a sound system warrants crews to adapt to the space they are in. As reggae and dub rely on bass, the size of the bass speaker – the scoop - reflects its importance in that most of the sound system’s power goes into feeding the bass speakers (figure 1). The reason for this, as Christopher Partridge (2010. 154) explains, is that powerful bass requires moving lots of air, and sound systems are interested in ‘feeling’ bass. Bigger scoops will mean that one will be able to feel more bass via the movement of air, which in turn requires more power.
Consequently, the fact that sound systems play music at levels perceived as high compared to ‘normal’ levels cause many traditional venues to turn down these events. All the sound systems I interviewed agreed that this was one of the main challenges:

“When you are looking for a place, even if it’s for a reggae sound system, and you announce ‘sound system’, ‘speakers’, ‘turntables’, people automatically think of ‘rave’, ‘not good’, ‘noise’” (Benoit, pers comm – 13-06-13)

“They [traditional venues] don’t want you, it’s too loud. If you have a sound system you’re banned from three quarters of the venues” (OBF, pers comm – 21-06-12)

However, *perceived* is the key word here. Jerome explained that in many sessions the higher frequencies, which can be dangerous, are in fact very often
below the levels defined as acceptable. What changes is the level of bass, how much the music is felt. As he explained, often they “appear to be above the limits for health and safety, whereas in fact we are well beneath them as the dangerous frequencies are lowered” (Jerome, pers comm – 04-02-14)

As such, sound systems constantly have to negotiate this tension between their perceived status as a ‘problem’ and their actual performances when deciding on a location. Therefore one of the main challenges in the technical organization of the dance is to find a space that will accommodate them, and crews have to work around these spatial and societal considerations.

Nevertheless, although space itself dictates in some ways how the system will operate, there are technical aspects of the organization that remain constant. Traditional live concerts as well as most outdoor music events will have the performer(s) on a stage or in a booth with the crowd opposite them, and the speakers in most cases play outwards towards the crowd (figure 2), resulting in a clear separation.
Robert Kronenburg (2012) provides a study of the variety of spatial arrangements within venues for popular music, from adopted space, dedicated spaces as well as mobile spaces. However these spaces, despite changing designs, all reify this separation between crowd and performers, especially concerning sound: the sound heard by the crowd is different from that heard by the artists – creating two distinct spaces and two distinct relationships with the music.

In contrast, most sound system-run nights have the control tower and crews at ground level, not on stages as with live concerts. In addition, there is no or little separate feedback for the crew – all those involved in the space of the dance, both the crew and the audience, hear the sound through the same mediums.
Albah explained:

“Once you've found a place, the aim is to play facing your system. There is no feedback, the system is your feedback [...] It's quite hard to get people to understand that when you play in venues [...] they do proper concerts, which is a European way of consuming music. We do sound system, which is originally a Jamaican way of consuming music [...] So we put our system at the other end of the room, so it hits in the opposite way that they are used to hear” (Albah, pers comm – 18-07-13)

This creates an inclusive space: where there is no or very little separation between the performers and the audience (Plate 2). Both are at the same level, and hear the same music via the same medium (figure 3 & 4)
Figure 3: General Sound system 1 stack set-up

Figure 4: General Sound System 2 stack Set-up
Some slight differences in the placing of the system are due to the way each crew will play. Crews that use two turntables to mix songs together will have a different sound system layout to those who only use one turntable. The main reason behind this is that a stack of speakers in front of the DJs causes a delay.

For this reason, crews such as Mungo’s HiFi tend to slightly modify the layout (figure 5).

Figure 5: Alternative 2 Stack set-up

It has to be mentioned that today some venues, especially nightclubs, do attempt to use this particular layout. However they remain different from the reggae sound system’s adaptive capability. Speakers in nightclubs are fixed, or mainly operate in one space. The reggae sound system on the other hand is mobile, and can be used both inside and outside. It is especially outside that this difference is highlighted. Most outdoor events or festival, even raves, will go back to the ‘traditional’ concert set-up. The sound system instead, adapts its set-
up to each space it uses in order to maintain its particular, inclusive sound-space.

