

The Sounding of the Notting Hill Carnival: Music as Space, Place and Territory

by Julian Henriques and Beatrice Ferrara, pre-publication draft, to appear in: Stratton, Jon and Zuberi, Nabeel (eds.) (2014) Black Popular Music in Post-World War 2 Britain, London: Ashgate

Notting Hill Carnival is undeniably a spectacular event with the flamboyant costumes of dancing mas bands, the splashes of colourful body paint, mud or chocolate staining the bodies of its J'Ouvert opening parade's revelers. But Carnival also has an explosive auditory impact due to its cacophony of sounds, in which soca, steel bands, calypso and static sound-systems mix and mingle in a multi-media and multi-sensory event.

Traditionally the 'five arts' of Carnival are soca, steel bands, calypso and sound-systems, together with the mas bands.¹ This chapter explores Carnival's irreducible heterogeneities and poly-vocalities as a unique phenomenon, contribution and expression of British cultural life and the country's musical landscape.

The Carnival Scene

Probably Europe's largest street festival, Notting Hill Carnival is attended each year by an average of one million people – including London residents as well as visitors from outside the city and the country.² Carnival is a powerful expression of the multiple layering of British popular music that regularly takes place at street level in London and many other UK cities. It is only possible, however, because of Britain's geographical, historical and post-colonial metropolitan location. This achieves a

¹ http://www.itzcaribbean.com/carnival_five_disciplines.php, accessed 20th July 2013.

² Source for attendance figures: BBC 2011 Report, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-14706924>, accessed 3rd April 2013.

distinctive West Indian or Caribbean event composed uniquely out of the different island cultures, of Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica. Observation, audition and interviews with participants at the 2012 Carnival provide a rich set of research materials to explore these issues. This chapter argues that the qualities of Carnival's acoustic space afford an understanding of its unique contribution to the British music scene in terms of the mixing, mashing and interference between different musical traditions. These help us to understand how Carnival's distinctive London street location makes it different from other similar events, such as a music festival.

Carnival has its origins in the particular political and cultural history of the local area of Notting Hill, presenting a very different picture of this part of West London than the film of that name.³ In brief, Carnival celebrates Caribbean and black diasporic London, whereas the 1999 romantic comedy with Hugh Grant and Julia Roberts painted an exclusively white picture of the same streets. Appropriately enough, the event can be said to have two mothers, as Abner (1993) relates, one from Hungary, the other from Trinidad and Tobago. The Hungarian Rhaune Laslett (1919-2002), president of the London Free School, initiated the Notting Hill Fayre in 1965 'to promote cooperation and understanding between people of various races and creeds through education and through working together'.⁴ The Trinidadian journalist and Communist political activist Claudia Jones (1915-1964) was the instigator of the first Mardi-Gras style carnival which was held in 1959, becoming an annual event in 1965, the year after her death. By then the Notting Hill area had developed a reputation as an epicentre for both London's

³ *Notting Hill*, dir. Roger Mitchell, 1999.

⁴ *Kensington News*, 23rd July 1966.

alternative arts and music scenes and race politics. In 1959 there had been white on black race riots in Notting Hill, then the stronghold for the fascist Oswald Mosley's Union Movement and Colin Jordan's White Defence League.⁵

In many ways, Carnival today has remained true to its founders' inspiration. Though now a highly commercialized operation, it remains a street festival. At the same time, with the regulation of sound and the clashes with police in 1976, it has also provided a site for contestation and confrontation between police, local government, residents and Carnival goers in the context of racialised British politics. But Carnival continues to achieve a unique Caribbean quality that is composed out of the different island cultures each contributing with tastes, sounds and styles to the Carnival. However, Notting Hill Carnival is far from entirely unique. It resonates with the rhythms of an international circuit of black Carnivals, such as Barbados 'Cropover', Grenada Carnival, Guyana 'Mash', Canadian 'Caribana' in Toronto, the US 'Labour Day Festival' in Brooklyn, 'Vincy Mas' in St. Vincent.⁶ In addition, it also connects with sonic events such as Jamaican dancehall sessions, the British club scene and international steel band competitions.

At the same time, Notting Hill Carnival recalls the multi-faceted tradition of European Carnival – especially for the central position herein occupied by the body, the durational character of time, and those practices commonly expunged out of

⁵ <http://www.vaguerants.org.uk/wp-content/pageflip/upload/TL/timelinechap10.pdf>, accessed 3rd April 2013.

⁶ For an insightful study into the distinctive role of the rhythms of Carnival in the formation of circum-Caribbean cultures, see Martin Munro, *Different Drummers. Rhythm and Race in the Americas* (Berkeley CA, 2010).

‘normalised’ life. Not incidentally, the European Carnival qualified as a temporary disruption of the social order especially by way of its excessive corporeal character. Addressing the political implication of this inversion of scales and values, Bakhtin in fact dubbed the carnivalesque body as an expression of the ‘absolute lower stratum’ in the cosmic order. Here ‘lower’ indicated the inversion of traditional social hierarchies (from top-down to bottom-up) and the pre-eminence of the corporeal functions associated with the lower parts of the body (guts, bottom, genitalia) and the lower level of the earth (soil, ground, dirt).⁷ Baseness, sexuality, reproduction, and the pull towards the street also mark the choreography of Notting Hill Carnival – thus re-performing what has been famously called ‘bass culture’, in the multiple senses of ‘base,’ ‘bass-oriented’ culture and bottom/s up.⁸ This is also evident in the reveling in mud, paint and chocolate taking place early in the morning on the Carnival’s opening event called J’Ouvert and in the frequent performance of the ‘wheelbarrow’ dance act during the parades.⁹

[Insert Fig. 1 here – Couple performing the wheelbarrow dance covered in paint.

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The Sounding of Carnival

⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington IN, 2007).

⁸ Julian Henriques, *Sonic Bodies. Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques and Ways of Knowing* (London & New York NY, 2011), p. 17. See also, Mimi Sheller, *Citizenship from Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

⁹ To testify to the cultural mixing of Carnival, the J’Ouvert (also written as Jouvert) event derives from Trinidad & Tobago’s Carnival traditions, while the wheelbarrow is a typical act of Jamaican dance choreography.

