

The Aesthetics and Ethics of London Based Rap:

A Sociology of UK Hip-Hop and Grime

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Declaration

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Abstract

This thesis considers rap music produced in London. The project employs close textual analysis and ethnography to engage with the formal characteristics of rap and the social relations constructed through its production and use. The black cultural tradition has a considerable history and the thesis focuses upon its appropriation in contemporary London.

The study begins with an examination of the process of becoming a rapper. I then consider the collaborative work that rap artists engage in and how these skills contribute to construction of the UK Hip-Hop and Grime scenes. Moving on from this focus on cultural producers, I then consider the practices of rap music's users and the role of rap in mainstream metropolitan life. I use the public bus as a site through which to observe the ethical relations that are constituted through sharing and playing with rap music. My analysis then turns to the processes through which identity is solicited and produced within nightclubs and concerts. I discuss the production of subaltern masculinities and femininities by the audience in this space. I also consider how MCs orchestrate their audiences in the production of special forms of collectivity and the organisation of a social consciousness. Following this, I examine rap lyrics in a selection of tracks and videos in order to engage with the representation of urban dwelling within the black public sphere. This close analysis allows me to consider rap songs as part of a cultural politics that challenges socio-economic inequality and racist oppression. I then discuss the structural position of the black working classes and the role of cultural production in providing means of avoiding the economic vulnerability of low skill labour. The study concludes with an examination of artists' efforts to transform their socio-economic positions through their cultural production and self-representation.

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Contents

<i>Introduction: Route Change</i>	6
<i>Chapter 1 Literature Review: Now boarding the last Routemaster through London</i>	21
<i>Chapter 2 Methodology: Hold On Tight!</i>	52
<i>Chapter 3 'Revolution of a Next Kind': Building black London from the Bottom</i>	97
<i>Chapter 4 'On The Bus My Oyster Card Goes "Ding De Diing De Ding Ding": Transforming the Space of London's Public Transport</i>	146
<i>Chapter 5 'I See The Glow In You': Summoning the Aura in London's Post Hip-Hop Culture</i>	187
<i>Chapter 6 'That There Kind of Sumthin' Sounds Strange to Me': Social Representation and the Recorded Soundscape</i>	232
<i>Chapter 7 From a 'Junior Spesh' to the 'Keys to the Bentley': The Routes of Grimey London</i>	272
<i>Conclusion: Post Grime London</i>	322
<i>Appendix</i>	329
<i>Bibliography</i>	331

Introduction: Route Change

After completing the final examinations of my undergraduate degree, I spent a week on campus celebrating with friends. One night I danced in the student nightclub with a flatmate from my Halls of Residence and his friends. After purchasing drinks from the bar I returned to the group. As I did so the rumbling bass of a well known Hip-Hop track began to sound. While the deep reverberations of Dead Prez's 'Bigger than Hip-Hop' drove on, I handed my friend his drink and rocked with the music from side to side. Presently, I became aware of a young Asian man heading directly toward me. I noticed, from the corner of my eye, that my acquaintances were also alerted to the stranger's rapid strides. My body tensed up. Then I was struck by the young man's words, as he spat the first bars of Dead Prez's lyrics in my face: 'One thing about music when it hit you feel no pain'. After a moment of shock (and relief) I began to rap them back at him. I had learned the lyrics to this song through repeated reading and listening as I had studied them for my dissertation. Although this was a fairly unusual way of acquiring the skill that I was now exercising, I was able to rap the entire track in this confrontation with another man. As our encounter developed I noticed, through my peripheral vision, that the tension of the group that had accompanied me had transformed into perplexity. I now focused on spitting back at my antagonist the lyrics he rapped in my face and, as I grew more confident in my own performance, began to physically engage him with firm but restrained pushes with my shoulder. My groups' interest in the performance began to spread, producing a wider audience. A large number of other dancers now stood around us in a circle. My antagonist and I continued to

rap the lyrics as the DJ played the track. He returned my pushes and shoves, while we both gestured with our arms emphasising the force of our verbal enunciation, as the audience looked on. Our performance ended with the track, at which point the other man embraced me. I remember being struck by a spontaneous feeling of fraternity. I think he thanked me before walking away, but I have never seen him since. For my own part, I returned to my group and shrugged my shoulders when my flatmate asked ‘what the fuck was that all about?’

This spontaneous performance perplexed me and I had no idea why the young Asian man approached me. But the event came to inform my approach to some aspects of this study. I became interested in the activity of young men and women on the dance-floor and the relation that rap lyrics have to those activities. Considering this particular incident, I became aware of the interaction between DJ, soundscape, and dancers in the construction and performance of a cultural script. Although I thought it unlikely that I would observe a similar performance in the course of my research, I had become sensitised to the role of antiphony and the production of extemporaneous social relations through rap music.

After having explored an interest in rap songs through close textual analysis, this event helped me to engage with rapping as a social process. I was surprised to discover that through my studies I had acquired the ability to rap this track from the album *Let's Get Free*. But the practice of performing those lyrics in that encounter disclosed a social dimension that I had not yet begun to explore. The unfolding of this performance in this social space, supported by the

track the DJ played, allowed particular forms of identification to emerge between the participants. I became aware of the relations through which identities were produced. Through this performance I was struck by how the force of the lyrics allowed myself and the other man to recognise something within one another, how the rhythm of the music provided a structure through which we could respond to one another's calls.

The Habitus and Cultural Politics of London Based Rap

The event in the student nightclub revealed to me an ability that I had acquired through repeated study of a particular song. However, I was aware that this academic interest was distinct from the familiarity that London's MCs had with rapping. Those who had learnt to rap through repeated practice during secondary school or earlier would have a substantially different relation to the art form than I would. In my conversations with MCs and DJs, they frequently related narratives of their development that placed beginning to rap at a crucial point in their childhood. This was usually around the age of thirteen or fourteen. They connected rapping to the relations they had with friends or with particular family members. Interviewees often described how learning to rap, at home in the bedroom or in school corridors with friends, developed from being a source of pleasure to a means of gaining social recognition. These distinct emphases are essentially connected to one another, and both have an organic relation to other aspects of urban sociality. MCs talked about how becoming a rapper influenced their perception of the world. Some also discussed political issues they had related through their music. I began this research thinking of rap, principally, as an art form. I found, through my conversations with artists, how

rapping also became a channel through which they developed their awareness of the possibilities that life in London made available to them. It also provided a mode of self expression and a strategy through which some artists attempted to confront social, economic and political limitations on those possibilities.

From the satisfaction of writing a line that feels just right, through the enjoyment of participating in a cypher with other MCs, to an artists pleasure at hearing their audience recite their lyrics as they perform on stage, rapping made possible the exploration of a range of social relations. Rappers were acutely aware of their position in relation to other artists, and even deliberate silence about another rapper could reveal a significant form of recognition. They were also concerned about the potential effects of their music in wider society. For some artists, being a rapper enabled them to demonstrate a concern for and responsibility towards their community. Others balanced their concern about what rappers did and said with recognition of artists' need to earn a living for themselves. However, one view that united many of the MCs and DJs that I spoke to, was that rap was somehow 'black' and that it had some role to play in dealing with the limited opportunities available in London. The expression of this view by white, working-class rappers brought to the fore the issue of how this art form is appropriated in contemporary London. It suggested that inter-'race' identification was among the durable social relations this cultural tradition had made possible.

London's Rap Music Scenes

In my engagement with rapping in London I have employed the concept of the scene. This is principally because it is used by research participants. However,

there is no single Rap scene in London but rather a number of scenes in which this cultural form is employed. This study is concerned with the UK Hip-Hop and Grime scenes. Others include the Desi beats scene, in which rap music is a significant component and London based rappers play a substantial role. The focus of this project is on black-British rap based in London. Although the way in which black culture is appropriated by British-Asians and used to construct their identities and address their concerns is both interesting and important, I am unable to attend to those issues in this space. Instead of dealing with the appropriation of black culture by other ethnic groups, I focus on the ways in which this cultural tradition is employed in social spaces dominated (but not exclusively occupied) by young black people.

London's rap scenes are sites of activity by artists whose experiences of migration are often unrelated to that of the Windrush generation. The exploration of identities, by artists such as the Sierra-Leonian Skirmish of Rhyme Asylum or the British-Nigerian Afrikan Boy, works with and against the self-representation of artists whose relation to Africa is mediated through Caribbean culture. Further to this, the plan of a white UK Hip-Hop artist to illegally migrate to New York (in order to use the skills he developed in the UK to achieve greater success in the US) complicates the migratory patterns and imaginary relations that produce London's black culture.

I use the term rap to refer to a linguistic art form practiced within the scenes discussed here. It is also performed in other scenes and in spaces that may not ordinarily be thought of as parts of a scene, for example in bedrooms or on public buses. Funky House came to dominate the black music scene in

London during the course of this study. The live MCing performed as part of its DJ sets contrasted with the rapping of UK Hip-Hop and Grime MCs. Therefore, although I focus on the UK Hip-Hop and Grime scenes, it is important to bear in mind their relation to other scenes and social spaces in which rappers perform.

As a distinctively London scene, Grime is of particular importance in understanding London's contemporary rap music. Grime differs from the UK Hip-Hop scene both in the age range of its participants and in the formal qualities of the music around which the scene is organised. Discussions of the Grime scene, within that scene, place it in relation either to US rap, mainstream British music, or UK Hip-Hop. The internet is an important tool in the shaping of both the UK Hip-Hop and Grime scenes. In a conversation with a Grime DJ, he brought up the role of online forums in the scene: 'They help to the slightest but they also do - how can I put it ... A lot of people have good views, but then again the contrast to the bad criticism is a joke.' Through online forums, participants discuss the character of their respective scenes. However, as JJ highlights, their influence is not neutral or impartial and not all participants engage in informed, rational discussion of the scene. Jokes, nonsense chat, and playful abuse are a strong feature of online forums. Nevertheless, they are also spaces through which participants develop their understanding of the scene and relations within it.

Some online forum users understood the scene in financial terms, this being linked to its size and health, or as something that could be used by artists. Others discussed it as something which contained artists. The scene was considered to contain a genre but not be reducible either to that musical genre

or the artists within it. Artists operating within the scene were thought by some online forum users to possess different qualities, such as versatility, in comparison to artists in other scenes (usually US Hip-Hop). One particular criticism of rhyme patterns used in Grime lyrics brought into question the overuse of auto rhyme, of which Wiley's style was identified as an example.¹ London was widely recognised to be the geographic, and financial, centre of this scene.² Forum users expressed a preference for Grime, and this form of music was considered by them to be superior to US Hip-Hop based upon its formal and thematic content. Hip-Hop was said to be a bigger market and financially stronger. However, the larger monetary economy of US Hip-Hop was also given as one of the reasons that it was less innovative/interesting. One defender of Grime connected it to mainstream political discourse through the claim that it was 'the underground sounds of broken britain.'³ The future of the scene was frequently raised as a concern, and it was considered to occupy a place in time. Questions such as where will it 'be in 5 years', and whether it is 'taking over the world' construct it in temporal and spatial terms, and attach particular aspirations to the 'movement'. The temporality of the scene itself was implicitly expressed in references to Grime's 'family tree.'

Some criticisms circulating within the scene were targeted at the lack of realism (or excessive hype), as well as of MCs' rhymes, or the beats they rap over. Reasons used to justify the state of Grime included references to it not being a commercial form, the number of free mix-tapes circulating within the

¹ <http://www.pureGrime.co.uk/forum/member.php?u=22001>

² <http://www.pureGrime.co.uk/forum/the-out-of-london-Grime-scene-t56236.html>

³ <http://www.pureGrime.co.uk/forum/member.php?u=27512>

scene, and the unwillingness of listeners to pay for artists' music. This was seen to have an impact on artists' ability to pay for studio time. The actions of particular artists (such as leaving a collective, or making an announcement) were responded to in such a way as to identify that this is important to the scene as a whole. These actions change the positions of producers in relation to one another, contributing to the scene's development and therefore its history.

Discussions of both the UK Hip-Hop and Grime scenes often included aesthetic considerations, historical awareness, and political motivations. Key events such as record deals, aesthetic innovations, important performances, and perceived increases in market size, produce time within the scenes and may transform the way the scene was thought of in spatial terms. Through discussions such as these, participants in the scene invest the music with social, political and economic aspirations and produce themselves as subjects in relation to a cultural form endowed with these qualities.

The relation between the concept of the habitus and the scene can be observed in the statement of a DJ on his radio show which he repeated in an interview: 'I live this, man.' The knowledge he acquired through growing up with rap and developed as a practitioner had, by this stage, come to form a substantial part of the way he sustained himself and his family economically. These scenes can be considered as part of a whole way of life, with different actors structuring it, involved in its reproduction, expressing particular values, and articulating these with political and economic activities in a variety of ways. This collective activity is a crucial component of the reproduction of London's rap cultures across generations.

Rap Studies

In April 2009 BBC 1Xtra celebrated 30 years of Hip-Hop. At that point rap had been a feature of ordinary life in England for over 35 years. This celebration of US Hip-Hop and its connection to a relative lack of awareness of the historical continuity of British rap highlights the importance of broadening the study of this art form. Although there is little scholarship on British rap, its routes can be traced from Africa through the Caribbean,⁴ and the US. They are influenced by European social and economic structures, with London operating as a junction point alongside cities such as Birmingham, Bristol and Nottingham. Although US Hip-Hop is considered to have its origins in the South Bronx,⁵ Kool DJ Herc is widely recognised as one of the culture's 'pioneers.'⁶ He is credited with importing elements of the sound system culture, that Hip Hop is built upon, from his native Jamaica. The migration to England of large numbers of West Indians produced a similar development of black Atlantic culture.⁷ Artists such as Dennis Bovell and Linton Kwesi Johnson were an important part of that development. Johnson's dub poetry can be seen as an antecedent to the laid back styles of MCs such as Roots Manuva and Ghostpoet.

Regardless of this considerable history, rap studies is dominated by an Americo-centric bias. The literature in this field repeatedly invokes a creation myth of Hip-Hop's birth in New York during the 1970s. Not all studies of rap conflate it with Hip-Hop, and some do acknowledge that this 'birth' in America

⁴ Russell A. Potter (1995) p. 39

⁵ Tricia Rose (1994)

⁶ Russell A. Potter (1995) p. 39

⁷ Joseph Heathcott(2003), pp. 183-206, pp. 199-200

was produced through transatlantic migration. Nevertheless, a narrative of Hip-Hop's emergence in the south Bronx followed by its spread around the globe dominates rap studies. Even when trans and outer-national contributions to Hip-Hop culture are acknowledged, they are quickly subordinated in relation to this narrative. Although studies that attempt to deal with rap produced outside North America may discuss Hip-Hop's connection with local communities, the privileging of US Hip-Hop continues to contribute to a view of rap as originating in New York followed by a process of globalisation. This obscures the ways in which social groups outside of the US appropriate the form to express their particular needs. In the case of London, it also obscures a history of rap that goes as far back as the 1970s.⁸

The present study takes contemporary London based rap as its focus of analysis. This includes the social relations at play in the production of this art form, the contexts of its reproduction, and rap culture's transformation of those contexts. The ways in which rap forms an aspect of a whole way of life are examined in order to engage with how the social relations within marginalised groups articulate cultural and economic practices with one another. The Hip-Hop creation narrative is compatible with the view that black-English youths receive a globalised African-American culture, copy the generic representations of blackness disseminated through that process, and in doing so act out America's social pathologies. Such a view overlooks the extent to which young people appropriate a variety of resources to construct social and cultural forms appropriate to their needs. Although London's black culture certainly manifests

⁸ An example of this truncation of the history of British rap can be found in David Hesmondhalgh and Casper Melville (2001) pp. 86 - 110

a number of problematic features, these cannot be divorced from the complexities and pressures of life in Britain's urban centres. Through a sustained analysis of this cultural form, I examine how London's rap music is not merely complicit with some of the damaging effects of the broader social and economic forces in the city, but how it is also used to develop strategies to deal with those forces in a productive and enabling manner.