In addition, the methods used to adjust the sound system are very different from more traditional concerts:

“The big touring companies who put up sound systems for gigs they will equalize their system – they will align it perfectly [...] all the frequencies will be at the same volume. That's why it sounds sort of... horrible. The bass will be as the same level as the tops. [...] That's where in reggae there's tweaking to be done. A reggae sound system isn't flat. It's going to be quite heavy on the bass and tops. [...] With the system we have, I could make it completely flat, but it wouldn't sound like reggae, it would sound like a concert venue.” (Jerome, pers comm – 04-02-14)

The tuning also evolves during the course of the session:

“What music you play will give you indications on how to set up your sound. Even within a session, between the warm up and the end, I will often change the settings. If Tom does a Roots and Ska Selection with 7", I'm going to boost the bass and the tops, because the original sound of the record is not the same.” (Jerome, pers comm – 04-02-14)

Therefore the sound system is not adjusted mechanically, but through a way of working that Henriques describes as “a refining and distilling process, whereby the output of a component is shaped and adjusted until it achieved the desired characteristics” (2011, 71). In essence the tuning is sensory, and depends on a crew's preference. In this sense, as Henriques (2011, 72) points out, “the ownership of a Sound [system] is indeed the ownership of a particular sound” [emphasis his]
5.2 Aesthetic considerations:

**Lighting:**

Following the technical factors are those of aesthetics, which are equally important - especially in their roles in building up the vibes. This is a feature that further differentiates the sound system session from traditional events. Many DJs and Bands will rely on light shows, pyrotechnics, laser effects to emphasize the music or to create 'a good show'. Sound systems on the other hand promote a much darker environment, with very little visual stimulation.

There are two reasons for this emphasis on darkness during sound system sessions. The first stems from the idea that one attends a sound system session for the music, or as Earl Gateshead described: "it's supposed to be about yourself. It's a meditation". Therefore the sessions will tend to have very little visual standpoints – in many cases the only source of light comes from the control tower and over the turntables, or in the more Rasta sessions, a picture of Haile Sellasie will be the sole illuminated object. Consequently, this allows the dances to become individualistic.

Following this idea, the second reason was explained by Albah:

"People don’t look at each other so much, so they’re not embarrassed to go there or to be all alone, because in any case you’re in the darkness.”
(Albah, pers comm – 18-07-13)

Thus darkness promotes individualism, albeit in a cohesive way. It allows people to focus on themselves ans not be disturbed by others, which “creates something special” according to Albah. As several people with whom I talked to at sessions explained: what they enjoy about these nights is that one can be
oneself – there are no entry requirements or dress codes. One can dance however one likes because people are here for the music. Or to quote many of the flyers for sound system events: “All Tribes Welcome”.

**Bass:**

However the key aesthetic element of a sound system is sound; sound that is played at levels that go against what would be felt as normal. This leads to what Julian Henriques (2003; 2011) refers to as ‘sonic dominance’.

The reggae sound system focuses on the lower frequencies, of bass and sub bass. As mentioned previously, the size of the bass scoops reflects the importance awarded to lower frequencies. These low frequencies, played at high levels, result in one being able to feel the sound. Whereas sensory deprivation tends to cause hallucinations and out of body experiences, sensory overload on the contrary tends to cause grounding into body experiences (Henriques, 2003. 458)

This feeling is actively looked for, and sound systems crews will organize the dance in such a way as to enhance this experience. As Earl Gateshead recalls:

> “We’d tape up the windows with drapes to get it as black as we could, so that you could only feel the sound. So your concentration wasn’t directed away from the sound in any way.” (Earl Gateshead, pers comm – 03-10-13)

Indeed, if one’s other senses are ‘obliterated’ by the physicality of sound, the time spent within this space is entirely dedicated to feeling the music. Thus it is this aspect that has been linked by many to semi-religious experiences, or at the very least a cathartic one; where for the time of the dance, all worries vanish;
and for several hours, there is only music. Both bass and lighting complement each other and allow an immersive experience.

Furthermore, the sensory appreciation of bass creates an inside and an outside. Obscuring the other senses and placing the focus on the vibration that the music produces results in a phenomenological understanding of space. In effect, “sonic dominance helps to generate a specific particular sense of place rather than a general abstract idea of space” (Henriques, 2003, 459). As such, this sonic space is opposed to the post-modern ‘non-places’ presented by Marc Auge – such as airports, shopping malls - which are “made of images”, abstract, and “are there to be passed through” (1995, 104). Instead, sonic space is “specific, particular, and fully impregnated with the living tradition of the moment” (Henriques, 2003, 459).

5.3 Building the vibes:

“It’s true that people increasingly enjoy getting together at reggae nights, but why? Because there is a good atmosphere, good vibes. There aren’t any troubles, people aren’t off their heads. They are here for the music, that’s what prevails. People come for the vibes.” (OBF, pers comm – 21-06-13)

The vibe is a concept that is difficult to explain. Bryan Rill in his study on Electronic Dance Music Culture, a movement that emerged out of Rave Culture,
describes the “Vibe” as “an overwhelming wave of positive energy” that “dissolves the selves of all participants into one collective mind, all experiencing the same sensations at peak moments of the night” (2006, 649). While this does cover one aspect of the ‘vibes’, it misses perhaps the most important part – that the ‘vibe’ is a process built through the interactions of the different actors within the space of the dance.