This chapter approaches Carnival from a particular point of listening, rather than a point of view. As a methodological approach, the thinking through the *sounding* of Carnival helps to draw attention to the reciprocal relationship between convergent and divergent sociocultural forces, simultaneously shrinking and expanding, local and global, both centripetal and centrifugal. In the manner of the compression and rarefaction of sound waves themselves, this reciprocating dynamic is expressed across the spectrum of frequencies, media and cultural traditions of sounding. Carnival is an amplifier and accelerator for these processes. In one direction there is the *mixing*, as a rushing-in, drawing-together, inhaling and concentrating of implosive musical energies. In the other there is the *circulation*, as a rushing-out, spreading-out and exhaling of explosive diasporic diffusion. Sounding is expressed in the intensive affects of its embodiment by the Carnival-goers, in the spatial location of the loci of sounding in the Carnival area, as well as in the extension, claiming and celebrating of the space of sounding as a territory – through movement in the dancing and parading. The sounding of Carnival is nothing if not an energetic emergence, as with auditory propagation itself, reaching its resounding crescendo on the August Bank Holiday Weekend.

The use of the verb ‘sounding’ is an attempt at unsettling the assumption that ‘sound’ is a thing in itself. Sounding is the corporeal and sociocultural as well as the auditory dynamics of sound. It refers to the activities carried out by, through and for, the making of a sound. Sounding is a kinetic activity, requiring agency, making and becoming; in short, a social and cultural practice.¹⁰ This provides both a description of

¹⁰ Julian Henriques, ‘Sonic Diaspora, Vibrations and Rhythm. Thinking through the Sounding of the Jamaican Dancehall Session’, *African and Black Diaspora* (1) 2 (2008): pp. 215 – 236.

the sound of Carnival, as well as a way of understanding its place and role in the development and transformation of black music in the UK. Carnival is nothing if not a *resounding* event.

In taking the step towards sounding and thinking through sound, one idea that has proved to be most productive is Christopher Small's concept of *musicking*, that is all the activities and media that go into music making, from those that build the instruments, the stage and most importantly the audience itself.¹¹ Small's example of musicking is a classical symphony orchestra concert, but the multi-media character of performance is perhaps even more evident in Carnival. In addition, the concept can easily be reverse engineered, as it were, onto Hebdige's use of bricolage that provided the lynchpin of his classic study of the British Punk scene.¹² Indeed, this is what the idea of musicking helps achieve, that is, a methodological move from musical forms and structures, to social and cultural processes.

The move from music as object to musicking as activity also serves to promote another important concept for thinking through sound. This is the idea of sound as the organizing principle of music, that is, to the opposite of how music is conventionally understood as the organization of sound. Interestingly, this shift has been grasped both in the European avant-garde classical tradition, with for example Pierre Schaeffer's

¹¹ Christopher Small, *Musicking. The Meaning of Performing and Listening* (Hanover NC, 1998).

¹² Dick Hebdige, *Subculture. The Meaning of Style* (London & New York NY, 2007). See also, as an example of stylistic repurposing, Al Fingers, *Clarks in Jamaica* (London, 2013).

musique concrète in the 1940s, as well as in popular culture.¹³ Reggae dub producers, such as King Tubby and Lee ‘Scratch’ Perry in 1960s Jamaica, also reduced music to its constituent sounds through echo delays and reverb, extracting all but a hint of lyric and removing most middle frequency for treble and drum and bass to dominate.¹⁴ It is also the sound of music that defines a genre, that is, what is commonly called a musical ‘groove’. While music is often associated with social and cultural processes and traditionally investigated taking the auditory as a meaningful ‘research object’ to decode, sound as such exceeds the limits of meaning-based analysis of music, plunging into a much more physical dimension. This also allows consideration of the depth, immersive character, and mechanic and machinic dynamics of auditory events.¹⁵ We could therefore consider sound not only as the necessary component of music, but also more precisely as the environment, field or milieu for music to mix.

Another important point to make is how sound, as distinct from music, configures the embodiment of the revelers. Sound at Carnival as an open-air event configures space and time very differently from indoors. Within walls and ceiling it is the other way round, with space configuring sound. Furthermore, sound configures space and time in a very different way to how we assume vision does. Marshall McLuhan uses the idea of *acoustic space* to describe what we would now call the pervasive and ubiquitous character of contemporary media: ‘Acoustic space structure is...like the ‘mind’s ear’ or

¹³ Pierre Schaeffer, *Traité des objets musicaux* (Paris, 1966).

¹⁴ Michael Veal, *Dub: Songscapes and Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae*, (Middletown, 2007)

¹⁵ Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*, pp. 36-38.

acoustic imagination... It is both discontinuous and nonhomogeneous. Its resonant and interpenetrating processes are simultaneously related with centres everywhere and boundaries nowhere'.¹⁶ The idea of *acoustic space* is preferred to Murray Schafer's term *soundscape*.¹⁷ This gave a useful emphasis to the idea of landscape, the conception of which is so thoroughly visualized, that is imbued with visual qualities, that there has never been any need for the term 'imagescape'.¹⁸ Listening is all about sound, whereas viewing is little about light. More recently, Steven Connor makes a similar point in respect to the early twentieth century development of radio where 'the singular space of the visual is transformed by the experience of sound to a plural space: one can hear many sounds simultaneously, where it is impossible to see different visual objects at the same time without disposing them in a unified field of vision. Where auditory experience is dominant, we may say, singular, perspectival gives way to plural, permeated space'.¹⁹

This idea of acoustic space is particularly helpful for exploring some of the distinctive characteristics of the Carnival. McLuhan's concept from the 1950's is

¹⁶ Marshall McLuhan and Bruce R. Powers, *The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century* (Oxford, 2004), p. 71. This idea of acoustic space came from the Canadian anthropologist filmmakers Edmund Carpenter, Frederick Varley and Robert Flaherty describing a very different scene than Carnival, that is, the snow-covered landscape of the arctic, see Edmund Carpenter et al., *Eskimo* (Toronto, 1957).

¹⁷ Murray R. Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, 1994).