Guide to this Study

Through a critical appropriation of Bourdieu's theory of the habitus, I examine the cultural politics produced through rap in London. In my analysis of the practice of rapping, I engage with the way in which distinct modalities of knowledge are employed to explore concerns about the conditions within which young Londoners dwell. Through the observation of rap's performance and use in a range of contexts I aim to develop the detailed analysis of particular events and practices into a larger picture of the social significance of contemporary London based rap. I do not, however, follow Bourdieu's insistence on the necessity of statistics in order to analyse the genesis of mental structures⁹ in an objective field with which to oppose agents' subjective responses and experience of that field. I pursue an interpretative agenda in an attempt to engage with agents' coming to terms with and struggle over their positions in contemporary London. Judith Butler's criticism of the distinction that Bourdieu makes between the subjective and objective domains of practice suggests that an interpretative approach may develop significant insight into the operations of social performatives in the production of raced and gendered subjectivities in

⁹ Pierre Bourdieu (1984) p. 468

London's black-public sphere.¹⁰ Indeed, Bourdieu admits that the 'reality of the social world is in fact partly determined by the struggles between agents over the representation of their position in the social world and, consequently, of that world.'¹¹ I attempt to relate the work of representation and agents' representations of themselves to the social, economic and political forces that act upon them in order to engage with how they negotiate their position in postcolonial London.

Chapters one and two map the intellectual topography of the remaining chapters. Chapter one reviews the main areas of literature that the study draws upon. Rap studies is an emerging field and there is little scholarship on British rap music. Therefore, I have sought to bring Hip-Hop studies together with studies of the public sphere and common culture. I have sought to use Bourdieu's concept of the *habitus* as a framework through which these distinct fields might be usefully combined. Chapter two sets out the methodological strategies that I followed in the collection and analysis of data during the fieldwork.

In chapter three I outline how young Londoners appropriate rap in a variety of contexts. I discuss how through this appropriation they use rap to develop their social awareness and recognition. I go on to consider how young artists participate in and produce a variety of social forms through which to further develop their subjective interests, and the role of these social relations in developing distinctive black-London scenes. I discuss the role of technology in

¹⁰ Judith Butler (1999) p. 119

¹¹ Pierre Bourdieu (1984) p. 253

the construction of contemporary rap scenes and the adjustments made to the form in order to meet the needs of young people in London. My examination of how and where rappers practice this art-form includes a discussion of the organisational work necessary to build and sustain the social scenes through which this culture is reproduced. It also leads on to a consideration of the socialisation of subjective urges, and examination of how the necessary work of interpreting the everyday world that is organised through rap music becomes articulated with the negotiation of identity and a position within contemporary London.

In chapter four I discuss how rap is used in mainstream metropolitan life. Through an ethnography of London's public buses, I investigate the social relations produced through this art-form and how particular cultural practices transform public space. I also consider the political context in which young Londoners' playing of music takes place. By analysing the formal physical and sonic structuring of public buses, I attempt to show how this space is open to play and how rap music users exploit this openness. The reshaping of public space through an ethics of play raises significant questions regarding what public space is for, the role of art in shaping civil society, how young people are able to take responsibility in the city and express their right to be themselves in public. I use this ethnographic work as a vehicle through which to engage with the position of young people in the city, to observe the mainstreaming of black culture, and to analyse how young people use rap in the development of their adult identities.

Vital to the development of a distinctive way of being in London, are the youth clubs and nightclubs in which black music is played, performed and danced to. Based upon an ethnographic study of nightclubs and concerts, chapter five analyses the production of the aura of London based rap. I examine the distinct forms of investment that users and producers have in the dance scene. I then connect this to the relations between artists and users. The reproduction of subaltern masculinities and femininities is observed through the use of dance space by artists and their audiences. In particular, I analyse how the MC's performative utterances solicit identification from the audience and how, in turn, audience members produce identities in response to the MC's summons. I employ Benjamin's theory of the aura in order to engage with the social processes and political issues that arise from the work invested in London based rap in the age of digital production.

In chapter six, I analyse rap lyrics and music videos in order to provide an in depth analysis of the themes and forms contained in London based rap. I perform a close analysis of a selection of tracks in an engagement with the process through which the audience's identification is solicited. I discuss the rhetorical strategies employed by artists and how these are adapted in the construction of different forms of social organisation. I then discuss the representation of gendered identities in the black public sphere and the critique of the conditions of urban dwelling made by MCs. I relate this critique to the political and media contexts in which rappers produce their work. Finally, I analyse how rappers relate political and economic goals in the construction of an anti-racist movement.

In chapter seven I examine the city's rap scenes as cultural economies that are oriented to the needs of working class artists. I discuss the significance of the emphasis on the representation of local particularity in the context of post-colonial London. In relation to this I compare the dynamism within Grime to critiques of UK Hip-Hop's generic representations. Cultural practitioners use rap to develop their economic autonomy and invest their work with ethical values that are unavailable to them in mainstream society. I analyse the strategies that artists use to pursue economic autonomy and how the formal and thematic content of their work is related to the negotiation of their social and economic position in the city. I investigate how artists use the form to explore different social, economic and political orientations within the black public sphere and through this process contribute to the continued vitality of London based rap culture.

Chapter 1 Literature Review: Now boarding the last Routemaster through London

The Black Public Sphere

London's black public sphere can be seen as a social field through which black cultural products are produced, circulated, adapted, and employed in the reproduction of the distinctive inter-subjective relations embodied within the black cultural tradition. This partially hidden social formation is reproduced in bedrooms, school corridors, on pirate radio and public buses as well as through online internet forums, magazines, youth-clubs and night-clubs. In *The Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere* Jürgen Habermas discusses the historical formation of the bourgeois public sphere. That social space was characterised by rational critical discussion, and through it the bourgeois public were able to call on authority to legitimate itself. Habermas noted the importance of literature in the production of bourgeois subjectivity:

The moral weeklies which flooded all of Europe already catered to a taste that made the mediocre *Pamela* the bestseller of the century. They already sprang from the needs of a bourgeois reading public that later on would find genuine satisfaction in the literary forms of the domestic drama and psychological novel.¹

He emphasises the significance of the distance, maintained between the bourgeois reader and the printed letter, to the character of the bourgeois public sphere, which 'required the privacy of appropriation as much as it made possible the publicity of a rational-critical exchange about what had been read.'² In contrast to this model of cultural appropriation, the black public sphere

¹ Jürgen Habermas (1989) p. 43

² Ibid p. 170

prioritises the value of inter-subjectivity.³ In Houston Baker's introduction to *The Black Public Sphere*, he discusses 'the formation of a self interested and politically engaged black public sphere in the United States.'⁴ He contrasts this with Habermas's bourgeois public observing that 'the publicness of this sphere was, of course, dependent upon both (male) ownership and (male) literacy.'⁵ Nevertheless, Baker acknowledges that theoretically and 'with a certain willing suspension of disbelief, the idea of a bourgeois public sphere, one compelled by reason alone, free of class and status distinctions and resolutely challenging state authority, is tremendously attractive.'⁶ The concept of the bourgeois public sphere is problematised by a number of issues, particularly its equation, in practice, of human beings with property owners. Baker continues 'Even in a discussion of Habermas' model, however, it is obvious that the *idea* of such an apparatus is far more compelling than its shadowy, exclusive manifestation in history.'⁷ In my use of the idea of a black public sphere, it is important to note that it too is complicated and compromised by its historical formation. Baker argues that the concept of a black public sphere is problematised by African American's historical arrival in the New World 'precisely as *property* belonging to the bourgeoisie'⁸ and the systematic prevention of their acquisition of

³ Paul Gilroy (2004) p. 201

⁴ Houston A. Baker (1996) p. 8

⁵ Ibid p. 11

⁶ Ibid p. 12

⁷ Ibid (emphasis in text)

⁸ Ibid p. 13 (emphasis in text)

literacy. Within the heroic narrative of white male progress a black public sphere could only, therefore, be figured as:

a separate and inverted opposite of a historically imagined white rationality in action. Such a black upside-down world could only be portrayed historically as an irrational, illiterate, owned, nonbourgeois community of chattel - legally barred from establishing even conjugal families - sitting bleakly in submissive silence before the state.⁹

Baker insist on the necessity, for critical analysis to 'make its way through the interruptions and fissures of an idealized notion of universal man without class, racial, and gender distinctions.'¹⁰ In response to the 'strangely distorting chiasma' constructed by the 'white imaginary of public life in America' he draws attention to the possibilities of 'structurally and affectively transforming the founding notion of the bourgeois public sphere into an expressive and empowering self-fashioning.'¹¹ This leads him to recast the public sphere as a plural space in which irreducibly different collectivities come together in political participation.

In 'After the Love has Gone', Paul Gilroy draws attention to the 'ethical and political questions that arise when critically inclined intellectuals discover the special potency of popular cultural styles.'¹² He identifies that those questions feature 'strongly in discussions of Hip hop and Rap because of the way that these expressions precipitate and dramatise intracommunal conflicts over the meanings and forms of freedom.'¹³ My study of UK Hip-Hop and Grime

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid p. 12

¹¹ Ibid p. 13

¹² Paul Gilroy (1994) pp. 49-76, p. 50

¹³ Ibid

attempts to engage with the ethical and political concerns within London's black public sphere. These questions are particularly relevant to the participation of white and black youths in these scenes. Gilroy's discussion of Benny Hill's influence on Luther Campbell's cultural production highlights Hip-Hop's cultural syncretism. This position opposes that of cultural critics, such as Tricia Rose. Gilroy points out that her assertion that 'Hip hop is reducible to a core of invariant exclusively African American "black practices" that permanently resist both commodification and white appropriation'¹⁴ denies 'either the extent to which white consumers currently support black culture or the possible implications of transracial popularity for the political struggles against white supremacy.'¹⁵ Gilroy's emphasis on syncretism is of significance to the present study's concern with the mainstreaming of black culture in London. Furthermore, my work in buses, nightclubs, concerts and lyrics responds to his identification of the proliferation of dramatic inserts such as jokes, and other humorous content in CD albums as

yet another indication that the foundational authority of the performance event has been undermined by the emergence of musical forms that cannot be faithfully or readily translated into concert settings as a result of their technological base.¹⁶

The inter-subjective relations produced within night clubs and public buses, that draw upon advances in technology are a key consideration of this thesis. I employ the concept of aura to analyse how white and black Londoners employ

¹⁴ Ibid p. 52

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid p. 60

linguistic and bodily practices to pursue political goals and explore ethical issues, that include freedom, in the black public sphere.

In his paper, 'Mutual Foundations for National Culture and Liberation Struggle', Frantz Fanon discusses the importance of monitoring the 'development of [the relationship between national reality and culture] during the liberation struggle.'¹⁷ The essay is of significance to the present study principally as a result of the link between Fanon's analysis of culture during the colonial period and my focus on black culture in contemporary (post-colonial) London. In *Policing the Crisis*, Hall et al. discuss the role of racist socio-economic structures and black culture's defensive response to them in the formation of 'colony'¹⁸ areas in London. I relate their analysis, of young black men's responses to economic marginalisation, to the 'hustle' work ethic that informs black cultural entrepreneurship in the capital. Fanon's discussion of the 'bitter, desperate recriminations, those loud violent outbursts that, after all, reassure the occupier'¹⁹ may be fruitfully related to my consideration of violence and the way that this cathartic process is managed within the Grime scene. His argument is pertinent to the self-regulation of Grime performances within London's rap scenes as well as to my discussion of the policing of black culture in the capital. Although the passages from Fanon's paper concern literary production, his comments on the role of the storyteller can be directly related to my discussion of the changing thematic material employed in the Grime scene:

¹⁷ Frantz Fanon (2004) p. 172

¹⁸ Hall et al., (1978) p. 390

¹⁹ Frantz Fanon (2004) p. 173

Close attention should be paid to the emergence of the imagination and inventiveness of songs and folktales in a colonized country. The storyteller responds to the expectations of the people by trial and error and searches for new models, apparently on his own, but in fact with the support of his audience.²⁰

This passage is particularly relevant to my analysis of audience's responses to rap artists' performances and the collective search for and making of meaning in contemporary London's subaltern public spheres. Fanon's argument is also related to my critique of a conservative literary studies, and my discussion of Timothy Clark's *Poetics of Singularity*. A literary studies content to reside within the tranquility of the seminar room is incapable of engaging with the process that Fanon describes as 'imparting new meaning and dynamism to artisanship, dance, music, literature, and the oral epic, [through which] the colonized subject restructures his own perception.'²¹ My own methodological approach attempts to draw upon literary studies' techniques through which the dynamics of particular cultural products, as well as whole genres, can be examined. At the same time the study participates in the far from tranquil environment towards which that dynamism is directed and from which it gains its creative energy.

Christopher Small's discussion of music as an activity rather than an object,²² has to some extent guided my shift away from rap lyrics toward performance. Combined with this, I attempt to bring his discussion of the ideal relations formed through music into my consideration of the ethics of rap. Small

²⁰ Ibid pp. 174-5

²¹ Ibid p. 176

²² Christopher Small (1987) p. 50

contrasts 'highly individualistic'²³ performances of professional symphony concerts with 'the performance of chamber music [which] may be, within limits, a more convivial affair. A quartet of friends, for example, who sit down in the home of one of them to "play the thoughts of the absent fifth known to them only through the music" is much more self-directed than the orchestra'.²⁴ In much of my analysis, especially on buses but also of interview material describing the formation of crews, I attempt to work through Small's identification that 'who one is, is based on relationships ... and musicking is concerned with the exploration, the affirmation and celebration of relationships'.²⁵ The use of Benjamin's notion of the aura allows me to locate the investment in black culture made by artists and their audiences within a different trend that can be seen in changing social relations in wider society.

By informing my analysis of the practices of MCs and their audiences with Walter Benjamin's work on the aura, I aim to develop an understanding of the aura of London based rap. Through examining the relations produced between artists and audiences I will engage with the social processes which produce this aura. This allows me to investigate the strategies that artists use to understand their relation to their work and the value of that work. Benjamin's discussion of the way that artworks were used in past ages can be adapted to the soundscape of the digital age. Consider his remarks on the authenticity of the artwork: 'photographic reproduction with the aid of certain processes, such as

²³ Ibid p. 61

²⁴ Ibid, the quotation is taken from Christopher Driver, 'Different Drum' *New Society*, 21 September, 1978, p. 639

²⁵ Ibid p. 56

enlargement or slow motion, can capture images which escape natural vision. Secondly, technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself. [...] The Cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art; the choral production, performed in an auditorium or in the open air, resounds in the drawing room.²⁶ If his statements that 'The uniqueness [or aura] of a work of art is inseparable from its being embedded in the fabric of tradition. [... and that] We know that the earliest works originated in the service of a ritual - first the magical, then the religious kind. It is significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function'²⁷ are set alongside the consideration of the loss of authenticity and the cultic value of Madonnas that were used during particular rituals after being hidden for most of the year, one can begin to develop a theory of how the aura that we are concerned with is based upon the use of music in order to collectively produce a special set of social relations. What is commonly referred to as 'hype' by artists and audiences is a valued aspect of rap's performance, and while this cannot be contained in the recorded material, artists do substantial work oriented towards producing this 'hype.' Furthermore, audiences find something of substantial value in rap music's orientation to particular responses, and will themselves work towards producing forms of the ideal relations that Small discusses. Substantial emphasis on the beat in forum discussions highlights this as a key component in the grounded aesthetics of London based rap culture. Through

²⁶ Walter Benjamin (1968) p. 220-1

²⁷ Ibid p. 223-4

analysing responses to the music as well as MCing, I aim to adapt this theory of the aura through the social processes at work in contemporary London's dance spaces.

Benjamin's comment that 'much futile thought had been devoted to the question of whether photography is an art. The primary question - whether the very invention of photography had not transformed the entire nature of art - was not raised',²⁸ raises the question of the significance of the digital production and reproduction of music. The economic consequences of this and its impact on the recording industry has substantially changed the relations between artists and companies. Perhaps more importantly, Benjamin's discussion of the actor, reduced to a prop and stripped of his aura, is suggestive of the changed relations in contemporary society between artists and their publics: 'The stage actor identifies himself with the character of his role. The film actor very often is denied this opportunity. His creation is by no means all of a piece'.²⁹ Against the trend that he identified in film 'The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the "spell of the personality," the phony spell of a commodity'³⁰ I argue that the contemporary performances of MCs and DJs attempt to reinvest in their practice the aura that is stripped of the film actor.

Habitus

A key organising concept for this study is the *habitus*. Pierre Bourdieu defines this as a structuring structure through which social subjects 'classified by their

²⁸ Ibid p. 227

²⁹ Ibid p. 230

³⁰ Ibid p. 231

classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make.³¹ This concept provides a framework for the analysis of how agents are subject to, formed by, and resist the forces which structure the social space. By adapting this framework to the concerns of the present study, the role of rap in the socialisation of interviewees can be seen as part of the development of a forms of cultural competence and the acquisition of a *habitus*. Bourdieu's formula bases the reproduction of cultural dispositions in the objective conditions in which agents find themselves. I place the acquisition of the linguistic skills and cultural dispositions of the rapper within the social, economic and political contexts of postcolonial London. In their appropriation of rap, marginalised groups produce representations of London that challenge or present alternatives to the hegemonic utterances of the dominant social classes. Through the acquisition of a *habitus* oriented to this art form, particular cultural and political dispositions are reproduced, adapted to and contest the socio-economic relations in the capital.