I would argue that the vibe is the energy or the atmosphere emanating from the interaction between music, people and performance within a particular place, and whose absence very often causes nights to be considered as failures.

One has to remember the sound system is not simply an assemblage of mechanical features. It has to be considered as a band, which results from the interactions between the mechanical aspects (speakers, turntables, records…) and the human aspects (performance of the crew, interaction with the crowd…). The vibes result from the combination of the technical and aesthetic aspects previously discussed, as well as the interaction between the crew and crowd. The space of the dance and the vibes are not created solely by those who run the sound system. They are also created by the crowd, through participation. Consequently building the vibe is a process, constantly being renegotiated (Figure 4): “The sound system, the DJs, the MCs will be feeding off the energy from the crowd, and different crowds have different energies, so you have to be reading that” (Tom, pers comm – 12-11-13)
Most important is the vocal interaction through the MC or singers. This allows a direct bridge between the crowd and crew. The MC’s role consists of singing, presenting the songs, informing the crowd about future sessions or current events. The MC often represents the spokesman for the sound system and the message that it extends. Rastafarian crews will put forwards a very spiritual and conscious message, while others may emphasize a more light-hearted message of fun. In addition, the MC’s performance is crucial in “hyping up” the crowd – engaging in a call and response style conversion:

(Sound system are) “vocal led. There’s by and large somebody on the mic for almost the entire session as opposed to a nightclub where you might get a DJ who doesn’t speak for the whole set. It’s very involving [...] The
participation of the crowd is a big thing, much bigger than in any other forms of music” (Earl Gateshead, pers comm – 03-10-13)

The MC’s role is thus to get people to join in, to get excited:

“the vibes that get created in the dance [...] depend a lot on the music you play but also, especially for beginners, on what you are going to say to get them to come into the dance” (Albah, pers comm – 18-07-13)

On another level, the vibes can be picked up through the performance of the crewmembers. Although the crews are not on stage and at the view of all, their performance remains an important part of the session, enhanced by the minimal separation between them and the crowd. For example, Wayne noted that one thing he thought “really gets the energy going is when people see more than one person picking the music”, as this creates a friendly “challenge to the next person [...] and people can see that and you can get the energy building up from that” (pers comm – 07-01-14)

At a more basic level is the music. The selection of the songs is rarely planned. The selection develops according to how the crews read the energy of the crowd. Albah pointed out that

“to build up your dance, you get people to get into the vibe by maybe playing a tune they will know, something a bit more mainstream [...] and once they are in the dance you can play some more obscure things”. (Albah, pers comm – 18-07-13)

The choice of which songs to play depend on the crowd’s reactions, which is why OBF, Albah and Lion Roots all told me they will never play the same set twice. Even if they have an idea of what songs they want to play, “it depends on how the crowds react to each tune” (Lion Roots, pers comm – 20-06-13).
Therefore even the sound produced is a result of the interaction between both actors.

Finally the space where the dancehall is held can also come into play. When asked if playing in places such as conventional nightclubs or venues changed anything, OBF pointed out that:

“Rico: you can be in a hype club but still manage to bring your own vibe. Shanti D: As long as you can set up your own sound system, you’re good [...] Dub changes the space.

Alexandre: It’s a bit as if you create your own space?

Guillaume: Exactly, it creates an energy, our own energy.
Rico: We create a bubble within the bubble.” (OBF, pers comm – 21-06-13)

Despite the ability of the sound system to ‘change’ the space as OBF mentioned, the surrounding environment of the dance affects how it will develop, but any development is always within the relationship between the other levels. The space helps the crowd to feel a certain way, which will then influence how the crew plays as well as the exchange that can build up the vibe.
6. The Politics of the Reggae Sound System:

If History IS Time, as it claims to be, then the uprising is a moment that springs up and out of Time, violates the law of History. If the State IS History, as it claims to be, then the insurrection is the forbidden moment, an unforgivable denial of the dialectic." (Hakim Bey, 1991)

As Lefebvre pointed out, space is always political, and the reggae sound system’s history shows it has been closely linked to the Rastafarian method of resistance through word-sound power: promoting a new philosophy through the medium of the dancehall. But the question is whether modern sound systems, many of whom do not necessarily adhere to the Rasta faith, have kept an oppositional discourse, and if so, what does it resist?

The “Carnivalesque” concept was as such used in the 90s to describe the Rave and Free party movements – where the (often illegal) occupation of derelict or empty spaces by partygoers and music created:

“a sense of excitement and collective involvement in changing urban spaces, and thus challenging existing urban structures and mores permeated the entire course of the event" (Ingham et al. 1999, 294).