¹⁸ Tim Ingold, 'Against Soundscape', in Angus Carlyle (ed.), *Autumn Leaves: Sound and the Environment in Artistic Practice* (Paris, 2007).

¹⁹ Steven Connor, 'The Modern Auditory I', in Roy Porter (ed.), *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present* (London, 1997), pp. 206-207.

prescient of the present spatiality of ubiquitous media we now live through. This is not only because bodies are increasingly targeted as sonic and addressed through floods of auditory stimuli alongside the visual ones.²⁰ McLuhan refers to the immersion of bodies within a multi-sensory environment and what he calls the *ratio* of the senses that once again plays on a collaboration of the senses in which the sonic is also tactile, proximate and imminent.²¹ The super-somatic character of acoustic places is the complete opposite of earphone listening, where the music is inserted into the listener.²² Acoustic space can best be described as not only auditory but multi-sensory, further intensifying the experience of the revelers through the *sensus communis* (common sense, or seat of sensation) of their embodiment in the sensorium of the event.

The Placing of Carnival

With the scene and the sounding of Notting Hill Carnival established, we can now turn to its staging as a performance, an event and venue. With clubs such as the Hacienda or Ronnie Scott's, venues are often associated with particular music scenes, as are concert halls such as the Apollo in New York or the Rainbow in London. As an open-air venue, Carnival is more akin to a music festival, famously Glastonbury or WOMAD, for example. With the digital file as the dominant form of music distribution, live performance, rather than music recording, has increasingly become the main revenue stream.²³ The Carnival is however a free event to participants.

²⁰ Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare. Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (Cambridge MA, 2010), pp. 129-148.

²¹ Carpenter, Edmund and Marshall McLuhan, eds. 1960. *Explorations in Communication*. Boston: Beacon Press

²² Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*, p. xvi.

²³ Prince first released his album *Planet Earth* as a covermount (free giveaway) with *The Mail on Sunday*, on July 15, 2007, as publicity for his series of concerts at the O2 arena, London.

The Carnival weekend is staged around three distinct auditory loci. Each of them unfolds dynamically, not only in space but also through embodied movement of the flesh and blood bodies of the dancers, crowds, and musicians – through the physiological rhythms of enhanced heartbeat, breath and kinetic energy of their performances. First there are the music stages where artists perform with a backing band or track, located on the streets in the central area within the Carnival parade route and at its periphery. This is the conventional concert hall or festival configuration with speakers either side of the stage associated with the traditional geometrical idea of *space*. The second locus is the sound systems, also located in the center of the Carnival area, that stage the phonographic performance of reggae, dancehall, and Brazilian salsa associated with multi-sensory *place*. Here, the mobile audience on the street is surrounded and immersed in the sound from three, rather than two, speaker stacks, intensifying their experience and creating a multi-sensory acoustic space. These streets also are not only a platform for dancing and socializing, but also the site for numerous mobile vendors and stalls selling a huge range of foods from around the world, cold drinks, coconuts and Carnival paraphernalia and so on. The third locus is the parade route round which the carnival floats circulate with both recorded music and live Trinidadian steel pan orchestras playing soca followed by masquerade bands playing mas, associated with the idea of *territory*. Their mobility used the extensive expression of sound, movement and visual spectacle to describe the limits of Carnival as a musical territory.

[Insert Fig. 2 here - Map of 2012 Carnival showing route, sound systems and stages]

Music Stages: Space

In a number of respects, the music stages for live performance are the most conventional manner of musical presentation in the mix of the Carnival. It serves us well to describe them to begin with as the comparator for more distinctive carnival parade and the sound systems on the streets within the circular route. At the 2012 Carnival, music stages were sponsored by *Red Bull* and *Flavour Mag* among others, but curiously these do not feature on the Carnival maps. Also there were stages set up in the street along with the sound systems, such as, for example, the *Sir Lloyd Digital Soundboy* set up on junction of Leamington Road Villas and Tavistock Road, in the 2013 Carnival. One particular example of the artists broken at Carnival is the British R&B girl trio All Saints 1.9.7.5 (later known as All Saints). With a sound similar to the 90s female R&B quartet Eternal, this group first performed in public on the Touch Magazine stage in 1994. As with these other modes of performance, the music stages can be used as an example to introduce a particular theoretical idea which might be helpful in understanding both this feature of the event as well as saying something more generally about the British music scene.

Insert Figure 3 here: Sir Lloyd Digital Soundboy, 2013 Carnival, as an example of the first loci of sounding – the conventional stage

The music stages at Carnival are on a smaller scale than many festivals, but Carnival still has to be considered as a multi-media event, not least because it requires the live presence of the performer. The basic configuration of proscenium arch, though not necessarily visible as such, is what separates the performing artists from their audience. This current convention is credited as the invention of the English architect Inigo Jones (1573 – 1652). The proscenium arch can be considered as a theatrical apparatus for staging the outside world, or *outdoors* in the inside world or *indoors*, aided by Jones' other invention of moveable stage scenery. It is therefore not without irony that the staged performance should have persisted for open-air performance. In addition, this illustrates the persistence – and indeed dominance – of visual definitions of space, as against the conception acoustic space mentioned above.

This introduces the major theme of this chapter, that is, how sounding creates space. This is an issue that can only be raised in an open-air setting such as Carnival, as otherwise it reverts to an architectural question of how space creates sound. Such considerations draw attention to sounding as such, on the one hand, to its materiality and corporeality, as with the physical impact of *sonic dominance*, for example; and on the other hand to its ethereality, as with its personal and cultural associations.²⁴ The audience's orientation towards the stage suggests that sounding is employed to reinforce the visual length and breadth of space, rather than its auditory depth, as with the sound system space of the locus described below. The conventional separation of performer from audience is a major factor inhibiting any understanding of how music works in

²⁴ Julian Henriques, *Sonic Dominance and the Reggae Sound System*, in *Auditory Culture Reader*, eds. Bull, Michael and Back, Les, pp 451-480 (Oxford: Berg, 2003).

popular culture, or anywhere else for that matter. One reason for this is that it reifies music as an object, as against a range of activities that are always in practice required for its production. This can be considered as one of the detrimental side effects of the European classical tradition, born out of musical notation, but since applied to popular and all other musical traditions.