I employ Bourdieu's *habitus* in my discussion of the dispositions adopted by young people living in London, the reproduction of particular cultural practices by them, and the objective conditions that structure their subjective experience of the urban environment. However, there are some limitations in Bourdieu's work on this concept. His comments on the absence of a '...popular art in the sense of an art of the urban working class...' suggests the inadequacy of his work on aesthetic distinction to a multicultural context. Black-British popular cultural forms are overwhelmingly urban and predominantly working

³¹ Pierre Bourdieu (1984) p. 6

class. The multicultural context places the position of 'legitimate culture' (which Bourdieu focuses on throughout his critique of the judgement of taste) under increased pressure, as social individuals and groups who may believe themselves to be upwardly mobile do not necessarily feel that they have to disavow their old customs and practices or identify with the dominant, 'legitimate' culture. Indeed, Bourdieu's reference to the 'black is beautiful strategy'³² as well as his discussion of the strategies used avoid 'downclassing'³³ by appropriating new titles or exercising responsibilities without having entitlement to do so,³⁴ identifies ways in which the social space can be transformed through the contestation of legitimacy. Bourdieu's focus on legitimate art limits the value of his critique to the study of black popular cultures. Despite analysing the interest in disinterestedness in relation to high art he does not systematically engage with the significance of popular forms to their users. Nevertheless, the openings, or possibilities, that Bourdieu refers to indicate how a sociology of rap may employ the framework that he provides to analyse this popular cultural form on its own terms. A critical appropriation of Bourdieu is necessary because he does not sufficiently recognise the possibility of a cultural politics that may challenge the established social order. This is a result of too simple an analysis of artistic production and consumption.

Judith Butler criticises Bourdieu's 'distinction between the subjective and objective domains of practice'³⁵ and highlights the way in which the

³² Ibid p. 384

³³ Ibid p. 150

³⁴ Ibid p. 481

³⁵ Judith Butler (1999) p. 119

‘*expropriability* of the dominant, ‘authorised’ discourse [...] constitutes one potential site of its subversive resignification.’³⁶ Bourdieu’s framework provides a mechanism that may be adapted to engage with black-British cultural politics through his discussion of temporality (in relation to the job market): ‘it is the time lag ... linked to changes in the productive apparatus, and changes in titles, which creates the space for symbolic strategies aimed at exploiting the discrepancies between the nominal and the real...’³⁷ The appropriation of names by rappers are means through which these artists attempt to deal with their marginalised position in the city. That appropriation is linked to their assumption of the responsibility of representing their community to their community, or criticising the dominant social group. However, this more recognisably political practice also works alongside the use of rap as a source of communal pleasure. MCs development of the necessary work of interpreting the everyday world into an art form produces interpretative communities. This assumption of responsibility and the expropriation of dominant discourse through which that assumption takes place produces a transformation of social space and of their position in that space, that is an important part of the mainstreaming of black culture.

In ‘Music as Technology of the Self’ Tia DeNora discusses the social effects of music in subjective construction. Through focusing on “private” or one-to-one forms of “human-music interaction”³⁸ through a series of ethnographic interviews, DeNora attempts to show ‘music as it is implicated in

³⁶ Ibid. 123

³⁷ Pierre Bourdieu (1984) p. 481

³⁸ Tia De Nora (1999) pp. 31-56, p. 32 (emphasis in text)

the self generation of social agency *as this process occurs in action*³⁹ The focus of De Nora's study on individuals contrasts with my concern with rap's role in inter-subjective construction and social action. However, her discussion of how, rather than acting as a stimulus, musics affects how individuals orient to and interpret it 'within the semiotic web of music and its extra-musical associations'⁴⁰ is useful to bear in mind when considering how young people develop awareness of themselves and of their social environment through rap music. In particular one of my participant's description of music acting as a catalyst in nightclubs bears some correspondence to De Nora's statement that 'music is used as a catalyst that shifts actors out of their reluctance to adopt what they perceive as "necessary" modes of agency, and into the modes of agency "demanded" by particular circumstances.'⁴¹ Her development of this argument to highlight how music becomes constitutive of particular emotional states, rather than merely expressive of a pre-existing state, enables the role of rap in constituting particular feelings and social relations to be made more readily apparent. In 'Aesthetic materials and Aesthetic Agency', Witkin and De Nora highlight how 'aesthetic means were employed to configure social agency and its settings ... one actor made a definite choice concerning the structure of the aesthetic environment ... in ways that had implications for the aesthetic agency of both partners.'⁴² This discussion highlights the necessity of considering the content of aesthetic materials as well as their social use and

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Ibid p. 44

⁴¹ Ibid p. 38

⁴² Robert Witkin and Tia De Nora (1997) pp. 1 - 6, p. 5

associations. In both of these articles the temporal unfolding of music plays a significant role in the self-reflexive constitution of a feeling state.

In ‘Modernist Discourse, Psychic Form, and Agency: Aesthetic Subjectivities at IRCAM’, Georgina Born examines ‘aesthetic subjectivities inhabiting a high cultural institution.’⁴³ Her study details the aesthetic dispositions of a number of composers at a high profile French research institute, and outlines what she sees as the limits of Bourdieu’s sociology of culture’⁴⁴ by drawing on psychoanalysis. Amongst the composers that she interviews, several repudiated their interest in popular music, in order to conform with the aesthetic and ideological concerns of the institution, whereas others used popular music outside their work at IRCAM in various ways. Her use of the psychoanalytical concept ‘splitting’ to read the adjustment of composers’ musical preferences as ‘an unconscious distortion whereby the “object” (of perception) is experienced as split into a “good” and a “bad” object, each both absolutely separate yet antagonistically bound’⁴⁵ is coupled with her concern with what she perceives as the agency of those who demonstrate ‘resistance’⁴⁶ to IRCAM’s discursive imperatives. I suggest her critique of Bourdieu and use of Kleinian psychoanalytical concepts results in a rather crude construction of agency (she does not see the adoption of the constraints of modernism, through taking up a position at IRCAM, for example, as a form of agency). Furthermore, I argue that Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, when

⁴³ Georgina Born (1997), pp. 480-501, p. 480

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Ibid p. 491

⁴⁶ Ibid p. 495

combined with his concept of an artistic field, is in fact adequate to the material she presents in her discussion of aesthetic subjectivities. Nevertheless, Born's work may be read alongside that of De Nora and Witkin in consideration of the contemporary study of aesthetic agency. Furthermore, her study of intellectuals working within an institution comes closer to my concern with the work done by various collective agents in the production of the UK Hip-Hop and Grime scenes than DeNora's rather more individualistic approach to aesthetic subjectivity.

In 'Aesthetics and Anaesthetics', Susan Buck-Morss discusses Walter Benjamin's essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. Her reconsideration of this essay engages in a critical discussion of the concept 'aesthetics' because 'it is precisely to this origin [of the word's etymological meaning] that, via Benjamin's revolution, we find ourselves returned'⁴⁷: 'Aisthitikos [which] is the Greek word for that which is "perceptive by feeling." *Aisthesis* is the sensory experience of perception. The original field of aesthetics is not art but reality - corporeal, material nature.'⁴⁸ Buck-Morss then considers the socio-political context of the modern era through which, by Benjamin's time, the term 'underwent a reversal of meaning'.⁴⁹ She identifies the leitmotif of autogenesis in the modifications in the meaning of this concept and highlights how, in Kant, this involves the separation of the subject from his sense perception. 'Kant's transcendental subject purges himself of the senses which endanger autonomy not only because they unavoidably entangle him in the world, but, specifically, because they make him passive ... instead of active ...

⁴⁷ Susan Buck-Morss (1992) pp. 3-41, p. 6

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Ibid p. 7

susceptible ... to sympathy and tears.⁵⁰ As a result of these transformations the aesthetic subject is constructed as autonomous and ‘sense-dead’.⁵¹ Buck-Morss then opposes this *anaesthetic* subject to an view of the human as radically open *synaesthetic* being,⁵² and critically examines the production of anaesthetics in the socio-economic developments that took place through the industrial revolution and which shape the modern world: ‘The problem is that under the conditions of modern shock - the daily shocks of the modern world - response to stimuli *without* thinking has become necessary for survival.’⁵³ In addition to the development of drugs to anaesthetise the body throughout the nineteenth century, Buck-Morss observes that ‘a narcotic was made out of reality itself’⁵⁴ and describes the phantasmagoric forms of Parisian shopping arcades that involved, not ‘numbing, but flooding the senses.’⁵⁵ After considering the Wagnerian Opera’s use of technology to produce its phantasmagoric effects, and the division of labour that it involved in producing a superficial unity,⁵⁶ she states that:

For Kant the domination of nature was internalized: the subjective will, the disciplined, material body, and the autonomous self that was produced as a result, were all *within* the (same) individual. But by the end of the nineteenth century, these functions were divided: “the self made man” was entrepreneur of a large corporation; the “warrior” was general of a technologically sophisticated war machine; the ruling prince was head of an

⁵⁰ Ibid p. 9

⁵¹ Ibid p. 10

⁵² Ibid p. 18

⁵³ Ibid p. 16

⁵⁴ Ibid p. 22

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ Ibid pp. 24-5

expanding bureaucracy; even the social revolutionary had become the leader and shaper of a disciplined, mass party organization.⁵⁷

In Benjamin's essay, he contrasts the painter and magician with the surgeon and photographer, and the present study considers the intersubjective relationship between the rapper appearing before the audience, and the self organisation of London's rap scenes. In contrast to the 'tripartite division of perceptual perspective - agent, matter, and observer' that Buck-Morss describes in the development of modern society, I attempt to engage in the aesthetic and ethical values that informs the entrepreneurship of MCs and DJ who attempt to negotiate a position of autonomy within London's post-colonial socio-economic and political order. This is related to the themes of social solidarity and toughening up, but also to the formal antiphony and appeal of the music to the body. Buck-Morss' discussion of aesthetics may be brought to bear upon the significance of vulgar references to the body in MCs' exhortations to nightclub audiences and the interpretative practices employed on the dance-floor.

In Richard Shusterman's 'The Fine Art of Rap' he argues that rap music 'challenges some of our most deeply entrenched aesthetic conventions, conventions which are common not only to modernism as an artistic style and ideology but to the philosophical doctrine of modernity and its differentiation of cultural spheres.'⁵⁸ Shusterman's discussion is relevant to my consideration of the transformation of public transport space and of how rap is used to manage 'violence'. His observation of how rap music's transformative lifting of 'concrete

⁵⁷ Ibid p. 28-9

⁵⁸ Richard Shusterman (1991), pp. 613-632, p. 614

sound-events’⁵⁹ is related to what he sees as rap’s challenge to the ‘deep division between creative artist and appropriative audience; transfigurative appreciation can take the form of art.’⁶⁰ This mode of appreciation can be seen at work in the relations produced by the playing of music on London’s public buses and nightclubs. Shusterman also acknowledges the social power of rap in its transformation of ‘violent rivalries between local gangs into musical-verbal contests between rapping crews.⁶¹ His discussion of rap’s postmodern aesthetics may be related to Vattimo’s radicalisation of hermeneutic philosophy and my discussion of an aesthetic nihilism at work in some rap production. Both Shusterman and Vattimo emphasise the reinterpretation of history as an important element of non-foundational thinking:

Neither the past nor the present is ever purely given or reported; they are always selectively represented and shaped by discursive structures reflecting dominant interests and values, which are often simply those of the politically dominant. In being historicized, history is not so much lost but pluralized and openly politicized, instead of having its implicit political agenda concealed under the guise of neutral objectivity where it cannot be challenged or even recognized as political.⁶²

Shusterman’s foregrounding of rap’s significance as a radical cultural politics⁶³ may be related to the complex representations of urban dwelling in Grime videos that I discuss in the present study. The working through and reinterpretation of the problematics of contemporary urban dwelling and the socio-historical conditions of black London in a manner that affirms a working-class black subjectivity may be considered an aesthetic nihilism and I employ

⁵⁹ Ibid p. 615

⁶⁰ Ibid p. 618

⁶¹ Ibid p. 620

⁶² Ibid p. 624

⁶³ Ibid p. 627

hermeneutic analysis in order to engage with the formal and thematic qualities of this art form.

Hip-Hop Studies, Textuality, and the Soundscape

Perhaps one of the possible weaknesses of ethnographic studies in general (and my project cannot escape this issue) is that without a historical dimension it is difficult to analyse how a culture manifests the adaptations that a particular social group have made to their environmental conditions over time. However, in Anderson's *Code of the Street* this results in the cultural code he discusses being prioritised over the environmental factors. Even though he makes reference to the socio-economic and historical context of his ethnography, he frequently places the code within a cultural and ideological context: 'Their outlook ... follows rules very much shaped by the code of the street.'⁶⁴ Here we have views, following rules, that are in turn shaped by a code. The layers of discourse eclipse the objective position of the people to which Anderson occasionally refers. At times Anderson's use of culture as a referential frame obscures the social and economic position of his research participants. This is particularly apparent where in his reference to the Roman era, shogun warriors, and 'biblical times' he fails to demonstrate how these contextual markers operate in the production of this code. The context for the code becomes so broad (both black tradition and history in general) and the economically determining factors so understated that the code becomes the principle problem for blacks' conditions. Furthermore, the socio-economic marginalisation that produces the code becomes an insubstantial part of the general historical

⁶⁴ Elijah Anderson (2000) p. 142

background. I deal with some of the weaknesses of Anderson's seminal study at length in the closing chapter, because of the text's influence not only within Hip-Hop studies (and the inclusion of extracts of the book in the Hip-Hop studies reader *That's the Joint!* is one indicator of this) but also because its adoption by the U.S. Department of Justice signals its influence on policy makers and criminal courts.⁶⁵

These weaknesses would be less problematic if he were as critical of the 'decent' culture to which he opposes the 'code of the street'. Anderson states that 'those with fewer apparent options and a limited sense of the future may more fully invest themselves in the culture [code of the street].'⁶⁶ In contrast to this, I argue that it is specifically because this culture provides some sense of affirmation that those who are able to adapt successfully to this way of life choose it. Even this limited sense of a future or affirmation of self is denied them by mainstream society. By adopting a street orientation they are able to live it fully as an authentic mode of being. Anderson's distanced tone at some points suggests that options are lost by choosing this limited route through life. The significance that those options are not available in the first place is not marked as strongly in his discussion as it should be. Furthermore his opposition of 'decent' and 'street' culture obscures the complexities within black working-class communities. Despite identifying that 'decent' boys need to exercise some identification with the street,⁶⁷ he does not develop this issue further. Alongside this, Andersen does not seem able to identify the values of the working poor,

⁶⁵ <http://opac.yale.edu/news/article.aspx?id=6458> [Date Accessed 15/02/2011]

⁶⁶ Elijah Anderson (2000) p. 143

⁶⁷ Ibid p. 112

decent young men, women and families that he deals with as working class values. The decent orientation, that he constructs, seems directed to pleasing white onlookers or adopting mainstream society's values.⁶⁸ In addition to aspiring to be middle class (and adopting the patriarchal values of the white middle classes) decent blacks appear also to aspire, somehow, to whiteness, or at least to the approval of whites. Fundamentally, Anderson fails to ask how, if having a job and a family are the requisite elements for a respectable position in 'decent' society, it is possible for young people who do not have access to decent jobs to gain respect. I suggest that 'code switching' youths present something potentially more radical than Anderson recognises. My engagement with the cultural production of artists such as Roots Manuva and Dizzee Rascal and use of aura as an analytical concept attempts to produce a more nuanced appraisal of black inner city life than Anderson's code allows.

In *Black Noise*, Tricia Rose argues that rap emerged as part of Hip-Hop culture in the Bronx during the 1970s.⁶⁹ Her description of break-dancers and DJs who attached 'customized, makeshift turntables and speakers to street light electrical sources [and through this] revised the use of central thoroughfares ... [making] "open-air" community centers in neighborhoods where there were none'⁷⁰ is useful in the analysis of the radical potential of rap in the public sphere, and its history in providing a form of cohesion for socially and economically marginalized groups. However, although Rose refers to the multicultural context of hip-hop's 'birth' she fails to develop the significance of

⁶⁸ Ibid p. 180

⁶⁹ Tricia Rose (1994) p. 2

⁷⁰ Ibid p. 22

this.⁷¹ Furthermore, in her final chapter she seems to celebrate the substitution of male dominance with female dominance. In spite of the merits of Rose's arguments on the progressive aspects of some female rappers' work, she admits that many female MCs reinforce dominant gender roles without adequately addressing this issue. This failure mars her critique of politically progressive rap and of sexist male rappers.⁷² Finally, her use of terms such as dominate, subvert, destabilise are somewhat crude. Often, where she asserts a subversion has taken place it can be argued that there has instead been 'accommodation' or 'adaptation'. In contrast to Rose, I attempt a nuanced analysis of gendered representations of multicultural London.

