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Julian HENRIQUES, *Sonic Bodies. Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques and Ways of Knowing*

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Julian Henriques, *Sonic Bodies. Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques and Ways of Knowing*, London & New York, Continuum, 2011.

Postcolonial critiques of knowledge formation and discourse are challenged by the fact that they are often formulated by way of recourse to Western epistemological models. Both Julian Henriques's as well as Markus Coester and Wolfgang Bender's¹ studies on African Jamaican popular culture present timely alternatives to avoid this pitfall. In Henriques's case, Jamaican Reggae Sound Systems are examined as a case study to theorize how "sounding" presents an alternative mode of proprioception dominated by the acoustic rather than the visual sense apparatus. As such "sounding" is explored as a practice and methodology to offer a relational rather than binary mode of cultural analysis of Caribbean culture. Based on fieldwork the author undertook between 1996 and 2001 key informants included Winston "Weepow" Powell, founder of Stone Love Moment, the Island's leading and longest established sound system, as well as the seminal research undertaken by seminal Jamaican ethno-musicologists such as Cheryl Ryman and Olive Lewin.

Henriques's book offers a combination of ethnographic fieldwork and cultural theory in the wake of Stuart Hall's emphasis on the study of Caribbean popular cultures. Broadly divided into three parts, his analysis focuses on the energetic core of the so-called "wavebands" or "vibes" at the heart of Jamaican dancehall culture defined as a triangular feedback loop between three key performance roles who run the event in direct communication with the

audience: the audio engineer, the selector and the MC. The study pays tribute to the corporeal turn in performance studies and proposes an original take on what is conceptualised as "auditory epistemology" in the introduction emphasising the materiality of sound as technological medium and corporeality (xxi).

In part one Henriques thus defines the dancehall scene as an "auditory culture" played out on a corporeal (audio engineer, selector, and MC) as well as material/technical (decks, amps, photographic equipment) levels (27). Unlike music, he suggests that "sounding" must be regarded as a performance "event" bringing together media, instrument and technique. Vibratory power is consequently both material and corporeal energy raised in response to electric impulse. Henriques analyses this key process of fine-tuning undertaken by the audio engineer:

Sonic Bodies...

Thinking through the vibrations of sounding, the engineer is concerned with the material vibrations of sounding in the minute detail of the electronic circuitry of the set, and the values of individual resistors and other components. The material vibrations in which a set operates includes its electromagnetic frequencies; that is with the electrical impulses in the electronic circuitry of its amplifiers and so on, and at much slower electromechanical frequencies, with the auditory vibration of the mechanical movement of the speaker diaphragm. This is the power process by which the recorded music is amplified to give the dancehall crowd in the session their uniquely embodying experience of the intensities of sonic dominance. Currently the top-range sound system sets, like Stone Love's, produce up to 20000 watts of music power" (72-73).

If part one thus highlights the technical skill at the heart of the dancehall phenomenon, part two focuses on the selector's role of "juggling" and "cut, mix 'n rewind". Here, Henriques addresses the ritualistic aspects of building vibratory power in the audiences' bodies through the skilful employment of repetition and affect. Key to this process of communication, according to Henriques, is that it builds on non-representational operations and procedures rather than semiotic codes whereby meaning evolves from the vibration itself as felt and responded to by the body as the vibe physically touches and enters the eardrum. As such vibratory power as an element of "bass culture"—in both its musical and class-based meaning—has direct links to sexual and sacred

cultural codes conveyed by recourse to ancestral Jamaican spirituality. Part three follows this argument by further elaborating on the MC's role with regards to "voicing" as the socio-cultural element that references glossolalia prevalent in Jamaican folklore, proverbs and churches.

Henriques's book proposes a refined theory of "sounding bodies" through the lens of Jamaican Dancehall. As such, it presents a convincing critique of the dominance of the visual in cultural studies by not only outlining the dancehall as a key setting to examine the significance of auditory systems across their material, corporeal and sociocultural contexts, but also to suggest that their relational affordances present a logic of practice that is both timely and relevant to postcolonial critiques and performance studies more widely. More still, such framing allows for an understanding of the unique contribution of Jamaican popular culture and music as a mode of thinking through sound. If Jamaican "vibratory power" as such is indeed non-representational, as *Sonic Bodies* suggests, its performance event and socio-cultural clout are not.

Sabine SÖRGE

Note

1. See my review of their edited collection, *A Reader in African-Jamaican Music, Dance and Religion*, in this volume.