Raves and free parties furthermore appeared as having an important ‘sensory’ aspect to them mainly due to the importance of drugs within the scene, such as Psychodelics, Ecstasy or MDMA:

“It was the temporary and transgressive nature of the warehouse parties that made them special, feelings amplified by the illegal use of the premises and consumption of drugs” (Ingham et al. 1999, 293)

However, I would argue that the rave scene faltered and was subsequently outlawed by the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act because they relied
too heavily on external, ‘overt’ resistance and opposition. As Bey argued, the Temporary Autonomous Zone “does not engage directly with the state”, as this allows the state to pinpoint the movement and silence it. From then on, raves developed into a more ‘mainstream’ form, leading to huge festival events which attempted to encapsulate this early euphoria – however what made the early raves special was lost: resistance and opposition to established societal norms.

The reggae sessions on the other hand offer a more subtle resistance and search for autonomy by “not engaging directly with the state”. The autonomy, similarly to the raves, is achieved through DIY practices and goes against capitalist exchanges and behavior. But furthermore, there is a more subtle resistance to modernity and consumerism by using the individual body as the centre of resistance. This is achieved through the heavy reliance on the sensory modality of sound. In this sense, reggae sound system sessions offer a temporary space where the ordinary modernist reliance on the visual and the rational is abandoned in favour of the sensory.
6.1: (In)direct resistance

A key part of how Hakim Bey’s Temporary Autonomous Zones will be able to survive comes from the fact that they do not engage directly with the state. As I have mentioned, I believe this is one of the main reasons for which the early raves were outlawed, forcing them to become “appropriated by a new brand of corporate clubbing” (Ingham et al. 1999, 298). As Ingham, Purvis and Clark point out:

“Indeed, house music has been commercially appropriated and its transgressive potential diluted to such an extent that, by 1996, it formed part of a British Tourist Authority campaign to target the youth market […]” (1999, 299)

The reggae sound system is clearly nowhere as openly subversive as the early raves were. The main difference, as Benoit and Albah explained, concerns the message:

“The techno message was understood. Essentially it was “the state can fuck off”, we can organize our nights without help from anyone. And the reggae nights were the same in the end, but with a different history and a different message. The politics of reggae nights were much more centred on real things, real fights, everyday life, cultural and social. The techno scene was a lot more utopic.” (Benoit, pers comm – 13-06-13)

“We [reggae sound systems] are still a bit more respectful of the law. Because we don’t want to get our sound system confiscated. Even if we do things that are on the limits of legality” (Albah, pers comm – 18-07-13)

Nevertheless, this, I would argue, is the key to the reggae sound system’s resilience and its increasing popularity. The “resistance" or the politics of reggae sound systems are much more subtle than those of the early raves. The politics
are put forth through the music and the MCs, through the ‘word-sound power’, and the sensory perceptions are reliant not so much on chemically altered minds but on the quality and intensity of sound.

6.2 DIY: the “home-made” sound system as identity:

What differentiates reggae sound system speakers from other speakers is that they are very often home-made. Although this may seem trivial or an example of technological fetishism, the difference is key in understanding how the crews approach sound and their own identity as a collective, as a ‘band’.

Historically, sound systems emerged from engineers experimenting with their sound equipment (Bradley, 2000), attempting to achieve new levels and frequencies of sound. Consequently, the sound system emerged through the ‘improvised’ use of equipment. As Stone Love sound system’s engineer explained: “we abuse things in Jamaica, we abuse musical equipment, what the man makes the things to do, we ahead of it” (quoted in Henriques, 2003, 458).

This practice has remained, as for the most part, reggae sound systems continue to build at least part of their equipment – be it speakers, amplifiers or effects. This stage is crucial for many, especially for crews who have originally very little engineering knowledge:

“the fact of building it allows you to understand how it functions, to really think about what you want in terms of sounding, the quality you want to get” (Albah, pers comm – 18-07-13)
Furthermore, as Jerome noted:

“At the time, the ghetto sound system they would start with literally a cupboard. That would be their wood, and they would nail planks onto it and put speakers inside. So with home-made you have that aspect that you made it yourself, it’s your system, and when you bring it out for a session people will recognize it” (Jerome, pers comm – 04-02-14)

Consequently, every crew’s sound system is different, as each crew will use a speaker design, an amplifier, or a driver that reflects their understanding of the sound they want to achieve. It is for this reason that OBF explained:

“the sound system makes our identity, and so people come to see the people that play but also to listen to a particular system” (OBF, pers comm – 21-06-13)

Thus as was mentioned both by Albah and Jerome, one can guess what kind of music a sound system plays based on its physical appearance:

“A sound system that is all black, covered with grids like Iration Steppas, it’s quite aggressive. And generally there is a reason behind it. If you look at the Channel One sound system, it’s all wooden, the grids on the speakers are round, you have a feeling they are going to play roots, and it tends to be that way.” (Albah, pers comm – 18-07-13)

“If someone has a lot of Piezos, a good medium range and scoops, you’re going to think they will play more roots and dub. If they have built lots of subs and tops, you’re going to say they play more stepper” (Jerome, pers comm – 04-02-14)

The way each sound system is build and assembled is based on how the crews want it to sound, and therefore a sound system also reflects a crew’s music. The texture and colour of the sound system are another factor in the construction of the sound system as a crew’s identity, as Albah explained:
“everyone has that particular texture that is linked to what you play. You try to have a sound system that sounds best for what you play the most” (Albah, pers comm – 18-07-13)

Jerome expanded on this notion that home-made allows a human touch to the sound:

“A reggae sound system will have a lot more colour, a sound which is much more – without sounding negative – muddy. It’s warmer, it’s not as clean. With the human ear, if it’s too clean, it doesn’t seem good. That’s why even with the new technologies, you can have very very clean sounds, which on paper is good quality, but people won’t like it because the human body is not used to it being so clear.” (Jerome, pers comm – 04-02-14)

Furthermore, the sound system’s identity can also be understood through the music that is ‘not’ played by the crews. Wayne from Argonauts, when asked about what creates a sound system’s identity, mentioned this aspect:

“Also the music you choose not to play. There’s that whole aspect of tunes with homophobic lyrics, and we’ve always through it’s a strict thing, we’d never play that. Stuff like that contributes to your identity as well.” (Wayne, pers comm – 07-01-14)

Benoit also commented that he previously used to play those songs because he “likes the flow and the melodies”, but now as he says:

“It’s the kind of tune I ban from my system […] I try to promote Peace Love Unity Respect, so one has to be a minimum coherent”. (Benoit, pers comm – 13-06-13)

There is therefore also a conscious choice on the type of music that is played through the system, one that reflects the crew’s philosophy and politics, and subsequently their identity.
Nevertheless, sounding is one of the levels on which reggae sound systems differ from the rave and free party culture. Although as Earl Gateshead did point out:

“[reggae] Sound systems were used in the early raves. We had on our sound system some of the earliest house raves.” (Earl Gateshead, pers comm – 03-10-13)

But reggae sound systems are more focused on the quality of sound rather than the quantity, which was the drive behind free parties:

“ravers also tend to want the most Kilowatts possible. We don’t give a shit about kilowatts [...]there is a real importance awarded to the quality of sound [...] Whereas ravers often just pile up speakers, the things are out of tune [...]. But if we start doing that, you won’t hear such and such frequency anymore. So the music we play forces us to put the quality of sound at the front” (Albah, pers comm – 18-07-13)

As Jerome added:

“More Kilowatts does not necessarily mean a better sound. It’s really the way in which [the reggae sound system] is assembled. Especially in reggae, the importance of the bass is that people feel it rather than hear it.” (Jerome, pers comm – 04-02-14)

All those interviewed used the same word to describe the way one appreciates the music in a sound system session: one “feels” it. This is different from simply hearing the music, where sound enters the body. Instead, during a sound system session, it is the body that is submerged in sound, in the physical sounding provided by the bass.
6.3 The search for autonomy

“We are part of a lifestyle a little bit on the margins of society. We don't want to be completely different, we just want people to understand that we live a little differently, with other values than the ones of the shit society in which we live in.” (Benoit, pers comm – 13-06-13)

Linked to the DIY aspect of the reggae sound system is the search for autonomy; or at the very least partial autonomy. Building one's own sound system allows for the freedom to decide on the sound, the appearance and to change whatever one wants.

“The home-made aspect allows you to evolve piece by piece, you don’t have to change everything – and that’s something you can’t do with a factory made system. Either you have to change everything, or you keep it. Whereas with home-made you can change things as you go along” (Jerome, pers comm – 04-02-14)

The organization of the nights, from the choice of venue, to publicity, to setting up the system, the sound checks... is all done through the crew and their relations. Wayne explained that central to a sound system is:

“the way that it takes a lot more people than just the DJs to run it. You've have the crew and then you've got all the people who kind of help out doing little bits and pieces, and they are kind of brought into feeling part of it. And then they bring their friends in, and they feel part of it. It’s more of a thing that grows out as it gets bigger, rather than just being like a strict relationship between the people who come to the night and the promoters and DJs.” (Wayne, pers comm – 07-01-14)

Earl Gateshead added that:

“Right from the people who did the publicity, to the flyers, to the people who sold food; we were all part of the sound. It was egalitarian [...] Right from the doorman to the crew, they are all part of the sound, and that
produces a sort of oneness that the crowd can feel” (Earl Gateshead, pers comm – 03-10-13)

It is in this sense that the reggae sound system enters the realm of anarchist planning, which is based around possibilities of cooperation and communal ways of life. Classical anarchist such as Vaneigem saw anarchist spaces as defined by a presupposition of equality, an equal capacity of people to plan for themselves in cooperation with others (Newman, 2011, 348). Wayne highlights that:

“it's not necessarily a business enterprise. A lot of people just do it for leisure, you know. So it takes away that more commercial aspect.” (Wayne, pers comm – 07-01-14)

This independence in the organizational side allows the space to be free of more capitalist frameworks. Aside from being liberated from the constraint of consumerism and designed obsolescence through the home-made sound system, another defining aspect of a sound system session is the minimal cost. Benoit linked this to his roots with the free party scene:

“I try to bring a minimal cost to our session, seen as we come from the free party scene, and that is proof that you can organize musical event of high quality for free or almost for free” (Benoit, pers comm – 13-06-13)

And as Albah reminds us that:

“originally [the reggae sound system] was a poor people’s concert. You could have Burning Spear, all the music bands playing for you in one night, and it wouldn't cost you anything.” (Albah, pers comm – 18-07-13)

In essence, the main drive behind building one's sound system is the freedom that comes with it:

“for a lot of people, and including ourselves, it was mostly about building a sound so that we could play when we wanted and where we wanted,
Autonomy is further achieved by one of the defining features of reggae – that is the importance of vinyl. Most sound system crews who produce their own music start their own label, and press their own records. When asked if the drive to keep vinyl placed the reggae sound system apart from the more mainstream music scene, Tom agreed that:

“that’s definitely a kind of underground counter-culture thing. Well, counter culture suggests that it’s against culture, which it isn’t really. But it’s kind of making a point about being autonomous I’d say, by pressing vinyl.” (Tom, pers comm 12-11-13)

Vinyl has remained central to the sound system scene despite the rise of MP3 and CD due to what Albah described: the drive for sound quality. For many within the scene, vinyl produces a much better sound than other digital formats:

“It represents a better sound...I mean it’s all personal, but for me digital sounds tinny, I don’t really like it. It’s empty.” (Earl Gateshead, pers comm – 03-10-2013)

Furthermore, vinyl goes hand in hand with the more sensory way of playing music:

“I like holding it, I like having the sleeves. I like the fact that you take the record off and on. I also find it a lot easier to find what you are going to play. If I was flipping through a laptop, I would kind of be stuck thinking ‘what am I going to play’. [Whereas with records] sometimes you just go through and you’ll think ‘oh this will go well new’. It’s a very tactile thing; you get more of a chance to interact with it” (Wayne, pers comm – 07-01-14)

Yet vinyl music also contains a political message. It shows resilience against the digital expansion of most of today’s music, a resistance against the digitalization of modern life. It is of little wonder that vinyl has remained the selling point of
independent music shops (Sherwin, 2013). It is a show of passion for music, or, as Benoit stated:

“If you want to go on and fight a minimum against Babylon you have to keep vinyl, otherwise it’s over, you’re completely in it. If you leave vinyl behind, as a reggae sound system, you can forget all the tunes that say “Burn Babylon”, because you did the first thing Babylon told you to do: forget vinyl and buy mp3” (Benoit, pers comm – 13-06-13)

6.4 Modernity and Post-Anarchist Space:

“By virtue of developing our listening, we may find ourselves granted the sense of a different norm, a different measure, a different principle for thinking the ‘ratio’ of rationality” (David M. Levin, 1989, 33)

Modernity brought on by the Enlightenment has been dominated by a vision-centred paradigm of knowledge, ethics and power. Historians of modernity themselves “have, until recently, focused almost exclusively on sight – when they have considered the senses at all” (Damousi & Deacon, 2007, 1).

It is agreed that since the Enlightenment, the visual has been determined as “the master sense of the modern era” (Ingham et al, 1999, 284). Aside from gaining a priority in many technological developments – “with technologies of vision generally being the most advanced or most ubiquitous” (Ingham et al. 1999,
as well as maintaining a hegemonic domination on representations of place, “the ascendency of vision also necessitated the denigration and discipline of the other senses” (Ingham et al. 1999, 284). Much of modernity therefore left the aural sense behind, considered far too problematic in its inability to be ordered (Bauman, 1993), and privileging the visual as the source of knowledge above all others (Henriques, 2003, 464).