In *Club Cultures* Sarah Thornton conducts an ethnographic study of popular music culture. She notes that the ascent of 'liveness' as a distinct musical value coincided with the decline in performance as both the dominant medium and the prototype for recording.⁷³ This trend produced the social phenomena that she calls disc cultures. Importantly for the present study, she highlights that 'black British disc cultures often emphasize the strength of communities outside the dance club setting, seeing the "vibe" as an affirmation of a politicized black identity.'⁷⁴ Thornton goes on to identify that white dance cultures appropriated aspects of black culture: 'warehouse events, in their turn, drew their inspiration from the Afro-Caribbean "sound-systems" which had

⁷¹ Ibid p. 34

⁷² Ibid p. 155

⁷³ Sarah Thornton (1995) p. 26

⁷⁴ Ibid p. 30

been a feature of black entertainment since the 1970s⁷⁵ Her ethnographic research and her discussion of authenticity draws on Benjamin's concept of the aura:

What authenticates contemporary dance cultures is the buzz or energy which results from the interaction of record, DJ and crowd. "Liveness" is displaced from the stage to the dancefloor, from the worship of the performer to a veneration of "atmosphere" or "vibe". The DJ and dancers share the spotlight as *de facto* performers; the crowd becomes a self-conscious cultural phenomenon - one which generates moods immune to reproduction, for which you have to be there.⁷⁶

There is some correspondence between this observation and my own use of this concept in my analysis of rap cultures. However, her emphasis upon the textual analysis of music journalism in her criticism of subcultural studies leads her to argue that 'subcultures are best defined as social groups that have been labelled as such.'⁷⁷ This suggests that she privileges these media over her ethnographic work and does not sufficiently engage with the complex relations that constitute different subcultures. Indeed, her spurious criticism of Hall and Jefferson's statement that subcultures have a 'distinctive enough shape and structure to make them identifiably different [and that they are] focused around certain activities, values ... territorial spaces',⁷⁸ does not provide any insight into these socio-cultural forms. Her own argument substitutes the assignment of labels by print media for socio-cultural processes that come to be distinguished as distinctive. Significantly, she seems to have lost sight of the implications of her statements about black identities and the appropriation of black culture in the

⁷⁵ Ibid p. 47

⁷⁶ Ibid p. 29-30

⁷⁷ Ibid p. 162

⁷⁸ Hall and Jefferson cited in Sarah Thornton (1995) p. 119

production of self-conscious collectivities. Her criticism of subcultural studies, and superficial analysis of the particular scenes she describes in her ethnography does not so much strip those club-goers of agency, it simply misses the point. Her argument is incapable of providing any insight into the social and political structures and values that distinguish particular subcultures from others. Furthermore, she fails to deal with the complex relations within and between subcultures and the distinct relations that articulate subcultures with corporate cultures. In contrast to Thornton, I conduct a more fully developed analysis of specific subcultures. Through this strategy I attempt to examine the social and political significance of these cultures, rather than to reduce all subcultures to undifferentiated groups that have been labelled by cynical media operations.

Raymond Williams discusses, in *The Sociology of Culture*, how in particular historical moments artistic practices and products may reveal the process of changing social relations and the ideological transformations that accompany them. His identification of the significance of the soliloquy in developing Elizabethan society's understanding of itself, highlights the importance of integrating the analysis of artistic strategies and formal devices with social changes: 'what can ... be called a device, is in the more developed and complex cases an innovating series of formal elements which can be shown to be inseparable from new conceptions of personality and new senses of the limits and contradictions of available social relations.'⁷⁹ Viewing the soliloquy merely as an artistic device eliminates the possibility of engaging with how the

⁷⁹ Raymond Williams (1995) p. 141

emerging bourgeoisie developed the ideological resources to conceive of the relatively autonomous individual.⁸⁰ Jürgen Habermas' description of the 'genuine satisfaction'⁸¹ that the bourgeois would find in the 'literary forms of the domestic drama and psychological novel'⁸² identifies a later stage in the socio-cultural development of the modern conception of the human, heralded through Hamlet's procrastinations. By attending to the production and reception of contemporary rap, alongside the semantic and semiotic analysis of Grime and UK Hip-Hop tracks, it is possible to engage with the processes through which blacks in London develop their awareness of, and come to terms with, the relations that position them in the capital.

Murray Schafer's seminal study, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, profoundly influenced the field of soundscape studies. In his outline of soundscape studies' purpose, Schafer highlights the need for 'a way to make environmental acoustics a *positive* study program'⁸³ He goes on to state that '[o]nly a total appreciation of the acoustic environment can give us the resources for improving the orchestration of the world soundscape.'⁸⁴ There is a significant distinction between Schafer's use of the soundscape as an overarching concept and my discussion of dominant and subaltern soundscapes. Whereas Schafer is principally concerned with what may constitute a soundscape and how to make the soundscape an object of

⁸⁰ Ibid p. 142

⁸¹ Jürgen Habermas (1989) p. 43

⁸² Ibid

⁸³ Murray Schafer (1977) p. 4 (emphasis in text)

⁸⁴ Ibid

analysis, my interest is in how sound transforms space and facilitates collective being. Nevertheless, Schafer's discussion of audioanalgesia informs my criticism of the use of music and other sounds on public transport: 'the use of sound as a painkiller, a distraction to dispel distractions. The use of audioanalgesia in modern life extends from its original use in the dental chair to wired background music in hotels, offices, restaurants and many other public and private places.'⁸⁵ By attending to the sonic organisation of public transport and other spaces, my concern with cultural politics intersects with Schafer's project. Significantly, the soundscape offers an alternative to the 'text' as an object of analysis. This facilitates the observation of distinct modes of interaction, appropriation and production that might be neglected in a close textual analysis.

In Gianni Vattimo's *Beyond Interpretation*, the philosopher discusses the 'nihilist vocation'⁸⁶ of hermeneutics in order to radicalise its critique of objectivism and positivism.⁸⁷ In his discussion of truth as opening rather than correspondence, Vattimo states:

The growing historico-political self-awareness of science (on account of which epistemology at its best turns increasingly from the theory of knowledge, logic and the theory of scientific language towards the knowledge of the scientific community) might well be numbered amongst the aspects of this transformation of the notion of truth.⁸⁸

As I combine a hermeneutic method drawn from the humanities (close textual analysis) with ethnography, Vattimo's discussion helps to situate my

⁸⁵ Ibid p. 96

⁸⁶ Gianni Vattimo (1996) p. 2

⁸⁷ Ibid p. 105

⁸⁸ Ibid p. 94

appropriation of these methods within a critical tradition. Much of my own analysis is directed towards the conditions of urban dwelling of young black Londoners or, what might be termed, the *habitus* of London based rap.

Vattimo's speaks of the hermeneutic conception of truth in terms of dwelling: 'Dwelling implies an interpretative belonging which involves both consensus and the possibility of critical activity.'⁸⁹ In Vattimo's view, as my analysis claims only to be an interpretation, it gains its validity by acknowledging its own position as an 'interpretative articulation'⁹⁰ of its belonging to a tradition and a product of modernity. My aim of engaging both with an academic community and with the social groups on which this study is based is related to the emphasis Vattimo places on 'every particular true statement' to 'constitute the basis of a possible universality, namely, the persuasiveness of that statement; ideally, for everyone.'⁹¹

Nonsense, Common Sense, Play, and the Body

In *Nonsense* Susan Stewart discusses the interpretative strategies of nonsensical practices, their relation to common sense, and their role in the production of reality in an ongoing social process. Her discussion draws attention to the contextualisation at work in the reproduction of common sense discourses: 'the interpretive activities of everyday, common sense discourse may be seen to be selective and thus involve an implication of "that which is not said", that which is left unrealised.'⁹² One of the strategies of nonsense that Stewart highlights is

⁸⁹ Ibid p. 82

⁹⁰ Ibid p. 108

⁹¹ Ibid p. 95

⁹² Susan Stewart (c1978) p. 86

the play with boundaries. Through various processes, such as misdirection or providing either a surplus or deficiency of signification, nonsense activities bring what would otherwise be considered ‘context’ into the materiality of the ‘text’. Her discussion of the strategies of nonsense and their role within the production of social reality is an important means through which the playful practices employed in rap music can be understood.

Interviewees discussed issues relating to rap music and its production in a manner that implies that it is a transparent medium. However, the use of meaningful and nonsense communication renders the form substantially opaque. Representations produced through rapping both invite and forbid interpretation, producing a politics of interpretation that necessitates attention to the contexts of performance and the close analysis of how rap soundscapes are constructed. This also requires that consideration be given to the effects of those performances.

Stewart discusses the way that contextual knowledge is hierarchically organised, arguing that drawing attention to ‘what everybody knows’ would result in disaster ‘since attention would be dispersed away from any purpose at hand, and the consequent failure to ‘go on’ would undermine all confidence in the viability of the given social construction of reality.’⁹³ Through strategies of play rap artists draw attention to abstract time, the body, space, and other ‘contextual’ material. Attentiveness to the use of such strategies allows the examination of how rap produces temporality without order, and non-progressive movement. The adoption of nonsense strategies of play in public

⁹³ Ibid

spaces can be shown to take on a subversive social significance in its disruption of the dominant order. Furthermore, Stewarts' theorisation of nonsense may be adapted to understanding the role of these activities in the social processes which make existence in the city liveable.

In connection with the significance of nonsense and play, Mikhail Bakhtin discusses the carnival as the intersection between life and art 'but shaped according to a certain pattern of play.'⁹⁴ Bakhtin's analysis of the 'material bodily principle'⁹⁵ of the carnival grotesque, through the work of Rabelais, can be brought to bear upon the patterns of play employed in the bodily practices of rap and dance. *Rabelais and His World* is a key text for the present study, and informs the approach that I have taken to linguistic and bodily practices. It is important to highlight the body as a modality of knowledge in the cultural practices articulated with rapping. This is a significant issue that guides my use of close textual analysis of what is principally an oral form. Particular forms of exaggeration, repetition, and volume, employed within spoken discourses are rendered insignificant when not analysed in conjunction with the bodily practices of London based rap. By bringing the body into the focus of my analysis, I draw attention to how dancers and rappers employ various strategies in order to both understand and transform their positions within London's social spaces. One of the most important elements of Bakhtin's analysis for the present study is the highlighting of the topographical logic at work in forms of travesty, and debasement. 'From the wearing of clothes turned

⁹⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin (1994) p. 7

⁹⁵ Ibid p. 19

inside out and trousers slipped over the head to the election of mock kings and popes the same topographical logic is put to work: shifting from top to bottom, casting the high and the old, the finished and completed into the material bodily lower stratum for death and rebirth.⁹⁶ Furthermore, his discussion of Billingsgate abuses helps to provide insight into the communal affirmation experienced in MC battles:

The billingsgate idiom is a two-faced Janus. The praise, as we have said, is ironic and ambivalent. It is on the brink of abuse; the one leads to the other, and it is impossible to draw the line between them. ... The grotesque language, particularly in its oldest form, was oriented toward the world and toward all the world's phenomena in their condition of unfinished metamorphosis: the passing from night to morning, from winter to spring, from the old to the new, from death to birth.⁹⁷

These practices are employed within the space of the carnival. The aesthetics of the carnival grotesque can be seen at work within the cultural practices of rap artists and their publics. Bakhtin's work on festivity can be related to Bourdieu's discussion of the working class cafe: 'The art of eating and drinking remains one of the few areas in which the working classes explicitly challenge the legitimate art of living.'⁹⁸ Following Bourdieu's argument that 'the body is the most indisputable manifestation of class taste',⁹⁹ one may see, through the linguistic play of rap, how cultural practitioners free themselves from the dominant idiom and produce a special collectivity as well as subaltern representations of their world. The praise/abuse form of these exchanges (that work best in an atmosphere of good humour) exerts a strong attraction, particularly in the

⁹⁶ Ibid p. 81-2

⁹⁷ Ibid p. 165

⁹⁸ Pierre Bourdieu (1984) p. 179

⁹⁹ Ibid p. 190

Grime scene: ‘Bloodshed, dismemberment, burning, death, beatings, blows, curses, and abuses all these elements are steeped in “merry time,” time which kills and gives birth, which allows nothing old to be perpetuated and never ceases to generate the new and the youthful.’¹⁰⁰ Bakhtin’s discussion of the proliferation of terms that include reference to indecent body parts is also a helpful link between grounded aesthetics and battling. The way in which certain terms facilitate an atmosphere of freedom and familiarity is an important part of my argument regarding the aura of black British culture. Following Bakhtin’s foregrounding of the ‘festive square’¹⁰¹ as a particular site of this freedom, I develop an analysis of rap’s effect in a variety of spaces and modalities.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid p. 211

¹⁰¹ Mikhail Bakhtin (1994) p. 188

Chapter 2 Methodology: Hold On Tight!

This study is concerned with the production of rap music and the social relations that are brought about through its use in London. My focus on this city requires that I limit my concern with the flow of culture to and from other nodes on ‘the webbed pathways of black Atlantic political culture.’¹ This is necessary in order to deal with activity that relates to rap music based in the capital.

Therefore, even though US Hip-Hop is an important part of London’s black culture, I focus on Grime music (which is closely associated with East London) and the city’s UK Hip-Hop scene. However, I attempt to avoid a sedentary approach to black culture by attending to the movements of people, practices and products through the capital.

The study also attempts to engage with rap as a cultural form by negotiating between text oriented approaches to rap lyrics and methods capable of dealing with rap as a social practice. In doing so it is intended that the social, economic and ethical relations that are produced through this practice may be brought to light alongside consideration of the aesthetic qualities of rap songs. I have combined methods developed in the humanities with techniques that have been tried and tested in the social sciences. There are important aspects of London’s rap music that are not amenable to macro-social analysis, and necessitate a shift to the type of close examination employed in the humanities. As a result of this I have combined ethnography with close textual analysis. I argue that the spirit of attentiveness to the particular that informs both of these

¹ Paul Gilroy (1993) p. 95

methods can produce an effective combination in the analysis of rap songs and their use.

In considering the methods appropriate to this research project it was paramount to also consider the object of study. The set of values, dispositions, interpretative and material practices that surround the production of rap and rap music in London are diverse, and approachable in a number of ways. Consequently, it is not possible to present London based rap ‘as it really is’ within this thesis. Instead I engage in a series of attempts to contribute to the knowledge of particular aspects of rap, the social world that it represents and how it plays a part in shaping that world. A further factor that bore upon the manner in which I approached my object of analysis was the temporal frame that I wanted to use. The decision to focus on London’s contemporary rap scenes resulted in important exclusions. Although there were several Jungle pirate radio stations active in the capital during the research period, my study excludes Jungle almost completely. Jungle is admitted, principally, through interviewees’ references to the black musical tradition from which Grime had developed. This focus also meant that my consideration of the emerging Funky House scene was also rather limited. However, it is discussed as a development from and response to Grime and as part of the same cultural tradition. The study is therefore focused predominantly on the UK Hip-Hop and Grime scenes, and all of the interviewed artists identified themselves in relation to one of these scenes.

The Grime scene was described by artists active within it as having developed from Garage music. Some extended a link to Jungle through that

scene. Interviewees associated key individuals and groups with Grime's emergence. In addition to this, technological and aesthetic innovations were also described as having played a role in the social organisation of artists and the interaction between producers and their audiences. The recognition of these actors and the ways in which they act was a significant factor in developing an approach that used multiple methods and sites.

Interviews proved a useful way of eliciting in depth information about artists' development as well as that of their scenes. These interviews also referred me directly to songs, videos and events or generated questions that were better dealt with by examining these sources. In turn, the content of songs and videos, as well as the activity that I observed at events, provided useful discussion points for later interviews. I found that it was possible, through the close examination of particular songs and performances, to explain how the dance space becomes open to a specific range of activities. In other words they provided me with concrete evidence of how artists' offerings facilitate certain modes of appropriations by their audiences.

