

ABSTRACT

“So Special, So Special, So Special”: Citizenship, Nation and the Jamaican Sound System

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Jamaican popular culture is dominated by the concept of ‘dancehall’—a broad term used to represent a contemporary negotiation of current and historical social values through collective performance. This project outlines how the dominant scholarly dancehall discourse uses individual narratives, such as that of the artist, producer, participant, politician or ‘don’. However, when applied to sound systems, a focus on the individual in place of the sound system group negates the distinct collective historical, cultural and social origins of the sound system, effectively neutralizing alternative notions of citizenship and nation, particularly among Black Jamaicans.

This work is guided by social capital and civic engagement research. Civic engagement reflects the frequency in which individual social resources are reinvested in a social network of groups of individuals with critical implications for social and political action. Given that popular culture in Jamaica, as in pop culture everywhere, is a youth culture this study extrapolates conclusions about youth, but about political and social youth sub-culture in Jamaica. The weaving together of civic and cultural imperatives under the rubric of social capital represents an original contribution to both fields.

The thesis argues that the overlapping social networks generated by sound system praxis produce unique forms of social capital and civic opportunities for engagement. Engagement is by no means uniform and, in my analysis, generates a combination of social and anti-social forms. My research provides a more complete understanding of the extent to which civic values contribute to the varied discourse of dancehall and popular culture more broadly.

Keywords: Joshua Roe Chamberlain, Jamaica, civic engagement, dancehall, popular culture, youth culture, politics, citizenship, nationality, sound systems