Street Sound Systems: Place

Distinguishing Notting Hill from other Carnivals, the second locus of sounding is the sound systems that occupy the inner area of the Carnival. The 2012 Carnival featured 37 official, stationary sound systems, with music ranging from funky house, disco and techno to R&B, hip hop, garage, ska, drum ‘n’ bass and Latin, and of course roots reggae and dub. Sound systems present a variety of musical inclinations, as detailed in the various Carnival maps and guides, made available from *Time Out* and other organizations. The sound systems’ common feature is their bass signature. The distribution of the different sound systems relates to the topography of the London borough in which the Carnival takes place – a section of the city with many crescents and hills, as well as being a consequence of the borough’s safety regulations.²⁵ Sound systems are very often located at crossroads, thus emphasizing the effect of being heard and felt, before actually being seen by the wandering crowds. In addition, in another register, crossroads have resonance as places of symbolic intensity, from the witches in *Macbeth*, to the Yoruba god Eshu or the Vodou Papa Legba as the god of crossroads, to 1930s Blues guitar genius Robert Johnson allegedly trading his soul to the devil for that

²⁵ The participation of each system and the distribution in the Carnival area is planned via scheduled BASS (British Association of Sound Systems) membership meetings attended by the Metropolitan Police and two local boroughs.

gift. Many sound systems have been occupying the same location for decades, making it easy for their followers to find them. Some of them also maintain a strong link with local shops, as in the case of the legendary People's Sound Record Shop in All Saints Road.

Most important for the present discussion, what distinguishes the second locus of sounding of sound systems from the music stages, is the manner in which this sound is diffused. In complete contrast to a stage performance, where the audience is in front of the sound, with the sound systems out on the streets the audience is in the midst of the sound. They are literally surrounded by it and immersed in it, as engineered by the configuration of three stacks or columns of speakers. With two speaker columns either side of a stage, sound is projected *outward* onto the audience; with three speaker columns in a sound system session, sound is projected *inwards* onto the audience. In simple geometrical terms, this triangulates a surface *area* of sound between the three sources, as distinct to the *line* of sound between the normal stereo pair. In addition, the intensities of sounding substantiate a third dimension of *depth* and the presence of auditory experience, the importance of which has been emphasised by many phenomenologically-inclined thinkers.²⁶ As the sound system provides an acousmatic or phonographic sound source (not requiring a live artist), the audience's attention is directed towards their own dancing, each other and the sounding itself.

²⁶ David M. Levin, *The Body's Recollection of Being: Phenomenological Psychology and the Deconstruction of Nihilism* (London, 1985).

The stationary sound systems, as distinct from those moving on Carnival floats, were introduced in the Carnival only around 1973-1975 by the then director of the Carnival, a young teacher from Trinidad and Tobago, Leslie Palmer. As Palmer recalls, introducing the phonographic Jamaican systems into the live performance of a strongly Trinidad and Tobago inclined Carnival was not an easy decision to make:

Really and truly, I had a good idea for Carnival back then. An idea...that would have changed things. Back then Carnival was the...pan only, it was the musicians. This is Trinidad and Tobago, you see? But I knew – what do the people want? What did the people want? The sound, they want Jamaican sound, and the rest. So I managed to get the sound systems into the Carnival. Really and truly this changed things. This was an attraction, this was calling more and more people. People came for the variety: the music, the sounds...²⁷

Leslie Palmer's idea to include the sound systems in Carnival reflected how by the mid-1970s sound systems had become an established part of the British music scene in areas of Caribbean settlement.

Together these sound systems boast an impressive and variegated expression of what Amiri Baraka calls the 'changing same' of black diasporic cultures.²⁸ A particularly relevant innovation of 2012 was the introduction of a new roots sound

²⁷ Interview, August 2012. We conducted the fieldwork this chapter refers to in London in August 2012, on the two weeks preceding the Carnival and on the actual Carnival weekend. We are particularly grateful to Christopher Scholey, General Manager of the Tabernacle in Powis Square, for generously introducing us to many contacts and providing an indispensable support.

²⁸ Amiri Baraka, *Blues People. Negro Music in White America* (New York NY, 1963). Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London, 1993).

system, Solution, taking over the site of the famous, but now retired, Jah Observer. One of the longstanding ‘sounds’ was Saxon Studio International that first played out in Lewisham in 1976.²⁹ In the 2012 Carnival, their spot was on the corner of Goldbourne Road and St Lawrence Terrace. While the Carnival route is characterised by the live performance of sound and its extension into space, the sound systems’ phonographic performance techniques activate intense participation and enthusiasm from their audience on their particular site. This serves both generally as an attractor for the passing throng, as well as specifically for that particular sound system’s followers as a siren-call, recognizable for its characteristic nuance, flavor or ‘vibe’, as with a particular club, club night or floor.

The Channel One sound system, located at the corner between Leamington Road Villas and Westbourne Park Road, provides a good example. The Channel One sound is one of the most popular of the Carnival and in the fieldwork several crowd members described their own ‘emotional attachment’ to the sound. Established in 1982, Channel One carries a ‘roots vibe’. This is expressed not only in their music selection but also in the peculiar *feeling* of quivering and pressure solicited by the old-style valve amplified set of equipment. The particular sound delivered by the system, due to a set of corporeal and material peculiarities that are an intermingling of matter and the pressure of time over materials, is not very ‘neat’. The resulting pressure on the eardrums and body is of a specific nuance which is ‘made sense’ at material, corporeal and sociocultural wavelengths. The particular phonographic colours, qualities, or timbre of a particular

²⁹ http://www.rapattack.co.uk/history%20of%20soundsystems.html#UK_History, accessed 12th July 2013.

sound system makes another example of the materiality and corporeality of sound, discussed above.

The corporeality of the Carnival goers' experience of sound also extends beyond the auditory medium itself. Another feature of the sound system area within the circumference of the carnival route is that it is entirely a multi-sensory environment. Sound systems are here interspersed with food stalls, in what have been defined as the different 'production houses' of Notting Hill Carnival's economy.³⁰ Although clearly delimited by clear-cut 'security areas', the place of the Carnival is not confined to the cartographical space of the festival area. It is heard, felt and smelt before is seen. It is heard with your ears, felt with your body through the shaking of the pavements and smelt with your nose because food is cooked in the stalls interspersed in the area.