A number of internal and external factors were identified by research participants that limit the development of the scene. Artists discussed their perception of transformations within the scene throughout the research period. The use of mixed methods and multiples site was also directed to engaging with a broader range of issues than a more closely focussed study could have provided, for example a single sited ethnographic case study. Through this combination I was able to consider how formal changes in the music were connected to economic goals and to discussions of the scene as a movement. For

example some MCs and DJs connected some aesthetic changes to the need to encourage more female participation in the scene. By shifting from analysis of interviews or music videos to observation of activity on dance-floors, I was better able to develop an image of how particular issues such as those identified by artists played out in the wider social scene.

In order to develop familiarity with the musical genres that the study was concerned with and the scenes in which they were produced, I adopted the practice of listening to Grime shows on pirate radio and rap music more generally on BBC 1Xtra. Alongside this I also looked through web sites such as MySpace, Channel U, Pure Grime, and RWD. On the one hand, the radio shows enabled me to engage with how artists talk about their work and their respective scenes. On the other hand, the web sites provided the opportunity to observe the responses of artists and audiences to events in the scene. General discussion was as valuable as the music being played, and enabled me to develop a vocabulary which was later employed during interviews. In addition to live radio I also listened to podcasts containing interviews, dating back to 2006. Through this I developed my awareness of some of the historical changes within the Grime and UK Hip-Hop scenes, and the work done by DJs to produce an income for themselves and organise their respective scenes. The various features of the podcasts that were attended to included: their status as products; their economic value to the DJs conducting interviews; their value as social capital to those involved in producing them; their role in providing information about and in organising the scene.

This period of familiarisation was a useful way of facilitating interviews. Interviewees were left as much as possible to talk during interviews free of interruption, and so direct its course. However, my familiarity with some of their references aided my ability to respond to interviewee's statements. This also enabled research participants to expand upon their statements when they exhausted a thread of discussion. The process of familiarisation did not strictly speaking stop once the 'fieldwork' began, but rather developed into a dialogue with participants. The critical engagement of the issue of 'violence', that I discuss below, can be considered a point in which the distinction between research participant testimony and analysis of cultural products became untenable. Research participants drew upon cultural products as part of their own knowledge and their practices imbued 'products' with meaning.

Several interviewees emphasised that the period in Grime's development, at which I happened to be conducting my research, was particularly interesting. They described a new kind of music developing out of this scene, which did not have a name. Different values were articulated through the music and expressed within the scene by and about artists. These events were linked, in interview discussions, to the reported establishment of independent record labels by artists in response to the limitations that were said to have been imposed on them by major record companies. This description of artists' activities was paralleled by the use of technology to distribute music in novel ways, as part of economic strategies developed with the aim of obtaining specific forms of autonomy. As an inductive study, the uncertainty within the scene about its future was of particular interest. In contrast to the 'stagnation' that was often

used to describe the UK Hip-Hop scene, it was possible to discern that the perceived novelty was related to Grime artists' attempts to further the attraction of a mainstream audience. Tinchy Stryder, Dizzee Rascal, and others may be considered to be engaged in an exploration of the limitations of their cultural form, both formally and economically. It was through listening to their songs and through interviews with other artists that I developed my analysis of the cultural politics at work within London's rap scenes.

Although interview, participant observation, and close textual analysis form the main methods through which this project was conducted, the early stages of the project incorporated a broader range of activities that enabled me to develop a familiarity with London's rap scenes. This preliminary stage allowed me to test a range of methods through which the project might have been conducted. In some cases (such as the internet research) it would have been possible to have developed the whole (or an alternative) research project, simply by focusing on that mode of research. A discussion of all the methods employed during the project follows, regardless of how little or how much these activities contributed to the final thesis.

Access

Access to artists was principally obtained by contacting email addresses on their websites, going through their management companies, or speaking to them directly after performances. Gatekeepers such as managers occasionally decided not to allow access. However, in other instances they were happy to facilitate interviews with artists and also offered access to other artists that they managed. I made contact with a number of DJs through a personal friend that

worked at a radio station. Several artists offered to place me in contact with others that they knew. Although in several cases I declined, because I was aware of how quickly I was gathering data, there were a number of exceptions to this. These exceptions were made usually where artists had a close working relation with others or were members of the same crew. In these instances I invited all the artists within the group to participate in a group interview. I accessed nightclubs, pubs and festivals as a patron, purchasing a ticket to all but one event. Where bouncers asked that patrons emptied our pockets, my recording material was made visible to them and did not raise any questions.

Access to students was provided through lecturers at their college. As I wanted to be as open as possible about my research I readily agreed to discuss my project with groups of students in addition to using classes to obtain data from them. Lecturers were not present at most of these sessions, but were at some. In those cases the sessions explicitly addressed the presence of the lecturer as a gatekeeper, but both lecturers and students seemed to feel that the subject of the research did not impact on the ongoing relationship between themselves and the educational institution. My position as a doctoral researcher standing in front of a class of students or leading a group round a table, also resulted in the reproduction of power relations associated with these formal arrangements. By requesting permission that I might record sessions I attempted to facilitate a somewhat more equitable relationship. However, I was aware that the institutional setting and the brevity of the encounters did not hold the promise of levelling the relations of power between us. Suki Ali warns

against an ‘illusion of agency’² in attempting to overcome power relations in her ‘continued statements of reflexive practice’ and her “allocation” of “power”³ to research participants. She goes on to argue that it may be useful to ‘see that we are always engaged in reflexive processes of subjective becoming.’⁴ In my encounters with A Level students they took a variety of positions, withholding information, challenging my position, or reassuring me, as part of their own reflexive practice. It may have been impossible to escape certain hierarchies, but those hierarchies were open to and on at least one occasion subjected to challenge. Furthermore, they were a potentially useful for my respondents to incorporate into their process of subjective becoming.

All the students have been made anonymous by concealing their names, and I refer to them as young woman or man. As artists have already publicised themselves I refer to them by the names that they used to introduce themselves to me. In one instance I have changed the name of one participant, Peter, who had not constructed a public identity and I decided needed to be made anonymous.

Internet Research and Rap’s Online Communities

Internet research was a useful way of developing familiarity with the Grime and UK Hip-Hop scenes during the early stages of research. However, I drew upon online material continually throughout the project in order to refine my observations in the light of material gathered through other activities. YouTube was identified by users and producers as an important tool in understanding

² Suki Ali (2006) p. 482

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

and being involved in London's rap music scenes. The publication of documentaries about the UK Hip-Hop and Grime scenes, music videos, and other material online, plays a significant role in the organisation of these scenes. My initial internet research involved surveying videos by a number of producers and noting their dominant themes. After one video was examined others suggested by the site were also viewed. As interviewees had stated that they often followed through on suggested videos, I adopted this practice as a way of becoming further immersed in the views and values of this social world. The cultural products that circulate within the field employ particular forms and themes, and particular values are attached to them by artists and their audiences. Furthermore, certain things are said and others not about cultural products. The use of the internet to gain familiarity with these interpretative communities enabled me to broaden my awareness of material that was often taken for granted by subjects being interviewed.

In addition to the analysis of YouTube videos, I also studied the MySpace profile of artists that I had interviewed. Their online publication was used to locate them within the field in which they operate. The 'Friend Space' feature of this website was potentially useful for determining the network of relationships between interviewees and other artists. The videos and songs posted on the website also provided useful material for review. Videos frequently provided a visual dimension to songs that were reviewed. However, representations in music videos operate differently to the songs they help to publicise. Videos appear to acquire the qualities of a product to a greater degree than the songs that they are produced for, which retain a processual quality and are often

adapted in live performances. Videos may also thematise different values, relations, and other issues to the music and lyrics that they accompany. My discussion of rap makes explicit where it refers solely to a rap video. Some artists posted videos of their community activity in addition to their music videos. Further to providing evidence of the range of economic activity that producers engage in, these videos represented the forms of relationship that artists developed with groups beyond their own listeners. I reviewed over 50 artists' MySpace pages, in addition to reviewing YouTube videos and online forum discussions.

As the internet is an important tool for the organisation of the Grime scene, a variety of techniques were used in order to understand that scene through the internet. As stated earlier Pure Grime, an online forum, was among the tools I initially used to develop my understanding of what Grime was to those who participated in the scene. This was achieved by taking a snap shot of the 'General Discussion' section of the website. The headings of the discussion topics that made up this section were then analysed and placed into different categories based upon their subject matter. Once the categories were stabilised this stage of the analytical process was concluded. The categories established after 200 discussion thread titles, out of approximately 1700, had been analysed were: 'Top x' (7 posts), 'Artist v Artist' (32 posts), 'Best' (37 posts), 'Worst' (4 posts), 'Song/Album' (32 records), 'Scene' (29 posts), 'Opinion' (30 posts), and 'Other' (29 posts). The headings of posts in the first four categories explicitly requested judgements of the best or worst, the names of a number of top artists, or for one artist to be compared with another. Items placed in the 'Song/Album'

category usually invited opinion on a specific song or album. Posts categorised as 'Opinion' were related to issues to do with an artist or song, but did not set the terms simply as best/worst or artist vs artist. Responses in this category were usually statements of approval linked to skill, comparison with other artists or songs, or the effect of a song in a club. There was a substantial interest in beats expressed in 'Opinion' posts. This was most frequently related to the Producer, the appreciation of the beat, or its effect in clubs. Posts in the 'Other' category were either advertisements for radio programmes, or related to other aspects of culture than Grime. The presence of such posts within the 'General Discussion' area was significant, and along with the 'Scene' and 'Opinion' categories, posts within the 'Other' category were analysed in detail. This material is suggestive of the ways in which the scene is related to other areas of cultural production. Because this section of the forum did not generally receive in depth responses, and topics were often repeated in a number of threads, all posts in the section were not analysed in detail. However, the details of posts falling into the 'Scene', 'Opinion' and 'Other' categories were studied.

Once the general image of the scene that was developed through these posts had stabilised this analysis was concluded. The purpose of this form of analysis had been to develop an understanding of how the scene was understood by the users of this forum. Therefore the details of most of the 'Top x', 'Artist v Artist', 'Best', 'Worst', and 'Song/Album' categorised posts were not studied but I noted that judgements of this form were made within the scene. The provisional conclusions drawn at this stage about the Grime scene were refined and developed throughout the project. This process of refining my

understanding of how the scene was discussed and related to by its participants was developed during interviews and informal discussion. It should be noted that in addition to containing posts referring to the Grime scene, Pure Grime is itself a part of that scene. Through its function in organising the awareness and activity of interested parties, the website played a significant role in structuring the scene.

Black Ephemera Collection

I spent approximately three months collecting black ephemera. This process focused on flyers for the night-club scene, promotional album covers, and sleeve notes. I also listened to pirate radio stations in order to develop a familiarity with what is played and how tracks are discussed. This also allowed me to engage with the themes of discussion, unrelated to what is played, within the social worlds with which the study was concerned. Through what may be considered the pilot phase, I developed a tentative, general picture of London's rap scenes. Although the active collection of black ephemera ceased at an early stage of the study, I was offered material by artists throughout the project and included on several email lists. The collection of black ephemera aided the identification of various issues within these social spaces. They included the representation of gendered identities, economic aspirations, and the conditions of urban dwelling. These issues were further investigated during semi-structured interviews, and later informed the analysis of dancing, song lyrics and video content.

The production of imitations of artists music through videos on YouTube by listeners provided a particularly interesting entry point into the responses of

audiences to artists' work. The interpretative practices that are employed by the audience are foregrounded in the production of these new cultural products. The audience's ability to publish these responses through the same mechanisms as the 'original' artists reveals a great deal about the black public sphere. It suggests a development of the democratic principle⁵ that Hebdige identifies in the practice of versioning: 'The original version takes on a new life and new meaning in a fresh context.'⁶ This became a consideration in my analysis of the antiphony through which that sphere was structured.

The different forms of emphasis given to Africaness, Caribbeaness, gender and other aspects of social identity are revealed both within cultural products and the necessary work employed in the responses that those products generate. Therefore, although the active collection of black ephemera was short lived, insights first developed through this form of research were complimented or reinforced through other research activities, and the effects of it on shaping the course of the study were more far reaching than the time spent actively collecting.

Interviews and Group Discussions

Among the first people interviewed were radio DJs. These actors provided valuable insights into their own development as organic intellectuals within their scenes. They also provided information about their scene's development, as well as useful contacts with other artists through which the interview process progressed. Interviews with MCs, DJs, and Producers constituted a substantial

⁵ Dick Hebdige (1993) p. 12

⁶ Ibid. 14

component of the project. These were semi-structured, usually beginning with a request that the interviewee introduce themselves. They often proceeded through the interviewee's narration of their early involvement with rap, but the direction varied from person to person. A frequent alternative would be for interviewees to address their recent achievements. Only after allowing this to be substantially developed did I ask about their previous activities. Usually, interviewees were simply asked to talk about themselves at the beginning of the initial interview. I then intervened only to focus their discussion within the broad limits of rap music or to continue the discussion after they had exhausted their material, by picking up on something they had mentioned in passing earlier. Initial interviews lasted between twenty minutes and two hours. They were usually followed up after a period of at least one week.

Prospective participants who were members of a group often expressed a wish to be interviewed with other members. This was encouraged, as early interviews had shown that the data elicited through group interview was much richer than one on one interviews. Group interview participants were encouraged to respond to one another's statements, and to set the agenda of the interviews themselves. However, the overall direction of the interviews were managed by myself, especially with younger and less experienced artists. In one to one interviews the form of the interview as a whole was determined more by the questions asked rather than through exchanges of views.

Following initial interviews, the recording was analysed and points of interest were highlighted for development. These areas formed the basis of questions for subsequent interviews. Through the process of highlighting areas

to be followed up, common experiences amongst artists were drawn out, as were peculiarities in these producers' views, experiences, and dispositions. I conducted a maximum of four interviews with any one individual and no single interview lasted longer than two and a half hours.

I defined an artist, for the purpose of this study, as someone who identified themselves as either a Rapper, MC, DJ or Producer. I also refer to artists as cultural producers or producers. In total I carried out thirty-one interviews with twenty-three individual artists, of whom three were female. These interviews produced approximately twenty-seven hours of recorded interview material. In addition to this, I had a number of informal conversations with artists both over the phone and in person that helped build familiarity between ourselves and provide additional information about their activities and perspectives.

Most of the listeners interviewed were drawn from educational institutions. As they were all made aware of the purpose of the study their perception of their relation to myself as a PhD student and themselves as students studying A-Level Sociology, may have affected their responses. For example, in an interview with a group of artists I offered the view that Grime often thematised 'community'. One artist objected to this, and expressed his view in opposition to that which I had put forward for discussion. In contrast to this, following a discussion of behaviour on buses with a group of A-Level students, I put forward my emerging ideas concerning the use of rap on the bus for discussion. This was met with a muted response. Following the class a student who was also an MC and had enjoyed the experience of playing music

on buses told me not to ‘worry’. She went on to say that the rest of the group agreed with my views. This was a problematic statement for me. Clearly she agreed with at least some of what I had said. However, the general silence of the rest of the group cannot be so easily dismissed. Their responses were considered, alongside other empirical data, in the development of my understanding of activity involving rap on public buses. Willingness to accept my views about rap in general or Grime in particular was not universal. One student responded in a way that implied that my detachment from the scene was grounds for the disqualification of my views regardless of my status within the education system. This response foregrounded that culture was thought of as something that one possesses. It also suggested that the activity of academic research of his culture was considered inappropriate or as an intrusion by this student. His response clearly differed from that of the overwhelming majority of participants, but was nevertheless noted as of potential significance for analysis. These incidents collectively highlight the ongoing negotiations that forms part of the research process.

As with artists, issues raised in these interviews were brought up for further examination with other groups and individuals. However, of the four discussion sessions held with groups of approximately twenty students, I returned only to one smaller group, of six, in a follow up session that excluded the rest of their class and their lecturer. The aim of this session was to gain a firm understanding of how particular issues were perceived by young people with a specific interest in Grime music. In addition to enabling interviewees to contribute to the study in the areas in which their knowledge was strongest, it

enabled me to confirm views that I had identified as being of further interest. The students in these groups were aged between seventeen and nineteen. In all interviews I allowed participants to direct the course of discussion as much as possible. Where there were areas in which I wanted to focus more closely I structured my questions around those areas before returning to a broader discussion.

