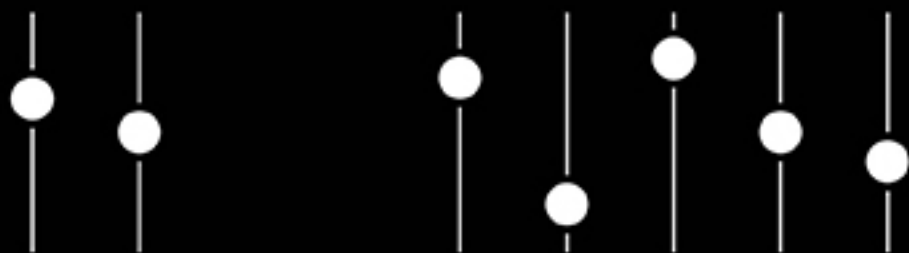


SONIC INTIMACY

MALCOLM JAMES



THE STUDY OF SOUND

SERIES EDITOR: MICHAEL BULL

B L O O M S B U R Y

Sonic Intimacy

THE STUDY OF SOUND

Editor: Michael Bull

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For the ravers.

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1

Introduction

In April 2017 I went to see Nadia Rose play at Village Underground in Shoreditch, London. I'd previously seen her videos on YouTube and was impressed by her affinity with the camera. I tried to buy a physical copy of her EP but it was only available on YouTube. It was later released on MP3. Wanting to support the artist, I paid to download the tracks. When I did I was then struck by what they lacked. I had come to know Nadia Rose and her music almost exclusively through YouTube. I was expecting the audio to reproduce its effects. It didn't.

In a third-year undergraduate class on post-colonial approaches to the city, I encouraged students to think about what these shifts might mean for music, and indeed for the alternative cultural and political registers of black diasporic sound culture. We went back through Debord, Benjamin, Adorno and Wynter, thinking about the relationship between visual culture, capitalism and race, and then engaged with Gilroy, Du Bois and Weheliye to explore the alternative relation of sound to modernity.

Back at Village Underground, Nadia Rose's Croydon crew had turned up, but the rest of the audience was only there on the back of the Skwod video. They didn't know the other tracks. Aloof and half-interested, as London crowds can be, they were draining, and Rose, who is so confident on screen, has such proficiency in the medium of her generation, was perceptibly nervous. Granted, this was a big gig, but she also seemed unfamiliar with these live arts. A graduate of Brit School, clearly trained to a high level in video performance, her YouTube persona was not easily communicated to the crowd. The little gestures, flicks, facial movements that are caught on camera to such great effect seemed lost in the physical

distance between her body and the dead weight of the mêlée. Her greatest moments of comfort appeared to come when her 'skwod' gathered on stage, evidently friends, and she could feel the intimate embrace of the cypher. Her other moment of comfort came as she physically abandoned those assembled in front of her to live Snapchat from stage to a screen following that she said gives her love.

This book's enquiry on the transformation of sonic intimacy and alternative cultural politics lies between this moment (the interface of black diasporic sound culture with social media) and two others: the reggae and dub sound systems of the 1970s and 1980s and jungle pirate radio of the 1990s. Half a century prior to Nadia Rose's appearance at Village Underground, hundreds of reggae and dub sound systems were producing their bass-mediated demands in excess of the racist state of the moment (Gilroy 1987). As captured in Franco Rosso's film *Babylon*, their low-end properties collected the dance floor and a largely black and working-class contingent, while providing the raw material to project an alternative imagination of Britain (Rosso 1981). A decade or so later, hundreds of jungle pirate radio stations blasted rolling bass lines across British cities moving under the pressure of two decades of Tory rule. Between bedrooms and cars, working-class and multi-ethnic dialogues were sustained.

Between these three moments (reggae sound systems, jungle pirate radio and grime YouTube music videos) lies an important question about the transformation of alternative black diasporic sound culture in Britain. How did the bass-mediated demands of the reggae and dub sound system bleed into the fractured fervour of pirate radio in the 1990s and then into the hyperlinked intensities and immediacies of YouTube music videos from 2008 onwards? To what extent was the tactility and proximity of the sound system necessary for the kinds of alternative politics it generated against the racist state? How can these politics be evaluated in relation to an illegal radio infrastructure, dispersed, extensive and fully charged with the agonism of John Major's Britain? And how should both be considered in relation to YouTube music videos' corporate ownership, atomization and digital screen intensities?

The book addresses these questions through lending an empathetic ear to modernity's relational flows of alternative and dominant formations. That is also to say that it does not answer

them through an argument of linear decline – the sound system losing out progressively to jungle pirate radio and grime YouTube music videos. Attractive as the ‘capitalism as progress, capitalism as ever and all consuming’ thesis is to certain branches of Marxist media scholarship, what cultural theory doesn’t need is another negative restatement of myth-mantra of dominant capitalism as modernity.