Valuable though the idea of acoustic space is in drawing attention to the auditory dimension of spatiality, it does not perhaps go far enough in embracing the corporeal and sensory components of sounding that the three speaker stack triangulation of the sound systems' auditory sources draws attention. For this, we might have to abandon the idea of space altogether and instead adopt that of *place*. While this is always the case with the time-based nature of sound, calendar events like Carnival make this inescapable. The auditory qualities of the space of Notting Hill Carnival are entirely emplaced, that is, located as a unique instance in one of the three particular loci of the staging of an event. This is what gives Carnival its distinct feel and character on the streets of this part of London. Furthermore, this is entirely typical of bodies. Invariably,

³⁰ <http://www.tfconsultancy.co.uk/reports/nottinghillcarnival.pdf>, accessed 29th June 2013.

they can only extend themselves in the particularities of place and duration, as against the mind which might think of itself as extending in the abstract, homogenous dimensions of space and time.

The sounding of Carnival has to be conceptualised as a full-bodied place, characterised by its haecceity – a throbbing ‘basin’, where multi-sensory fluxes converge; a pan-corporal experience, multisensory milieu, or sensorium, in which touch, colour, dance, movement, fibres, waves and smells proliferate. Musical sounds both take and make place, as the particular local embodied instantiation of the more abstract generalized idea of space. Nowhere is this more evident than at Carnival. The strict relation between the auditory loci of Carnival and its being a source of power calls for a different articulation of sound and space: from a transcendent, general and detached notion of space to an immanent, particular and charged one.

The subordination of fully embodied places to abstract spaces has traversed modern Western culture since at least the seventeenth century.³¹ Place, unlike space, is never outside time. This is evidently the case with the sound systems, whose bass heavy rhythms define the locus. Musical sounds both take and make time, or rather duration. Carnival itself is a temporal phenomenon, originally tied to the Christian calendar marking the end of Lent, but now virtually free from religious ritual association. In fact, Carnival is now staged as commercial event, taking advantage of the English summer.

³¹ This issue of ‘place’ has been the subject research of authors such as Edward Casey (1993), Gaston Bachelard (1969) and more recently Doreen Massey and Nigel Thrift (2003).

The year-long preparations reach a *crescendo* over Carnival weekend, as Matthew Phillips (leader of the local Mangrove Steelband) confirms:

It's not just what you see here today. It's what we do during the year. Competitions, arrangements, the Mas... The Carnival is just a special occasion, along with others during the year. The whole spirit of Carnival is sustained by many different events taking place during the year.³²

This temporal aspect of Carnival is also recognized by its participants. The priest officiating the 'Carnival Heroes Celebration' blessing hymn, for instance, pronounced that 'the Carnival is all about being connected to energetic rhythms, back and forth in space and time.'³³ In addition, timing is important for staging the event of Carnival. It is critical for the authorities also, who – having opened up the streets to the revellers – have to effect a closure on their temporary sacrifice of control of the space. In the 1970's this closing down, or lock-off of the music at 7 p.m., became a contentious issue, triggering clashes between young people and the police.

The sounding of Carnival makes its place and location on the streets of Notting Hill of particular importance. The location of Carnival certainly gives it its specific character and it has also been a politically contentious issue, as the fierce resistance to the proposed relocation to Hyde Park in 2001 testifies.³⁴ Indeed, the street and open-air

³² Interview, August 2012.

³³ Authors' field notes, August 2012. The "Carnival Heroes Celebration" – i.e. the dedication of two Heritage Blue Plaques to Trinidadian Carnival's pioneers Russell Henderson and Leslie Palmer in Tavistock Square, London – was held on 23rd August 2012 in Tavistock Square, London, UK.

³⁴ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/1167784.stm, accessed 3rd April 2013.

location shapes Notting Hill Carnival's popular street culture character and participatory ethos. This recalls the Jamaican slang of 'livity' (way of life),³⁵ and the centrality of the 'town square' in European Carnival as the locus where 'the world upside-down' is performed.³⁶ While the sounds of the Carnival spontaneously mesh and blend, or mix and mingle, with those of the larger surrounding area in a cacophony of auditory stimuli, the designed territory of the event configures itself as part of and within the identity of a specific area of West London.

Besides their emplacement, a further important feature of the stationary sound systems concerns their intensities, that is, auditory condensations, compressions, centripetal forces and implosions. Such compression comes from the volume or amplitude of sound itself. It also comes from the volume or number of people crowded into the space. The better the sound the more of a crowd it draws, like moths to a light. This all makes for a more intense experience that has been described as *sonic dominance*.³⁷ The phrase refers to the super-liminal whole-body experience of audition, immersed in the materiality of the force of its physical presence in the bowl between the speaker stacks. This generates a highly energetic vibrational field across a spectrum of frequencies from tweeters, through mid-horns to bass and sub-bass in which (human) bodies and (the bodies of) technologies alike are immersed. This can be felt as a physical assault on the body provoked by the pressure of sounds, often resulting in a quivering of the skin, the sole of the foot and the guts, and an almost painful trembling of the ears' internal membranes. Interestingly enough, these pains can also be source of

³⁵ Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*, p. 7.

³⁶ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p. 10.

³⁷ See note 11

pleasure. Steve Goodman has described the feeling of pleasure enjoyed through these gentle pains as ‘the masochism of the sound clash’, thus addressing the productive dimension of this collective enjoyment.³⁸ As a young crowd member said after having animatedly declined the invitation of a security guard to protect her ears while the massive Chocolate Factory UK’s float was approaching with its intense load of pressure: ‘The pressure is part of the fun. You cannot possibly do without!’³⁹ The MCs on the sound system make a point of inviting the crowd to ‘join the sound’, or inciting them to ‘be part of it’, ‘make some noise’ and ‘make more noise’ – until eventually somebody will hand you a plastic toy whistle to blow.⁴⁰ Simultaneously, subtraction from sonic hyper-stimulation – for an unexpected technical failure of one float’s speakers during a parade, for example – can also generate a very strong and sharp reaction of discontent and mocking.⁴¹

There is certainly a dimension of empowerment to the collective enjoyment of sound during the Carnival street performances, as Dick Hebdige has pointed out. Referring to the Notting Hill sound systems in 1979, he states ‘power was at home here – just beyond the finger tips. It hung on the air – invisible, electric – channeled through a battery of homemade speakers’.⁴² Here, ‘power’ indicates a collective power, more power-with (*la puissance*) rather than power-over (*la puissance*). The term *methexis*, meaning participation and contagion, from ancient Greek theatre, is useful here. This is

³⁸ Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, p. 27.