Interviews with both artists and listeners supported and were supported by other areas of research of this project. In particular, observation on buses and the conclusions drawn from that observation were informed by comments made during a number of interviews in various contexts. Similarly, video clips made during performances were shown to interview participants in order to elicit responses. In both cases the aim was to develop a stronger understanding of the social world in which rap is produced. The process of generating and testing theory as it was developed through a number of different methods was a primary concern. This goal was pursued alongside, and through, the build up of a detailed understanding of particular issues, cultural practices and products. Although I had originally set out to conduct interviews as a discrete research activity within the larger project I came to consider them as a part of my ethnographic work. David Walsh states that one of ethnography's distinctive features is that 'there are no distinct stages of theorizing, hypothesis construction, data gathering and hypothesis testing. Instead the research process is one of a constant interaction between problem formulation, data collection and data analysis.'⁷ By bringing different forms of material into

⁷ David Walsh (1998) p. 221

interviews, instead of relying solely on questions, I was able to generate a greater range of responses.

Some of these responses necessitated further investigation. In one case an interview participant told me to look on YouTube at a particular video, in order to illustrate a point he was making. After analysing this video I had the opportunity to discuss it with the participant informally some days later. Following this he began to talk with me about other videos that I had gone on to view after studying the one to which I had been directed. It became clear to me that through a dialogical process I was developing my cultural competence. I was also developing a broader range of tools through which my research could be conducted. This video was used in further interviews, alongside others, in order to develop the breadth of discussion. It became a particularly valuable tool through which to investigate the issue of 'violence'. It is worth noting at this point, that I questioned the young man about his views after I watched the video rather than uncritically accept them. The examination of his views about the video was complimented with work done to elicit the views of others through it. This enabled me to test the accuracy of my preliminary observations of this aspect of the scene and to refine my analysis of it. This critical dialogue was a fundamental part of the research process.

It is important to consider that the young man did not explain the issue of violence to me and then refer me to the video as proof. He directed me in order that I could see what he meant. The video was itself a part of his explanation and understanding of the Grime scene's violence. By critically examining the video I was, in another sense, asking a follow on question in an

extended interview to probe this issue. Loïc Wacquant refers to ethnography as ‘social research based on close-up, on-the-ground observation of people and institutions in real time and space, in which the investigator embeds herself near (or within) the phenomenon so as to detect how and why agents on the scene act, think and feel the way they do.’⁸ My later use of this video was a means of drawing upon a collective knowledge base. When I discussed the video with JJ he said that he had observed the same video ‘thousands’ of time before. The video is not an objective record of ‘violence’ in the Grime scene. It is an instrument through which actors in the scene come to construct the scene and their relation to it.

Live Performance and Nightclub Participant Observation

Participant observation in nightclubs and other music/dance events (including at open mic nights, festivals and concerts) was carried out over the course of the fieldwork. Although several sites were attended on multiple occasions, I aimed to conduct an ethnographic survey rather than an ethnographic case study. This strategy was adopted in order to achieve some degree of representativity, as Sarah Thornton does in her study *Club Cultures*.⁹ The possibility of conducting this project as an ethnographic case study was considered prior to undertaking field work. However, I wanted to go beyond offering a description of what I saw and heard directly by examining ‘one segment in miniature’.¹⁰ Instead I aimed at producing limited generalisations from my direct observations and to provide explanations for the descriptive material that could be tested by further and

⁸ Loïc Wacquant (2003) p. 5

⁹ Sarah Thornton (1995) p. 30

¹⁰ Eliot Liebow (c2003) p. 9

later studies. In contrast to my approach, Elliot Liebow offers rich description of lower class men through his ethnographic case study in *Tally's Corner*. He states that his hope that others might systematically test his ideas leaves the validity and range of applicability of his observations open to question.¹¹ This is not to say that they were invalid. However, in my view their applicability beyond the group that he is specifically concerned with is uncertain. I have tried to broaden the range of applicability of my interpretations by carrying out observations in multiple sites. That strategy is complimented by using interview and other methods to refine those interpretations.

Liebow's ethnographic case study of a group of 'streetcorner Negro'¹² men looks at them through their relations with work, their children, female partners, and their friends. In doing so it employs the relationships through which the men see themselves, in the construction of its interpretive approach. As a result of this strategy, Liebow avoids using categories such as dependancy or delinquency which 'touch most directly on middle class life; the one threatens the property, peace and good order of society at large; the other drains its purse.'¹³ This exploratory method enables him to build up a detailed picture of the men's everyday lives and of the social forces that act upon them. I focus my concerns upon the relations that are most significant to actors within the scenes that I study. However, I bring other issues, such as the London Assembly's discussion of anti-social behaviour into my contextual discussion of the significance of the use of rap music in London.

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid p. 135

¹³ Ibid p. 3

In his discussion of the methods he employed, Liebow states that 'Since the data do not have "sense" built into them - that is, they were not collected to test specific hypothesis nor with any firm presumptions of relevance - the present analysis is an attempt to make sense after the fact.¹⁴ Although I argue that the data he collected clearly had sense built into it by the research participants, through their everyday social acts, Liebow's defence of applying his interpretation to the data subsequent to observation has some bearing upon the present study. The research questions that I set out with acted to guide the initial enquiry along broad lines. The overall shape and organisation of the project was determined much more by the concerns of those encountered in its course. Like Liebow, I am critical of the terms used by participants and the meanings they convey. This has enabled me to conduct my analysis as a response to events, acts and statements presented within the rap scenes, by actors within those scenes. The advantage of this is that the substance of the study is meaningful to those within the social world from which it was derived, without losing a critical distance from the representation of the world that different agents produce. In attempting to engage with London based rap I have necessarily focused on specific events in particular locations. By comparing practices in one event with another I have aimed to develop ideas that may be tested anywhere within London and refined or substantiated accordingly. In order to achieve these aims I decided that an ethnographic survey was more suitable for the task of analysing London based rap. In order to approximate the

¹⁴ Ibid p. 7

scale of the rap scenes in London I adopted methods capable of producing generalisations while attempting to retain descriptive detail.

The aim of the study in nightclubs and other events was to investigate the socio-cultural activity within these spaces. I observed the organisation of dancers on the dance-floor, and how their movements and gestures interact with MCs and DJs' production of the soundscape. I also observed the techniques employed by artists to solicit responses from their audience. The use of multiple sites attempted to mediate between the detailed descriptive material of ethnography and broad theoretical generalisations. Sites were selected for a variety of reasons. In some cases they were promoted by well recognised groups within the Grime and UK Hip-Hop scenes. In other cases I had been directed to events hosted by research participants. Internet research also enabled me to identify events at which MCs or DJs that participants had referred to would perform. One site was selected because the popularity of the venue attracted a more general audience whose participation in London's rap cultures would provide a useful basis for comparison.

In order to aid the analysis of rap's dance scene, I made sound recordings of the night-club environment. In addition to using a dictaphone to record one aspect of this environment, I used a camera to record light levels and the different uses of light within the club space. As it was impractical to obtain informed consent from all dancers in the night-club for me to observe them, I avoided taking photographs of people dancing. The exceptions to this were when I could record crowd behaviour from a sufficient distance to make faces unidentifiable and where the recording of dancers was made permissible. One

example of this occurred when groups of break-dancers appropriated club space and continued to perform as other club goers took visual records of their performance. It was possible at larger venues to view dancers from high enough and far enough to effectively conceal their identities while still capturing a record of collective activity, such as the formation of circles or pushing and shoving. However, the recording of the practice of dance for the main part took the form of note-taking on a personal digital assistant in the club as people danced. In order to capture this material for analysis I combined the use of the PDA and dictaphone, using the index function of the dictaphone to highlight particular points in the night. These indexes were referred to in my notes where appropriate.

The use of video and photography in this space was more problematic than the taking of notes and the use of a dictaphone. Although the use of cameras in night-clubs is common, the practice of taking photographs of other dancers is not. The use of photography was therefore primarily directed to the performing artists or the general environment, in order to capture the use of lighting and collective responses to the artists' performances. While the capturing of material for later analysis was a fruitful method for this study, the analysis of this space is dependent upon presence in it. Therefore I participated as fully as possible in the practices employed by dancers, in order to examine the inter-subjective experience of the dance scene. This resulted in my switching position during most nightclub events from observation to participation, as occupying both at the same time was difficult. However, the experience of participating occasionally enabled me to experience a rightness of fit between

dancers' gestures and the sounds. This may be analogous to Thornton's discussion of how 'clubgoers talk of the rightness and naturalness of the crowds in which they have good experiences.'¹⁵ This subjective experience was complimented by the limited recordings made during the ethnographic survey period.

In contrast to the participant observation of night-clubs, live event fieldwork enabled greater use of video recording. The organisation of the space was, again, an important consideration. The way that the events were oriented to particular social and commercial purposes offered a useful contrast with the organisation of the dance space in nightclubs. My observations were directed to a variety of spatial and social aspects of these events. They included the position of the artists in relation to the audience, the presence or absence of barriers, the use of recording equipment by promoters, the presence of video projections, and the use of advertising. There was, generally, less physical activity amongst the audience in these events, in comparison to night-clubs. Consequently, photography and video recording these performances may have captured a larger proportion of material of visual significance. This was possible while avoiding the capture of the faces of audience members without obtaining their informed consent.

In total I recorded approximately 5 hours of video and over 17 hours of audio at 26 events over the course of the field research. Some of this video material was used during interviews in order to facilitate discussion of specific issues. Several events were attended with a group that I became acquainted with

¹⁵ Sarah Thornton (1995) p. 111

through the course of the research. I did not record the events attended with this group and have omitted those events from the total given above. Although attendance at these events helped to inform the analysis of material gained from the recorded events, my fuller participation in events with this group made analysis of those events particularly difficult. I have also excluded them from the list of recorded events provided in the appendix. Without bracketing them out, I have found it more appropriate to focus on observations at the events listed even where my analysis might be confirmed by my subjective experience of events that I attended as a club-goer. The decision to not record at some events was made after I attended one particular event which I did record. At one point I identified a group of young men performing a synchronised dance. I approached the group then, from a short distance and in a position adjacent to them, I attempted to approximate the gestures that they were performing. In the moment that I incorporated the last (and most subtle) gesture into my own movements I experienced a rightness of fit with the music. The movements became easy, and provided me with some pleasure as a result of my efforts. I therefore decided to attempt to explore the subjective feelings provided through the practice of dancing without the additional consideration of recording observations at some events.

A final note on the selection of sites is appropriate here. Space is a significant consideration for this study. During the fieldwork, I decided to attend an event outside of the city. This was in order to develop a larger picture of the London based rap scene. Attendance of this event was by no means necessary, but it allowed me to develop the contextual information that I had at

my disposal. As a result of the metropolitan police's suppression of the scene, through the regime of risk assessment of events of this kind in London, Sidewinder's Bristol event presented an opportunity to observe a large scale event promoted by a well recognised organisation within the Grime scene. It also provided me with the opportunity to see several well recognised London based artists perform, including 'the Godfather of Grime' Wiley. My decision to broaden the scope of the activities related to my research is the result of one of the external factors that affect the structure of the scene. This decision enabled the study to consider these factors both methodologically (as I had to broaden the geographic area with which I was concerned while maintaining a focus on London based rap) and in relation to the cultural politics that I became aware of as a significant issue that was emerging from the field.

Public Transport Participant Observation

I have undertaken thirty hours of participant observation of the playing of music on buses. The ethnography included journeys during which a digital recorder was used, unrecorded journeys, and partially recorded journeys. In the initial period of this research, I took photographs of the interior and exterior of buses in order to develop an understanding of how the space was arranged. I also attempted to produce a 'baseline' journey by taking a bus during off peak hours for the entire route. By analysing the pattern of sounds on this near empty bus I was able to develop an understanding of the bus soundscape. It also facilitated the engagement with the transformation of this soundscape by the playing of music in this space. The 'baseline' journey was contrasted with journeys along the same route during peak hours and at other times of the day. I also expanded

the range of my ethnography to other routes. This component of the fieldwork focused on the top deck of double decked buses, during peak and off peak afternoon periods. I considered, and then rejected, the idea of designing a methodological approach aimed at constructing an objective picture of 'the bus', for example by randomising times and routes. The decision was taken because I was specifically interested in a particular type of social activity and its effect. The journeys taken provided me with a sufficient contrast between the experience of riding with and without rap music being played.

Although most of the bus journeys that composed this research were taken through south London, several comparison journeys were taken in the north and east of the city. A series of journeys in east London were taken from the area surrounding a school that had been identified by interviewees as a proving ground for a number of artists now prominent within the Grime scene. I had aimed to remain distanced from social activity involving music on buses. However, it became apparent during the research that a dialogical approach to my subjects would elicit richer data. Once I had developed a picture of the soundscape of the bus through the recordings already undertaken, I avoided recording those with whom I spoke on buses. This became a principle reason for undertaking journeys without recording. In addition to using audio recordings I occasionally made written notes. However the audio record frequently proved superior to observations made during the journey, although this was not always the case. In contrast to Nina Wakeford's research on the number 73 bus, I focused my observation upon the internal space and how material was used on

the bus, rather than on how the bus connected spaces external to it.¹⁶ However, Wakeford's comments on her selection of buses as research site highlights one of the benefits for observing the use of rap in public transport space:

[O]ne of the reasons for selecting the 73 bus route is that it was a way to intersect diverse communities in London, including commercial and residential areas popular with gay men and lesbians, and also neighbourhoods which housed many different minority ethnic and religious groups (e.g. African, Caribbean, Turkish and Orthodox Jewish areas).¹⁷

Although I did not use route 73 during my research, the diversity of people using the bus routes that I did ride on enabled me to observe a variety of practices that employed rap music within the mainstream of metropolitan life. As with my nightclub ethnography I attempted to produce a degree of representativity through adopting the approach of an ethnographic survey.

The Recorded Soundscape

I have listened to over 360 rap tracks by artists based in London. By listening to a variety of albums and singles I aimed to develop a broad familiarity with the formal and thematic elements employed in London based rap music. Tracks were selected for review on the basis of recommendations from research participants, the popularity of the artist or song as identified through radio broadcasts, or as a result of following links from tracks listened to on the internet. A subset of these were selected for close analysis. The criteria for this selection was based upon issues that emerge from the field and my discussion of the tracks usually refers to these issues. However, it may be useful to outline three potential criteria of selection that I considered at the outset of the fieldwork. The first was concerned with the response to the song on the dance-

¹⁶ Nina Wakeford (2003) p. 235

¹⁷ Ibid p. 240

floor, and its social value. The second was based on users' familiarity with lyrics, or the incidences of listeners reciting lyrics and the factors that produce this. This second criteria is similar to the first in that its social value may be privileged over the consideration of its formal qualities, however its social use is substantially different. Although a song may be used for dancing or verbal recitation, some tend to be used more for one purpose than the other. The final selection criteria that I considered prior to the commencement of the fieldwork was not related to popularity as closely as the first two. It was more concerned with the formal qualities of the song. The aesthetic value of a song does not increase in inverse proportion to its social value. Its formal qualities are a product of, and in turn reproduce, a set of social values and relations. This difference is emphasised in the distinction between the Grime and Hip-Hop scenes made by some UK Hip-Hop artists. My analysis engages with the formal qualities of both Grime and UK Hip-Hop songs as part of a wider consideration of the soundscape. This analysis complements the research on buses and in clubs by offering a sustained engagement with particular tracks and performances. It enables important questions to be posed about how rap is used, how it is constructed, and how that social construction is part of a process that anticipates particular forms of social activity.

Although the close analysis of the recorded soundscape enacts a form of epistemological violence, through the process of textualisation, it also enables an engagement with rap songs as social texts. This contrasts with methods which would fail to engage with rap songs themselves at all, but only the practices that constitute their use. Such approaches ignore the inherently social

character of rap, and the sociality embedded within its formal features. In contrast to the approach advocated by Bauer below, I avoided formalising the collection of data in order to fabricate an objective view of the soundscape; for example by following his direction that sound 'be recorded by positioning microphones at different locations for 24 hours or longer.'¹⁸ I also avoided making transcriptions of aural material I collected, including interview, music tracks, or recordings of activity in nightclubs and buses. Instead I attempt to draw attention to my own positionality (and by extension that of everyone else) within the environment under consideration and to engage with the processes through which the soundscape is produced as well as how it is used.