According to Newman (2010b), post-anarchism differs from classical anarchism in its questioning of Enlightenment humanism and the particular modernity this entailed. Consequently, the dancehall of the reggae sound system becomes a post-anarchist space as it allows the predominant ‘vision’ of modernity to disappear temporarily through sonic dominance.

“The reggae sound system session can be considered as an experiment in what it would be like if the world were ruled by sound” (Henriques, 2003, 464). It allows the aural to reclaim its lost place and thus produces a temporary autonomous zone in relation to the senses. Whilst vision is dominant in society, the sound system allows sound to temporarily replace vision, changing the dominant rational understanding of self and space. Within most modern societies, testing is based on scientific, rational explanation. Within the sound system session, the body is the centre of perception. Testing and decision-making (choice of speaker, choice of song…) is achieved through the sensory modality (“this feels right” or “this sounds right”) as it “evokes emotional associations in the way that mere images fail to do” (Henriques, 2003, 467). What is considered right changes according to the space, as does the relationship between the body and space.
However, the sound system does not go against modern society completely. It employs both traditional and modern technologies. It will link home-made speakers, amps or effects with factory made pre-amps, filters. Sound systems also play new or unreleased songs through digital formats, but still keep vinyl as a backbone. It would be more correct to say that the sound systems appropriate aspects of modern society and adapt them to their own needs – to reproduce them in a more democratic way.

This adaptive capability has extended further to include reggae’s political past. All crews are aware of reggae’s importance as a political music – yet they are also aware that their struggles have evolved. Today sound systems in Europe do not face the same problems as the inhabitants of Kingston’s ghetto’s in the 60s, nor the same issues as the Jamaican working class in 80s Britain. But they do remain spaces of contestation:

“Originally reggae is a bit the music of the oppressed. We’re not really oppressed in Europe, we’re rather privileged. But we still have things to say, and it is part of an alternative [...] you identify with reggae because it holds values such as unity, peace, tolerance. [...] You can very well come from a fancy background, it doesn’t mean you can’t speak out against things that are happening around you” (Albah, pers comm – 18-07-13)

And as such, many crews, aside from promoting a space of dance and enjoyment, still put forwards a political message at their sessions:

“With the pressure we experience at the moment from the system, we absorb all this throughout the year, and we transcribe that in our nights with ‘harder’ tunes, steppas, very militant lyrics, anti-establishment, or lyrics that simply express everyday life” (OBF, pers comm – 21-06-13)
Therefore the reggae sound system provides a temporary space of sonic dominance, where rationality shifts from one focused on the visual and the rational to one where the haptic and the sensory take over, “allowing a place between places and a time out of time” (Henriques, 2003, 469). As a friend of mine described, the sound system session is “an occasion to free the mind, to forget the past and the future and live in the present. It is about listening to good music and their message, and feeling them with people who come from different backgrounds, without any judgement”. But it also brings forth new ways of participation and politics, while emphasizing different relationships as opposed to the ones articulated through dominant capitalist discourse.

In effect, Saul Newman (2011) called for a post-anarchist conception of political space “based around the project of autonomy and the re-situation of the political space outside of the state”. Following this rationale, the reggae sound system can be understood as one of Newman’s postanarchist ‘insurrectional spaces’ that effectively foster “alternative ways of life, new relations and intensities” (2011, 353).
7. Conclusion:

This dissertation examined the particular way in which reggae sound systems organise and effectively recreate the space of the dancehall and what this space actually means and represents for new generations of sound systems that have grown outside of the reggae hubs of Jamaica and England.

What has emerged through interviews with both French and British crews is that the dancehall is much more than a space where music is played. It is organized so as to emphasise the senses – and is best understood through a phenomenological perspective, with the body as the centre of perception. The crews set up and run the sessions according to their perceptions and conceptions of sound, creating an individuality, where each sound system has a distinct identity resulting from the different ways in which their technical and sensory knowledge is expressed.

Furthermore, the reggae sound system differs significantly from the free party and rave scene which has gathered much more geographical and sociological attention. Although these have been widely associated with the concept of Temporary Autonomous Zones as reappropriated spaces of liberation and “carnival”, they have engaged in forms of resistance which were too overt, and for this reason have become target of state repression.

Instead, the reggae sound system session has retained an important political and oppositional role through a more subtle and covert resistance, which is better understood through the lens of post-anarchist thought. This is achieved through a search for autonomy, where the crews organise every aspect of the
event, but also build and plan their sound systems themselves which allows them to create their own sonic identity.

Furthermore, they do not resist particular dominant actors - such as a government or a law – but a hegemonic conception of space and participation. Post-anarchist theory provides a framework through which to understand this, and as such they can be seen as ‘insurrectional spaces’, Temporary Autonomous Zones which, for the time of a night, displace the dominant understanding of space and performance and bring about a more participatory, democratic, and above all sensory one.