³⁹ Authors’ field notes, August 2012.

⁴⁰ Authors’ field notes, August 2012.

⁴¹ Authors’ field notes, August 2012.

⁴² Hebdige, *Subculture*, p. 38.

the power of connection and combination, creativity and sharing – of which the sound is the magnetic attractor. The *methexis* of Carnival is not of course restricted to the stationary sounds systems but is equally in evidence on the parade route, as discussed below. In this way, the power of the sounding of Carnival can be heard, that is to say recognized, as a source of solidarity and even political power. In the 1970s and 1980s Carnival received little or no attention for its music. However, in Bhaktinian carnivalesque style, it did receive notoriety as a disturbance to the established order. Sound thus became weapon. This was in a battle in which, under the notorious Sus laws, a single (black) person could be – and was disproportionately – arrested merely on suspicion of committing an offense and any gathering of black people, and youngsters in particular, was considered to be threat.⁴³ Carnival offered an albeit temporary taste of victory in this battle.

Carnival Parade Route: Territories

The third, perhaps most iconic auditory locus is the parade route, whose circumference literally defines what is outside and what is inside Carnival. ‘Mas and Pan *is* Carnival’, as is often said. The parade route resonates with the typically cadenced soca rhythms and the silvery sound of steel pans. It makes direct reference to the migration of black people from Trinidad and Tobago to the UK.⁴⁴ As Pepe Francis reminds us: ‘That is

⁴³ Darcus Howe (ed.), *The Road Make to Walk on Carnival Day: the Battle for the West Indian Carnival in Britain* (London, 1977). Cecil Gutzmore, ‘The Notting Hill Carnival’, *Marxism Today*, August 1982: pp. 31 – 33; ‘Capital, ‘black youth’ and crime’, *Race Class* 25:2 (1983): pp. 13-30. Ashley Dawson, ‘Linton Kwesi Johnson’s Dub Poetry and the Political Aesthetics of Carnival in Britain’, *Small Axe* 10: 3 (2006): pp. 54-69.

⁴⁴ For an insight into the links of soca’s direct musical progenitor (calypso) with migration, see Stuart Hall, ‘Calypso Kings’, *The Guardian*, 28th June 2002.

how it all began...with a group of steel band musicians moving around the area of the fayre with their pans on the neck...when Russell Henderson's...Steelpan Combo hit the streets'.⁴⁵ Soon afterwards, the floats were introduced. In the early days, original steel pan tunes and soca compositions lived side-by-side with steel pan versions of popular English songs, thus 'blending' – as Francis says – the British pop score with the sound of the pans.⁴⁶ This peculiarity still characterises the genre, as evidenced in the sounds of numerous soca and steel pan contests held worldwide.

The 2012 Carnival fielded a total of 57 mas bands and 13 steel bands paraded around the edge of the area between Sunday (the more family-oriented Children's Day) and Monday.⁴⁷ Today the route consists of a parade of massive trucks each carrying a float on which the ensembles play live music.⁴⁸ Mas paraders – men, women and children – in costumes dance after each float. Each mas, each ensemble and each float belongs to a specific local group, which is responsible for the designing and sewing the costumes, composing and rehearsing the scores and maintaining the floats in good working order. The atmosphere is one of 'positive competition', the term used by Mangrove Steelband's leader Matthew Phillips.⁴⁹

The multi-media, multi-sensory and embodied nature of sounding brought out by the music stages and sound systems is also very much in evidence on the parade route.

⁴⁵ Interview, August 2012.

⁴⁶ Interview, August 2012.

⁴⁷ Figures provided during the 2012 Carnival Press Release, held at The Tabernacle, London, on 21th August 2012.

⁴⁸ Occasionally, floats can also be phonographic, i.e. they can play recorded music through sets of amplifiers.

⁴⁹ Interview, August 2012.

Besides their mobility, this is further energized with the *motility*, that is, the bodily movement of those playing Mas. These are the Trinidadian dancing masquerades and steel pan and soca floats circulating around the edge of the Carnival area. Both women and men dancers are involved in the Mas parades and Pan floats, while the design and preparation of the costumes is mainly a women-led activity. As Matthew Phillips explains, the preparation of costumes takes many months and is carried out in the non-working hours of the week. It is a ‘hands-on’ activity, where bodily-cultural skills are collectively employed in a shoulder-to-shoulder work that occupies long spans of time:

It takes a great deal of work with the Mas. It’s also a question of pride. It makes you proud, what you achieve together. [...] Then you must see that for somebody this is not their real job. You’ll have to come [...] after 7 p.m. – when everybody comes and gives their time, their creativity”.⁵⁰

This produces the impressive appearance of the Mas and Pan parades, that is, the elaborated and flamboyant costumes designed and individually hand-made for the dancing procession. The extravagance, colorfulness and excess of the costumes is primarily an address for the eye. The Western ocular-centric hierarchy of the senses – with vision on top – is very much expressed in the popularity of playing Mas.

While the costumes are primarily designed to attract the eye, however, the large often-feathered apparatus of costumes also have to be worn by the kinetic fleshly machines of dancing bodies. As Pepe Francis puts it, ‘the real bodily work of the

⁵⁰ Interview, August 2012.

Carnival is indeed the mas, the dancers'.⁵¹ Dance can be considered an energetic transduction of bodily currents of sounding. As the music induces movement the sonic is transduced into both kinetic energy and visual impact.