Discourse Analysis

Cultural production may be seen as signifying practices in which the process of signifying is privileged over other aspects of the practice. Although other spheres, such as the economic and political systems, are inherently signifying systems, the process of signifying within them is itself subordinated to other purposes. The cultural sphere may then be considered as articulated to these other signifying systems, in relative autonomy. As such it is logical to conclude that areas within this field require methods of analysis that are appropriate to the particular qualities of their objects. When attempts are made by interviewees or other research participants to distinguish between good and bad examples of a particular artistic practice or product, these should be seen as an important part of the 'social process of conscious human production.'¹⁹

¹⁸ Martin Bauer (2000) p. 270

¹⁹ Raymond Williams (1995) p. 126

Engagement with aesthetic judgements is in no way a retreat from the social. However, it was not my aim to make aesthetic judgements, but to observe how such judgements were made by the subjects of my observation. My use of close textual analysis as a means of engaging with the way in which participants represented the social world, can be related to the development of discourse analysis as a ‘critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge, and a skepticism towards the view that our observations of the world unproblematically yield its true nature to us’²⁰ in the social sciences more generally. The discussion of best or worst songs and albums as well as favourite artists on online internet forums was one area in which engagement with aesthetic judgements was necessary. This is also related to the view of Grime as an expanding movement, and in the light of ‘discourse as a *social practice*’,²¹ the actors engaged in these discourses on Grime produce themselves as participants in a movement and as particular kinds of aesthetic judges. Furthermore, the responses of dancers at nightclubs and artists’ discussion of their own and others’ work required engagement with the aesthetic values and practices of distinction employed by subjects in the field. My focus, in websites, nightclubs and other social spaces, was directed to the use of particular cultural products in the development and maintenance of specific forms of subjectivity. David Walsh suggests that the easiest way of understanding one particular type of constructionist ethnography is ‘to imagine the ethnographer as being like a

²⁰ Rosalind Gill (2000) p. 173

²¹ Raymond Williams (1995) p. 175

literary critic’²² who analyses a ‘densely layered *cultural script*.’²³ Although I do not provide a thick description of the events that I observed, the value of my own combination of close textual analysis with ethnographic observation ‘lies in being able to establish a coherent picture we can share while waiting for others to propose a more plausible alternative.’²⁴ Further to this, my participation in nightclubs was part of the development of cultural competence that was a valuable precursor to the analysis of the activity of other dancers in these spaces.

My discussion, in chapter 6, of the roll call in two tracks directly links this oral technique to the production of particular social relations. This link is more fully developed in the discussion of the formal qualities of Roots Manuva’s ‘Witness (1 Hope)’. In that analysis I attempt to relate the changing rhythms and sounds employed by the artist to the responses of the audience. I do not suggest that there is a structural homology between cultural and social spheres. However, in this examination of Roots Manuva’s track I do aim to show how the artist anticipates certain types of responses, or makes this track open to particular modes of reception. Following Raymond Williams, I maintain that even while there are internal developments within artistic practices, forms of cultural production are socially conditioned in their development.²⁵ Indeed, formal innovations may be integral elements of significant social changes.

²² David Walsh (1998) p. 219

²³ Ibid (emphasis in text)

²⁴ Gianni Vattimo (1996) p. 11

²⁵ Raymond Williams (1995) p. 137

Williams argues that 'to analyse the soliloquy in English Renaissance drama is necessarily, first, a matter of formal analysis, but not as a way of denying or making irrelevant a social analysis; rather than a new and technically rigorous kind of social analysis of *this* social practice.'²⁶ William's cultural materialism is an important influence upon the methodological approach that I have taken. I hope that this thesis will assist in the synthesising of methods capable of adequately dealing with the performative event of the rap soundscape. I have tried to draw upon the resources available in both English studies and Sociology, but it may be the case that a combination of techniques that also draws from dance and the performing arts may yet yield even more fruitful results. Any attempt to examine rap that out of hand declared either the social sciences or humanities irrelevant would be greatly impoverished.

It is worth distinguishing my use of close textual analysis from the practice of literary critics. The distinction occurs principally because the object of literary and social analysis are different. It is my view that both Sociology and English studies can make a valuable contribution to the study of rap. However, I want to note that English studies has not sufficiently developed the tools necessary to fully analyse rap. Although up to and during the Renaissance poetry was performed with a musical accompaniment, by the time that English studies had begun to develop tools to analyse poetry the art-form had lost its musical dimension. It had undergone a transformation from a performed oral form to become a written genre. In order to give sufficient attention to rap's poetic qualities as well as its contemporary innovations, literary criticism must

²⁶ Ibid. 142 (emphasis in text)

begin to develop the methodological tools to analyse the sonic effects of the rap soundscape and how the lyric is inserted into that soundscape. Although this thesis is not the place in which to advance English studies, I offer the following critique of the limitations of the counter-cultural turn in literary criticism in order suggest a way of resisting this deeply conservative trend.

In *The Poetics of Singularity*, Timothy Clark describes a ‘dominant paradigm of thinking’²⁷ in contemporary literary and cultural studies, which reduces ‘all intellectual positions to stances within a certain model of cultural politics.’²⁸ He goes on to argue that within this paradigm:

To understand a text is taken to mean placing it within the various competing discourses of its time and (or) our own time, discourses being understood instrumentally as competing ways of representing or constructing reality, each reflecting or producing various kinds of identity, often defined in terms of ethnicity, nationality, religious affiliation, class or gender. The assumption is that once one has cashed in a text in terms of its cultural politics (so understood) nothing worthwhile is left to say about it.²⁹

Clark criticises this paradigm on the basis that it reinforces ‘an essential pillar of the domination it seemingly contests’³⁰ by explaining a text as the expression of the author’s cultural identity and focusing upon those elements of that text which can be translated into a liberal discourse of freedom and rights.³¹ *The Poetics of Singularity* schematises a school of singularity which has been attentive to literary texts’ resistance to being described in general categories. Clark places this school in opposition to the ‘dominant paradigm’ and claims

²⁷ Timothy Clark (2005) p. 1

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid p. 18

³¹ Ibid p. 17

that this alternative thinking can, through ‘the notion of discontinuity inherent in singularity,’³² enable a jump out of the moralistic ‘use of cultural identity as a principle of explanation.’³³ However, the ideal reader that Clark places forward in order to make this leap possesses considerable privileges. The ‘refusal of the nation or any group as the basis of subjective identification’³⁴ presupposes the ability to resist the social forces that produce such identification. The members of the social groups with which this study is concerned often find themselves in a position in which they do not make a conscious political choice to occupy.

Politics comes to them, whether through direct contact with the police or other mechanisms of social marginalisation. They respond to these forces with the cultural resources at their disposal. In opposing the cultural turn in literary studies, Clark acknowledges that ‘it may be more feasible to realise this thinking [in which hermeneutics affirms a space of freedom] in a seminar room more readily than on the streets.’³⁵ In opposition to Clark’s criticism of what he sees as a contradiction in cultural criticism’s investment in the domination that it contests, I argue that the idioms through which freedom are apprehended in contemporary culture urgently need to be addressed in order to provide a more radical critique than is possible either within the seminar room or by attacking the rights or privileges that have been denied individuals and groups by those who dominate them.

³² Ibid p. 29

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid p. 119

³⁵ Ibid p. 120

Gilroy's statement on the narrowness of conventional understanding of freedom helps to inform this position: 'however important the relatively narrow understanding of freedom centred on political rights has been, it leaves vast areas of thinking about freedom and the desire to be seen to be free, untouched.'³⁶ The object of my study is more often found on the streets or in nightclubs than in the seminar room. Consequently those participating in its production are not required to pay the hefty tuition fees that secure access to that space. I have not sought to affirm the singularity of the rap songs that I have analysed. Instead I try to draw attention to their social character. I have already addressed how formal techniques, such as the roll call, have a social value. My analysis of Roots Manuva, Bashy, No. Lay and other artists' work attempts to bring the techniques of textual analysis to bear upon the social production of the art work and not to exchange the object of literary criticism for that of Sociology. Furthermore, William's identification of the soliloquy as a means through which social changes were negotiated, highlights the necessity of literary studies' engagement with the social. Clark's position risks closing itself off from the social processes which contribute to artistic freedom and creativity. Although this thesis does not speak directly to the concerns of literary criticism, I argue that English studies can make a valuable contribution to the study of rap. In order to make a contribution to contemporary popular cultures it should resist any retreat from the outside world, back into the Academic institution, and affirm the everyday Englishes of ordinary social life.

³⁶ Paul Gilroy (1994) p. 63

Ethics

It is my aim to use this thesis to engage in a dialogue with participants in London's rap scenes. Interviewees were advised at the beginning of their first interview that it was my intention to give them the opportunity to look at what I wrote about them and how I used their testimony before submitting my thesis. After finishing the draft of my final chapter I began to contact those participants that I had been able to include in the write up. Not all were available to review the draft thesis, some had long since changed their contact details and others failed to respond to my offer to show them how their contribution had been used.

I want to emphasise that this was an ethical rather than methodological decision. Just as I felt that it was important to critically analyse interviewee's statements, I wanted to provide the opportunity for that analysis to be examined by those whose contributions had been analysed. However, this ethical choice led directly to methodological gains and some improved reliability of my analysis. In the first review session, I not only received comments that I had slightly underplayed some of the importance of particular forms of rap (and consequently a request that I make a small addition to one paragraph of this study) but also affirmation of my analysis. Reain felt that 'forgetting' was an interesting way of looking at how free-styling took place. But he wanted to emphasise that it was an important and valued mode of rapping in itself and a skill acquired over and above the common repertoire of MCs' skills, by a rather smaller number of rappers. He highlighted that accomplished freestylers not

only practiced regularly but that they would immediately begin their rapping in a cypher by free-styling rather than build up to it.

In addition to helping to refine my analysis in this area he confirmed the significance of my analysis in others. In particular he pointed out my discussion of his name. Although he said that he would not have used the same language, he found that this discussion drew attention to issues that he had only recently been considering (regarding what he termed 'the duality of man'). He went on to add that my analysis brought to light issues that he had not considered as fully. My aim, in approaching this project as a dialogue with, as well as a discussion of, rap scenes and the actors that produce them, was to develop the value of this research by enabling it to speak to the concerns of those social groups with which it deals. I hope that this work will lead to the development of a society that better understands itself.

Objectivity, Subjectivity and Self-Reflexivity in the Research Process

My place in relation to the subjects of analysis is an important aspect of this thesis. I have tried to draw attention to the position of 'the researcher' throughout the substantive chapters of this study. However, it is useful to address the topic of self-reflexivity here, for the sake of clarity, even if I deal with this through reference to issues in the substantive material. Throughout my chapter concerned with London's public bus service, I make apparent the limits of what was observable to me. This includes those who, because seated behind, me I could hear but not see. It is because of the particular positions that may be occupied in this space that the transformations with which I am concerned could take place. The marking out of the back of the top deck as a

space for young people to congregate informally enacts something comparable to the sign-posting of seats downstairs for the use of disabled and elderly passengers. Further to physically occupying the space made available to them, young Londoners appropriate it through the soundscape, a gesture which is made all the more powerful because their activity may be heard but they cannot be seen at the back of the bus because other passengers are forced to face forward by the arrangement of the seats.

Throughout my research I changed position on the bus in order to better understand the experience of sitting on the bus and how perception is shaped by one's position. However, there were occasions when my position changed in response to my subjects' actions. These include my being told to 'come here' by a young girl, if I wanted to hear the music she played on her phone. The physical change in position was accompanied by a social change, and my shift to the back of the bus brought me closer to her perspective. In another incident I chose to disclose information about myself to a young man that I had questioned regarding his musical preferences. At the moment in which he asked what I listened to, as at many others throughout this study, my research ethics came to mind. As I had decided that I would talk to this passenger, I ensured that my recorder was off, in order to avoid the covert recording of conversation. Not only did my willingness to enter equitable relations with participants elicit important data, but the relation between the young man and myself itself became a reproduction of the social forms brought about through London based rap music by its users. The research became conducted through, and informed by, the ethical arrangements of the culture being researched. The familiarity with

which the girl addressed me also highlighted my limits in determining my social position. There was a significant age gap between her and myself, but her address conveyed that she either did not recognise my seniority (social or biological) or that she was deliberately negating it. Her act demonstrates how music may be used to level social distinctions and renegotiate the organisation of space.

During my ethnographic research on buses I used a digital dictaphone. The decision to do this was taken after I had considered the possibility of recording private conversations as well as the difficulty of recording sonic events through writing. The research methods employed in this study were often developed through the use of the cultural forms being analysed, as in my playing music to the man above. In other instances the socio-cultural context in which my observations took place were inimical to the methods being employed.

On the bus that I discuss taking from near St Bonaventure's school I was confronted with a lot of noise as soon as I boarded. At this point I wondered whether it was worthwhile using a recording device at all. I expected that the shouting and screaming on the bus would drown out any of the sounds that I might have been interested in capturing, rendering later analysis of the soundscape difficult or impossible. However, I found that although I was able to discern the music that they listened to, the less discriminating recorder that I used emphasised the sounds closest to it. Though the playing of music could be detected, the inter-subjective play of the group produced through that music could not.

The dictaphone was a useful tool during my ethnographic research and I would have been unable to develop my analysis as I have done without it. However, it also has limitations (just as my human presence is limited) which needed to be considered in relation to both methodological and ethical issues. At the earliest stage of bus research I took pictures of the top deck of a bus, while it was empty, in order to build up an idea of what was significant to my study about the bus. Although I became aware that TfL had the ability to monitor, via CCTV, the activity of people on public buses I decided that it was not necessary or desirable to keep visual records of people in this space.

Although I have avoided listing attributes of my social identity in a superficial gesture of self-reflexivity, a number of incidents (such as moving to the back of the bus to join this girl above) draw attention to my social position in relation to (and sometimes as a part of) the social worlds with which this study is concerned. Renato Rosaldo discusses the possibilities of transforming the social analyst into a social critic 'who speaks from a subordinate position.'³⁷ I do not claim to speak on behalf of research participants. However, in a number of cases I found that I shared some of the cultural knowledge that interviewees discussed or was addressed in a manner that suggested some identification with myself by others. I therefore cannot claim to be entirely detached from the social worlds under consideration.

Rosaldo discusses a number of subject positions from which valuable insights may be gained by the social analyst, but it is his suggestion of the possibility of 'using the plural to speak of an observer's identities. More a busy

³⁷ Renato Rosaldo (1993) p. 187

intersection through which multiple identities crisscross than a unified coherent self...’³⁸ that has informed my own approach of drawing attention to the shifts in my position. Through this strategy I intended to explore the potential for ‘uniting an analytical with an ethical project and render obsolete the view of the utterly detached observer who looks down from on high.’³⁹ I have attempted to work outwards from my own limited awareness of my object of study towards a fuller understanding that draws upon a variety of sources and is informed by other subject positions. My partial awareness of rap music placed me in a position from which to begin this engagement with actors within these social scenes. Nevertheless, the research process demanded the placing aside of my own perspective in order to privilege those of others, prior to offering any social critique. The decision to allow interviewees to read how I had used their contribution in the draft thesis was a continuation of the aim of engaging in dialogue with those in the social world under consideration as well as contributing to academic discourses on culture. This approach had an obvious impact on the timescale of the fieldwork. The live performance and nightclub based research began in July 2008 and ended in March 2009, while interviews were started in May 2008 and continued until May 2010. I collected black ephemera, including fliers and CD’s from May to August 2008. The bus ethnography in chapter four focuses on the period of active research from April to October 2008. However, it is informed by events on London’s public buses observed as late as December 2009. The snapshot of data, used for analysis of

³⁸ Ibid p. 194

³⁹ Ibid

the Pure Grime discussion forum, was taken in October 2008. However, the internet was used to assist in my research throughout the entire period of fieldwork, from April 2008 until May 2010. Analysis of music videos and rap lyrics also took place throughout this period.

My participant observation on buses and in nightclubs and other music events helped to inform and was informed by other research activities, interviews and close textual analysis in particular. The process of triangulation using material gained from various sources enabled me to refine the interpretations that I made from my observations in relation to issues such as economic growth and social solidarity. This cross checking became an important part of probing deeper into these issues and critically engaging with the people from whom I obtained information. I want to contrast this form of social critique from the ethnographic work of scholars such as Elijah Anderson. In *Code of the Street*, Anderson develops his concept of a 'code' from a series of interviews and observations, and states that this term is useful because it is used by people in the social world he is investigating and opposes the code to a 'decent' culture:

The decent family and the street family in a real sense represent two poles of value orientation, two contrasting conceptual categories. The labels 'decent' and 'street,' which residents themselves use, amount to evaluative judgements that confer status on local residents.⁴⁰

I deal with some of the analytical problems that arise from Anderson's work in the final chapter of this thesis. Here, I want to contrast his valorisation of 'old heads', who he sees as neighbourhood mentors and the heroes of his narrative,⁴¹

⁴⁰ Elijah Anderson (2000) p. 35

⁴¹ Ibid pp. 102, 144-6, 324

and the consequent positioning of himself closer to them in relation to the ‘code of the street’ from the partially detached critical position that I adopt in relation to research participants, such as Alim; the young man who emphasised violence in a YouTube video; and the lyrical content of songs like ‘Black Boys’.