That such questions are concerned with *sonic intimacy* might not be immediately apparent. After all, the notion of *sonic intimacy*, while habitually known, is also somewhat illusory. Scholarship on the sonic has opened up regimes of knowledge not fully captured by the visual, and literature on intimacy has enabled an exploration of relationships, inter-subjectivity, feeling, forces and vibes not present in textual approaches to social and cultural life. But the relation of the sonic and intimate to alternative cultural politics has infrequently been considered. Rather, with the exception of some select works addressed below, the vibe of a dancehall or the hype of pirate radio has tended to provide the atmosphere for scholarly discussion, rather than be the focus. This is not inconsequential for our understanding of alternative cultural politics in late modern society, especially if we consider that black diasporic sounds and their intimacies have had a historically close relationship to the alternative forms of being and knowledge practised, produced and projected by peoples marginalized by the textual, visual and racial regimes of Eurocentric capitalist modernity (Hall 1997; Wynter and McKittrick 2015).

The remainder of this chapter clarifies this assertion, opening up the dynamics of sonic intimacy and locating them in the conjoint fields of race, post-colonial, sound and cultural studies. The remainder of the book is divided into three chapters, each focusing on a different sound culture and conjuncture. Chapter 2 explores the 1970s and 1980s reggae and dub sound system, Chapter 3 addresses 1990s jungle pirate radio, and Chapter 4 post-2008 grime YouTube music videos. This conjunctural approach does not imply that these moments are discrete. Indeed, the book is organized so as to draw through their continuities and discontinuities. But it does also imply that reggae sound systems, jungle pirate radio and grime YouTube music videos can be understood as particular clusters of sonic, social and technological materials and that these clusters are archetypal

of their moments. Understanding them as such then helps to identify what is at stake in sonic intimacy's modern remaking.¹

The sonic

'Bass history is a moving/is a hurting black story' intones dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson on the 1980 album *Bass Culture* (Johnson 1980). In that landmark collaboration with Dennis Bovell, Johnson speaks poetic verse through dub's deconstructive rhythematics, drawing attention to the work of sound, and bass, in conveying the history of black Atlantic people in Britain. Eight decades earlier, US sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois made similar comment on black US culture. In his seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk*, slave spirituals function as central allegories for an exploration of racialized being and knowledge. Those haunting melodies welled from the black souls of America's dark past. Scored in minor key, they 'articulate[d] the message of the slave to the world' (Du Bois 2007: 3–4, 169) – a message not intelligible to slave-owning households. For Plantation Lady Mary Boykin Chesnut 'the words have no meaning at all'. For her, the handclaps, 'shrill shrieks', a 'minor key' 'was all sound' (cited in Shaw 2013: 138). Indeed, like the reggae bass line, many of those songs did not have literal meaning, but they carried with them knowledge both terrible and joyous. They communicated a message to the world, 'a hope – a faith in the ultimate justice of things' (Du Bois 2007: 169, 175).²

¹The three sound cultures selected for this book are not chosen to be representative of British diasporic sound and music cultures in the post-war period, or of all associated sonic intimacies. Rather, they are selected because of their prominent place in popular culture and because of their particular affinities with their moments. These affinities, then, provide the basis for making a theoretical argument about the transformation of sonic intimacy in late modernity. Readers interested in the interface with the black diasporic and south Asian sound culture are advised to engage additionally with some of the excellent work in the field (Sharma et al. 1996; Kim 2012; 2015).

²'The child sang it to his children and they to their children's children, and so two hundred years it has travelled down to us and we sing it to our children, knowing as little as our fathers what its words may mean, but knowing well the meaning of its music' (Du Bois 2007: 170).

The sound cultures discussed in this book contain reverberations of those moments, but reggae sound systems, jungle pirate radio and grime YouTube music videos are not slave spirituals just as sure as a reggae bass line is not a jungle one. Of different times, produced and productive in different moments of capitalism, racism and colonialism, they are part of each other's stories as they are resolutely of their own. And still, to differing degrees, they convey through sound alternative stories of modernity, and to that end Linton Kwesi Johnson and Du Bois's remain prescient.

After all, the over-determination of being and knowledge by visual and textual means has remained a central plank of modern Western societies, as has the coterminous development of the visual and textual with racism and capitalism (Dyer 1997; Wynter and McKittrick 2015). In the margins of these dominant articulations of modernity, black diasporic sound cultures have continued to provide alternative playlists for the modern condition, just as they have offered registers through which demands beyond those positions have materialized. It is for this reason that the reggae sound system is written about as:

... the recorded documentation of an alternative living history of the black presence in Britain; a space in which black Britons could tell, intellectualise and become conscious of social justice, black rights, anti-racism and against police harassment with people who understood and had sympathy with it. (Henry 2006: 8)

The use of 'alternative' rather than 'oppositional' in the above quote is instructive. For Henry, black and working-class reggae sound systems are culturally alternative to the dominant white petit-bourgeois culture of the day. They are alternative, not neatly oppositional because they contain elements of dominant culture, not least pieces of consumer technology.³

For Henry, the UK reggae sound system documents an alternative living history to formal written culture and to the white bourgeois

³In *Marxism and Literature*, Williams discusses the relation of dominant culture to any conjuncture, but also how in that same conjuncture other forms of culture exist that are alternative and oppositional to those dominant forms (1977: 121–7).