In essence, the sound system is, in the words of Earl Gateshead:

“A physical representation of an alternative way of looking at the world. Music played on a computer or Ipod sounds entirely different when played on a sound system. The system produces a sound with an other worldly quality, a feeling of massive latent power. The aural difference in how you hear music represents a different way of looking at, and hearing the world”

This study has only skimmed the surface of the underlying politics and performance techniques at the centre of these new generations of sound systems. Further research would effectively be welcomed and I can venture several areas that would benefit from additional exploration.

In relation to the geographical expansion of sound system culture, it would be of interest to find out whether crews from other countries and localities are influenced by local or regional factors in their politics, performance or message. Furthermore, the role of the internet has allowed knowledge relating to sound system culture to expand, through the use of forums, exchange of speakers
designs and so forth. Could this expansion in the virtual world be an additional cause for the real world explosion of reggae and sound system culture, especially among the younger generations.

However, I hope this dissertation has shown the sound system's importance in creating alternative spaces that produce counter-hegemonic understandings and values.
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9. Glossary

**Dancehall (music):** Musical genre that became dominant in Jamaica during the late 1980s and 1990s after the growing digitalization of reggae. It is characterized by a faster rhythm and less reliance on instrumental melody. It has also attracted criticism over many of its lyrics accused of glorifying violence, homophobia and misogyny.

**Dub:** Genre of music that grew out of reggae. It allows a breaking down of the music, places emphasis on drums and bass, and relies on a heavy use of effects such as echoes and reverbs. It is at the root of the modern “remixing” technique.

**Piezo:** Type of loudspeaker that produces frequencies above 2 000 Hz.

**Roots Reggae:** Subgenre of reggae that was predominant during the 1970s and early 1980s. It is characterized by politically, socially or spiritually conscious vocals influenced by the Rastafarian movement, a slow rhythm, and an emphasis on melody and harmony through vocal, keyboard or horns.

**Stepper Reggae/Stepper Dub:** Particular drum rhythm where the bass drum plays every quarter beat, it is now associated with sound systems that produce music replicating this rhythm with a more digital sound (such as Iration Steppas, King Earthquale, OBF)

(Plate 2: Channel One Sound System. Source: www.tokyodub.com)
Scoop: Particular type of bass speaker cabinet design that is used by most reggae sound systems. It has also become the measure of a sound system’s ‘power’ – sound system are often advertised according to the number of scoops they have.

String-up a sound: the process of strapping the speakers together when setting up the sound system, as these may otherwise move due to the vibrations.
10. Appendices:

10.1 Interview Schedule – example (p55)

10.2 Interview Schedule French – Example (57)

10.3 Sample Project Information Sheet (p58)

10.4 Sample Consent Form (p59)
10.1 Sound System Interview schedule – example

1. What does your sound system consist of?
2. How would you best describe a reggae sound system dance?
3. Each sound system has its own ‘identity’ – how do you create yours and promote it?
4. How do you set up your sound at dances / does the setup change according to the space you are using?
5. Where do you mostly organize sound system dances?
6. How important is the interaction with the crowd – why?
7. Is there something aside from music that you try to bring to the dances, and to the people that attend?
8. Vinyl is central to the sound system even if digital has become part of it too. What would be the main reason behind this?
9. Technology and DIY has a central place in sound system culture (building one’s own speaker system, analogue machines…). Why is this?
10. Sound system emerged out of specific political and social issues. Are these still relevant today or have these issues changed/disappeared?
11. There are a lot of similarities between reggae sound systems and rave and free party culture – Are there some differences too/what are the main differences?
1. Do quoi consiste ton sound system?

2. Comment to decrirais une session sound system?

3. On dit que chaque sound a sa propre identite – qu’est ce qui fait cette identite? Comment est ce qu’elle est cree?

4. Est-ce que la maniere dont tu montes ta sono change en function de l’endroit ou tu es?

5. Est-ce qu’il y a quelque chose d’autre que tu essayes d’apporter a tes dances? Autre que la musique?

6. Le vinyl est considere comme tres important dans les sound systems reggae – quelles sont les raisons pour cela?

7. Est-ce que le fait de construire sa sono soi-meme apporte quelque chose d’autre?

8. Le sound system et le reggae sont issues a la base d’un context politique, economique assez dur – est ce qu’il y a toujours un lien avec ces origines pour les nouveaux sounds europeens?

9. Il y a beaucoup de points communs entre les sounds systems reggae et les teufs – mais est ce qu’il y a aussi des differences?