[Insert Fig. 4 here - Mangrove Mas, Costume preparation. © Beatrice Ferrara]

Mangrove Mas' 2012 costume design by Broken Feather exemplifies this co-operation of all the senses through corporeal movement. The chosen theme itself is that of the body – 'Virtues of Athleticism.' This was intended as a homage to the Olympic Games hosted in London in the weeks preceding the Carnival. Introducing us into the room at the Tabernacle in Powis Square, London – where the costumes had been designed and were being sewn – one Mas member explained the concept behind the choice of the theme:

Every year it gets more and more challenging! It sounded exciting for this year's masquerade to go and use this – to get into the general excitement for the Olympics: 'the virtues of an athlete'. 'Cause basically what you see in an athlete is a balanced use of some things we have singled out here – like speed, or power, or agility, or balance.⁵²

The Mas member then showed us a mind map realized on one of the walls of the room. A piece of cardboard was hung for each of the 'virtues'. Each piece of cardboard was surrounded by a great numbers of magazine clippings, hand-made drawings, costume

⁵¹ Interview, August 2012.

⁵² Interview, August 2012.

sketches – all relating a series of animal, natural, human and mechanical elements to a specific ‘virtue’ such as speed, balance, power, agility and so on.

As our Interviewee clarified, the creation of such a mind map through images and visual evocations was meant as a process to single out some material, spiritual, human and non-human features that could help a body in motion enhance a specific virtue and had therefore to be amplified through some specific aspects of the costumes. A certain design would therefore mobilize a certain part of the body and lead to a certain effect and quality of movement when worn in dance, thus creating a transduction from the visual, to the tactile, to the aural dimension. This was the case, for example, with a pony-tailed headpiece designed to complete a male costume.

You’ve got to know what movement will give you what you want, and the costumes are designed to stress that thing. See that horsetail there on top of that headpiece? That will add a special something when you move your head, will make the movement seem much stronger...like – it will draw it in the air, if you know what I mean!⁵³

The phenomenon of energetic transduction involving the ear, the arms, the legs, the guts, and all the corporeal matter involved in dance is often given full credit in the wisdom of Carnival. This is especially true of the relation between steel pan drumming and mas dancing. As Pepe Francis claims, ‘The pan is ‘the jumbee in the blood’. The sound of the pan that gets in your blood, as in the Camboulay and the Jouvay’.⁵⁴ This

⁵³ Interview, August 2012.

⁵⁴ Interview, August 2012.

hints at the release of a surplus energy, which is of course also to be accounted for in its social dimension. As Francis adds, ‘The sound of the pan is linked with migration. With colonialism, too... Music and rhythm as ‘releasing’, as a breath of fresh air... for the people playing and the people listening. The sound of Carnival... is a very carefully orchestrated... collective excitement’.⁵⁵ The Carnival parade provides a good example of this that we can now examine in more detail.

The steel pan, the musical instrument that is the unique invention of the Trinidad and Tobago Carnival, makes an excellent example of how sound can come to define music. The steel pan is seldom played on the music stages, but the steel pan orchestra is the traditional musical medium of the Carnival parade. An orchestra of up to thirty pan-players (with soprano, mezzosoprano, alto, baritone and bass pans) is carried on the Carnival float, as described below. Steel pans are traditionally made out of 55-gallon used oil drums and are played with rubber-tipped sticks of different sizes – this creates the distinctive metallic ‘tinning’ sound that makes pans recognizable. A chromatically pitched idiophone instrument, the pan produces its sound only through the vibrations of its material surfaces and cavities. It has no strings or membranes.

After the stretching process of the sheet metal into a bowl shape – called ‘sinking’ – pans are made to ‘sing’ by marking the pattern of the notes on the surface and tuning the instrument. Making the pans ‘sing’ in the proper way is a sound-related activity heavily relying on acoustic training, that is, socioculturally acquired experience and bodily, or ear-based, knowledge. As Pepe Francis – chairperson of the British

⁵⁵ Interview, August 2012.

Association of Steelbands and manager of Ebony Steel Band – explains, the material quality of the pan is strictly linked with the performance skills and sociocultural reverberations of the instrument:

The pan was born a poor instrument. Its material quality says it all – metal, you know? It was oil barrels ... The links with migrations are very important. But it can be complex though, it can be subtle, you see? And here we talk of a band – mind it – an orchestra. ... It takes a certain kind of knowledge – knowing how to listen, learning to know when a sound works ... It is a ‘hands on’ activity. ‘Hands-on’ is how one makes music. You have your hands on something.

He then goes on to explain what this kind of involvement means:

... this is a total involvement, where you’re into music and into education. Steelbands are about education, too. Steelbands are not just playing or what one plays, but also the activities – the educational support you give. You know? Generations of educators and community service.⁵⁶

In saying this Pepe Francis is in fact broadening out the idea of what music is in a way in which Christopher Small would entirely approve as consistent with his concept of *musicking*.

As well as the intensities and multi-sensory experience of sounding for which the stationary sound systems on the street corners provide evidence, the Carnival parade offers a further dimension to understanding of the sounding of Carnival – *movement of*

⁵⁶ Interview, August 2012.

travel. Whereas with the stages and the sound systems the dynamics are related to the movement of the crowd and the sonic space and place are defined from *within* the intensities, with the parade the effect and affects of sounding are taken literally a step further with the *movement* of sound through space and place. In this way sounding is defined from *without*, that is, the *extending* of space through sound as an ‘*extensification*’. Here the movement is that of both the sound source on the float and the audience, as the mas players following on behind. For the bystanders on either side of the route, the sound source passes in front of them, from one side to the other.

The sounding of the parade thus literally describes, that is, draws, the space of Carnival. Such an account is in fact entirely consistent with the way Tim Ingold considers that all place is defined in terms of pathways, ways of movement and perambulations. As he puts it, ‘[places] are like knots, and the threads from which they are tied are lines of wayfaring’.⁵⁷ The practice of making space through procession is a very ancient one, as with the Catholic Church’s annual saint’s day rituals of parading a patron saint’s statue around a village or town; or the Ramlila, a Hindu festival which is an enactment of the Vedic Ramayana story, at various cities across India and the diaspora over the period of a week; or the Coventry Passion Plays.⁵⁸ Sounding lends itself to a processional sense of time, nowhere more so than with the sounding of Carnival as this configures the music, sound and space of the event.

⁵⁷ Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (London, 2011), p. 149.

⁵⁸ Anuradha Kapur, 2006, *Actors, Pilgrims, Kings and Gods: The Ramlila of Ramnagar* (Kolkata, 2006).

The circulating movement of the Carnival parade is an *extending* of space through sound along the streets of the London borough. It is both spectacular and dramatic. Describing the several different qualities of time, the Russian-born French sociologist Georges Gurvitch, identified the last of these as ‘explosive time’, for which Carnival must count as an excellent example.⁵⁹ This rapid spatial extension has also been recognized as having a clear social and political function since the early days of the Carnival, as Pepe Francis suggests, talking about how ‘marching on’ the area configures an ‘expansion’ and a ‘taking over’ of the space.⁶⁰ From here, spatial emplacement is compressed into an alternative time-space in which traditional norms are suspended. This is a significant act, especially in the context of the corporeal and sociocultural arrangement of the city spaces during the early days of Carnival.

That sound is most often considered as time-based is what makes the territorializing effects of sounding at Carnival even more interesting. Carnival is a territory defined, bounded, patrolled and enforced through sounding. The concept of territorialisation and de-territorialisation proposed in Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus* – the title itself employing a spatial term – has been quite widely adopted.⁶¹ Here the term also refers to Isaac Julien’s 1984 film *Territories*.⁶² At its simplest an auditory territory is that established by a songbird, like the robin, singing their statement of ownership of their garden territory in the morning chorus. Territory

⁵⁹ Georges Gurvitch, *The Spectrum of Social Time* (Dordrecht, 1964).

⁶⁰ Interview, August 2012.

⁶¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis MN, 1987).

⁶² *Territories*, dir. Isaac Julien, 1984.

more than place, and considerably more than space, has this strong affective quality that fosters the kind of ‘tribal’ identity that music sub-cultures have often been described as possessing.

In terms of the sociocultural wavelengths of sounding, its metropolitan and post-colonial setting constitute Carnival at the epicentre of the complex syncretic and diasporic flows that are a particular characteristic of contemporary British popular musical culture. Carnival’s *raison d’être* emerges precisely at the crossroad of the many ‘routes’ that, as Paul Gilroy’s famously claims, traverse ‘the Black Atlantic’.⁶³ The politics of space, place and territory is also emphasized by the Race Today Collective’s Darcus Howe in 1977 in his aptly entitled *The Road Make to Walk on Carnival Day*.⁶⁴ Here Howe discusses the importance of the ownership of the streets through sounding, embodied in the revellers’ flesh and blood and sheer presence *en masse*, as well as playing mas. This runs counter to the way the streets of Notting Hill, as everywhere, are normally the exclusive territory of vehicular traffic, encasing bodies in steel and plastic, rather than bare skin spattered in the glitter and mud of Carnival.

As with ownership which can be thought of as the foundation stone of capitalism, the ownership of space through sounding has an important affective dimension. This theme has been taken up by Hakim Bey and his concept of T.A.Z. (temporary autonomous zones).⁶⁵ This idea has been very much in evidence with the

⁶³ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*.

⁶⁴ Howe (ed.), *The Road*, 1977.

⁶⁵ Hakim Bay, *T.A.Z. The Temporary Autonomous Zone. Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (Brooklyn NY, 1991).

Occupy Movement in London and globally in recent years. In New York this also had an important sonic component in the ‘human megaphone’, whereby – because of the authorities forbidding electronic amplification – speakers’ words were relayed by the audience within earshot of the platform back to the entire crowd.⁶⁶ This practice created what could be called a *political* acoustic space. Moreover, in its setting of post-colonial London, Carnival is about an affirmation of that most important of all places – especially for diasporic peoples – the place that is called *home*. The parade route is where Carnival allows this to be asserted, extended, celebrated – not to say flaunted.

Conclusion: The Diasporic Mix

In describing the space, place and territory of carnival across the three auditory loci, the intention has been to demonstrate the complexities of both the event and the understanding of the event which might be adequate for a broader understanding of the British music scene. This involves the *extensification* of sounding along the parade route which contrasts and compliments the *intensification* of space through sound that takes place through the use of sound systems. This relationship is a typically auditory one of reciprocation, as with the compression and rarefaction of sound waves, the expansion and compression of audio frequencies on the sound system, the inhaling and exhaling of the breath, or the tension and relaxation of musculature of the mas players.

There is a similar reciprocity between the coming-together or centripetal concentration of cultures, traditions and peoples to make Carnival and its explosive

⁶⁶ See Richard Kim’s article in *The Nation*, 3rd October 2011, <http://www.thenation.com/blog/163767/we-are-all-human-microphones-now>, accessed 5th October 2013, and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VIgeGBKur7s>, accessed 5th October 2013.

centrifugal diasporic expression on the weekend itself. One crowd member brilliantly summarized the spirit of Carnival: ‘Jump on a float, lose yourself in the crowd, dance to the sound!’⁶⁷ Into the reciprocal dynamics of *in-tens*-ity (dancing to a certain sound by gravitating around the system as in a field of tension) with *ex-pan*-sion (relating to the more extensive movement of following the parade floats), this reveler reminds us of the all-important embodied third dimension of sounding, that is *ex-stasis* (losing one’s self).

The delimitating function of the parade route does not constitute an act of total (en)closure, but rather a creative (re)distribution of the space culminating in a proliferation of places regulated by rhythms and specific milieus. Each mas and steel band ensemble gives its own specific signature to a section of the parade. This becomes more and more apparent and distinctly audible as soon as the mas and pan approaches the ‘point-of-listening’ and the ‘point-of-view’ of each member of the crowd standing in the outer perimeter of the parade. At the same time, the acoustic properties of sounding allow in turn for a mixing and meshing of the different ‘signatures’. Though exemplified in the unique event of Carnival, it is these principles of how sounding operates – analysed in this essay in turn, as if unpacking a mix – that might be useful for understanding the British music scene more generally. It is impossible to hear the music of M.I.A., Dub Colossus, Burial, or Giggs, examples almost at random, without evoking the uniquely British diaspora that Carnival embodies.

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⁶⁷ Interview, August 2012.

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