My ethical engagement with this social world attempted to adopt a broadly critical approach to all the practices and subject positions that I encountered. Although specific social factors facilitated my engagement with artists and listeners, the research activity that I was engaged in also confirmed my position as a ‘stranger’.⁴² I remained outside the specific subcultures with which I was concerned, even as I acquired greater cultural competence and understanding of the perspectives within them. Reain’s comments about my analysis of his interviews perhaps best exemplify this relation. The language and aims of this study are not those of my research participants. However, through a critical engagement with their interview testimonies, their cultural production, their linguistic and bodily practices, this research project may contribute to the self understanding of the social individuals and groups that are its subject. It may also contribute to a broader understanding of black culture in London. I do not share Reain’s developing ideas about the ‘duality of man’ and I distinguished my analysis from his considerations when he noted his interest. Nevertheless, by providing the opportunity to engage in a critical dialogue, the research methods enabled the opportunity for intellectual exchange without aligning myself with the aims or interests of those under consideration.

⁴² David Walsh (1998) p. 218

Finally, my concern with the interpretative process and my own self-reflexivity has avoided a formulaic incantation of my social attributes, and I have attempted to take advantage of the fusing of ethnography with discourse analysis. Instead of attempting to present myself as whole, finished, unified identity at the beginning of this thesis, I suggest that readers approach this text with something of the lens of a literary critic. There are significant silences, elisions and interpolations through which I draw attention to my position in the research through the practice of writing. This is in order that the reader may become a part of the critical process of engaging with the aesthetics and ethics of London based rap, rather than accepting this thesis as a finished and conclusive account of the subject.

Chapter 3 ‘Revolution of a Next Kind’: Building black London from the Bottom

Reain tells me that he spells his stage name a particular way for the purpose of putting two words together, ‘and two meanings together.’ His discussion of this name contrasts with what he refers to as his ‘given name’. While there is nothing in our conversation to suggest any discomfort with the name given him by his family, ‘... the name of a king, brap!’, the description he provides of the process of constructing another name, appropriate to himself, reveals a considered approach to the identity that he inhabits as a rapper. ‘You know you’ve got reign sovereign r, e, i, g, n, and you’ve got rain weather, and that’s what, basically, I’m trying to bring across.’ Although he does not make the connection more explicit, his valorisation of an aspect of his given name, related to monarchy, may be associated with his trying to bring across the idea ‘[not] that I’m better than anyone, but just in a sense that I think ... that anyone has a potential to be a king. Within their own right.’ This sense of Reain’s neologism is combined with another, that he considers to be ‘a bit more aggy: “Right I’m pissing down on people”. And that’s a bit more where the battle and rugged element comes into my style.’ By combining these words and meanings Reain fashions a sense of himself that incorporates a street ruggedness with a sense of dignity that the working class black-Englishman believes is accessible to anyone: ‘whether your sweeping the roads or whether you’re sat on a throne.’ He took this name at about 16 or 17 after rapping since the age of 15, listening to his elder brother’s rap music as a child, and then purchasing Hip-Hop records for himself as a teenager. As one of many genres of music that were played in his home, rap is

an art form that has provided him with the cultural resources through which he constructed his adult identity.

Through participating in rap music cultures young Londoners develop a sense of themselves. This sense includes awareness of their place in the world, the city they inhabit, and the relations with others through which their life experiences are structured. Rapping becomes an important part of the production of particular modes of urban living through various forms of play and the exploration of the relations that are constitutive of this verbal art form. This productive activity occurs in a variety of sites, including the home, school, and youth clubs, as well as other, liminal, spaces. The acquisition of linguistic skills that distinguish one as a rapper enables young people to achieve social recognition, to cultivate forms of self-esteem, and the means to attain economic and social aspirations. In the act of rapping they appropriate means to represent themselves and the urban world they inhabit, both to themselves and others. As young rappers develop, their interests and investments in this art form may enlarge to include, not only pleasure and social recognition for their skills, but also concern for the organisation of social life, and with the socio-economic and political forces that structure their lives and the reproduction of their culture.

These interests and concerns are developed through a variety of processes, including copying rappers on the radio, writing lyrics in the bedroom, clashing with other rappers in a circle at school, and practicing what one artist described as the 'lost art' of free-styling. Rapping and playing with products made through or with rap is used in the construction of forms of inter-subjectivity, collective identifications and social skills. Reain's combination of

the vulgar with the dignified in his identity reveals a concern with self-possession as well as social conservatism. He refers to a Nas lyric, 'blood of a slave, heart of a King', that he heard some time after giving himself the name 'Reain'. In relating this lyric to his name, he identifies how the themes and values that circulate in this culture affirm and express his own sentiments. By explaining this aspect of his identity through another's lyrics, Reain also demonstrates how one's sense of self is nurtured and extended through participation in rap cultures. The affirmation of his identity through rap and a reference to slavery is an important consideration in the study of contemporary life in the postcolonial city.

The circles formed in playgrounds and nightclubs across London can be seen as a refashioning of a vital component of slave culture and the pre-modern African forms upon which the slaves drew. In this reshaping, advanced technologies are combined with black cultural resources in the development of new aesthetic forms and inter-subjective relations. This cultural and technological work contributes to the ongoing reconfiguration of the black public sphere in contemporary London.

This chapter aims to analyse the ethical relations and aesthetic forms produced by young people in their development as rap artists and in their construction of London's rap scenes. I begin with a discussion of the significance of the presence of this black cultural tradition in the city. This 'homegrown' art form is connected to the cultures that black settler migrants brought with them. After considering the relation between rap and the culture produced by slaves, I highlight some of the distinctive features that rap

contributes to the formation of a black public sphere in contemporary London. In the two following sections I examine the ethics and aesthetics of the rap music cultures produced in London. This begins with rap artists' recollections of their initial experiences of this cultural form. I briefly consider the relationships formed in the production of rap and the shared time and space that rappers inhabit. I then analyse how the aesthetic qualities of rap cultures are shaped by the social relations through which they are produced. In connection with this I highlight how the use of technology in the contemporary black public sphere distinguishes London's rap cultures from those produced during slavery and in the post-colonial Caribbean.

Following this preliminary discussion of these black cultural forms and relations, I move on to an examination of how rap is appropriated by urban youths in the production of their social identities. I also analyse how these cultural practitioners contribute to the construction of their social scenes. This analysis attends to the inclination of subjects towards particular dispositions through participation in rap cultures. It also engages with the collaborative processes through which technology and labour are employed in the construction of the micro-economies of London's black public spheres. This engagement highlights the proximity of those cultural spaces to specific contexts of urban dwelling. I then return to the connection between technology and ethical relations in the black public sphere, in order to examine the convergence of factors that came about in the production of the Grime music amongst the interpretative community associated with it. Following this, I discuss the significance of the inter-generational reproduction of London's rap cultures

both within and outside of the family structure. The social recognition gained through rapping is an important aspect of young people's social development as well as mature artists' economic aspirations. I therefore conclude with a consideration of the social significance of the adaptation of this cultural practice to the conditions of post-colonial London.

'I drop jewels': Appropriating a Cultural Inheritance

The participation in London's rap cultures by Reain and others is testament to the tenacity of this art form. The practice can be traced, through slavery, to the Caribbean and America and back to Africa. The presence of a culture of rap in London, is certainly in part, related to the global dominance of American popular culture. However, it is important to highlight the significance of a homegrown black music tradition. Linton Kwesi Johnson's discussion of 'Jamaican Rebel Music' refers to the practice of dub-poetry that, I argue, forms a key historical link between black London's culture and its Atlantic routes:

The 'dub-lyricist' is the dj turned poet. He intones his lyrics rather than sings them. Dub-lyricism is a new form of (oral) music-poetry, wherein the lyricist overdubs rhythmic phrases on to the rhythm background of a popular song. Dub-lyricists include poets like Big Youth, I Roy, U Roy, Dillinger, Shorty the President, Prince Jazzbo and others.¹

Johnson's own practice as a dub-poet signals the presence of a culture of rap in the UK at least as far back as the period that saw Hip-Hop's 'birth' in New York during the 1970s. The contemporary practice of 'clashing' in London can also be traced back to African and Caribbean cultures. Roger Abrahams describes the practice of 'Giving Rag' in the Caribbean, which bears substantial similarities to the clashes of black-English rappers.² The carnivalesque verbal battles of West

¹ Linton Kwesi Johnson (1976) p. 398

² Roger Abrahams (1972) pp. 217-8

Indian artists such as I Roy and Prince Jazzbo can be related to the practices described by Abrahams, and the association of migrants like Linton Kwesi Johnson and Dennis Bovell with such artists would have been an important contribution to the spread of black Atlantic culture.

Johnson's essay links the dub-lyricists work to the expression of the ongoing historical suffering of slavery and continued un-freedoms that blacks are subject to. In his discussion of slave culture and the 'ring shout', Sterling Stuckey identifies that 'the lyrics are driven by complex percussive rhythms, and often give way to chants, whose repetition can have a hypnotic effect and contribute to the high religious purpose of possession.'³ This religious purpose was associated with the specific social, economic and political position in which the slaves found themselves. The African rhythms that the slaves drew on were 'adapted, changed, and intensified by the tragic soul-life of the slaves.'⁴ Further to this, Gerald Davis discusses the antiphony that is central to black cultural production, in the context of the church, and the formulae through which individual interpretations are offered to black audiences.⁵ While contemporary rap has lost its sacred dimension, Gilroy argues that this 'fading public sphere' is still 'just about recognisable as a profane transcoding of the black Christian congregation'.⁶ Many of its formal qualities have been retained and refined. Stuckey's description of the slave's lyrics bears similarities to what Adam Krims

³ Sterling Stuckey (1987) p. 27

⁴ W.E.B. DuBois (2000) p. 134

⁵ Gerald Davis (1985)

⁶ Paul Gilroy (1994) p. 71

terms, percussion effusive flow.⁷ Cornel West acknowledges the relation of rap to a black cultural tradition but describes rap's changed relation to its context in the phrase 'the African polyrhythms of the street.'⁸ The practice of rapping in London is not a result of a simple handing down of a finished culture but the ongoing adaptation and reworking of cultural resources to the conditions in which practitioners find themselves.

Although the contexts of production may be significantly different, the association that black youths have with rap music may indicate one of the key reasons for its historical longevity. Stuckey notes, in his discussion of the 'ring shout', that 'Black youngsters were eager to "shout," forming themselves into a circle, singing and dancing at the slightest suggestion, assuring the perpetuation of important religious and artistic values of their people.'⁹ The appropriation of the ring shout in London may meet very different needs to those expressed in slaves' song and dance. However, the adaptation of the slave circle into cyphers and clashes by young people suggests that it remains an important way in which they craft their adult identities. Further to this, I suggest that MCs and DJs also facilitate a collective experience, a practice that retains important links with the tradition of black expressive culture. Gilroy has described how 'radical passions rooted in distinctly African history, philosophy, and religious practice ... have, at strategic moments challenged the political and moral authority of the capitalist world system in which the diaspora was created.'¹⁰ Following Gilroy's suggestion

⁷ Adam Krims (2000) pp. 50-1

⁸ Cornel West (1992) p. 222

⁹ Sterling Stuckey (1987) p. 86

¹⁰ Paul Gilroy (2002) p. 209

that many ‘practices that were forged in the habitus of slavery have lingered on’¹¹ it is important to consider how this cultural form is appropriated in black London’s subaltern public sphere. For Johnson, the dub-lyricist embodied ‘the historical experience of the Jamaican masses’:

Through music, song and poetry, they give spiritual expression to their own inner beings, to their own experience. But in so doing, they are also giving spiritual expression to the collective experience of sufferation that is shared by all sufferers.¹²

In the study of contemporary rap it is necessary to examine how Grime and UK Hip-Hop MCs employ cultural resources in the production of alternative, oppositional interpretations of metropolitan life.

In contrast to the subjectivity formed through the consumption of the psychological novel from which, Jurgen Habermas argues, the rational-critical public debate that characterised the bourgeois public sphere flowed,¹³ the antiphonic structure of rap prioritises the value of inter-subjectivity. Kamau Brathwaite contrasts the Jamaican oral tradition with the written tradition of Western poetry, as a form of total expression:

Reading is an isolated, individualistic expression. The oral tradition on the other hand demands not only the griot but the audience to complete the community: The noise and sounds that the maker makes are responded to by the audience and are returned to him. Hence we have the creation of a continuum where meaning truly resides.¹⁴

In this total expression, voice, body movement and gesture are combined with the materiality of sound in the production of an interpretative community. In his discussion of food, and convivial culture, Bourdieu opposes the self image

¹¹ Paul Gilroy (1994) p. 65

¹² Linton Kwesi Johnson (1976) p. 399

¹³ Jürgen Habermas (1989) p. 43

¹⁴ Edward Brathwaite (1984) p.18-9

that the petit-bourgeois constructs by withdrawal into the home, with the 'being-in-the-present that is affirmed in the 'readiness to take advantage of the good times and take time as it comes is, in itself, an affirmation of solidarity with others...'.¹⁵ Whereas the consumption of literary texts emphasised a private subjectivity, that formed an important channel through which the culture of the dominant social group developed, the inter-subjectivity through which rap music is used by initiates of London's black culture is an essential component in the development of that culture and of its practitioners. The artistic forms and social values that are made and adapted in the subaltern black public sphere can be seen to affirm principles of commonality in contemporary London.

The sense of a common present forms the basis of my link between the aesthetics and ethics of London based rap music. I want to invest in the formal features of rap music an ethical value. These qualities may be observed in the forms of reciprocity, exchange and recognition that are employed in the black public sphere. They are influenced by historical and technological developments. In order to understand rap's role in the formation of identity, attention must be given to how social, economic, technological and political factors influence this cultural practice. Paul Willis highlights, in his discussion of grounded aesthetics, that 'there is a dramaturgy and poetics of everyday life, of social presence, encounter and event'.¹⁶ The ethics of play through which young Londoners signify their lived conditions is of central importance to the grounded aesthetics that I am attempting to outline here. The strategies of play

¹⁵ Pierre Bourdieu (1984) p. 183

¹⁶ Paul Willis (1990) p. 22

and self organisation that structure the subaltern public sphere can be usefully related to Bakhtin's discussion of the carnival grotesque.

The carnivalesque crowd in the marketplace or in the streets is not merely a crowd. It is the people as a whole, but organized *in their own way*, the way of the people. It is outside and contrary to all existing forms of socio-economic and political organization, which is suspended for the time of the festivity.¹⁷

The structure of contemporary London's black public sphere is not determined by the responses of slaves and colonised people to their conditions. But the dispositions that are acquired through the practice of rapping incline subjects towards a particular orientation to the social world. As the challenges posed by that world change, each generation adapts the cultural resources that they inherit to deal with those conditions. Many of the themes employed in clashing are characteristic of the carnival grotesque:

The body that figures in all the expressions of the unofficial speech of the people is the body that fecundates and is fecundated, that gives birth and is born, devours and is devoured, drinks defecates, is sick and dying. In all languages there is a great number of expressions related to the genital organs, the anus and buttocks, the belly, the mouth and nose.¹⁸

The use of vulgar language in the Grime and UK Hip-Hop scenes emphasises the material and bodily. The grotesque aesthetic is adapted within these scenes to common goals and the present conditions of dwelling. Furthermore, Reain's reference to slavery suggests a lingering awareness of the value that the memory of racial terror may have in the London's black public sphere. This value is employed by him in the service of dealing with his own situation, as a working class black man, possessing dignity with common values and interests.

¹⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) p. 255

¹⁸ Ibid p. 319

A Time to Be Together: The Ethics of Rap

There are number of different styles of rap with various qualities in which pleasure is found by young Londoners. The practice is associated with the development of friendships inside or outside of school. Beginning to rap was regarded as a form of play, frequently compared to football, and as something to do with friends: ‘everyone was doing it.’ It is also related by interviewees to a feeling that is enjoyed and the desire to be the person who brings about that feeling in others. Above all it is considered by young artists to have been an ordinary part of growing up. Listening to rap music is a common feature in Britain’s youth cultures. Whether via the radio, internet, or purchased recordings, the use of recorded rap music is an essential component in contemporary London’s rap cultures. Listening to records with friends, retracing the lyrics of a favourite artist, gathering around a radio at night, or MCing over a record as part of a bedroom set, are a few of the ways in which recorded music is used in the reproduction of London’s rap cultures. The form of play through which young Londoners develop their understanding of black urban life can lead to a new sense of self. Rapping at 15 or 16 was frequently contrasted with experiences of rapping that occurred earlier in childhood. Even though rapping during one’s mid-teens was occasionally described as something like a hobby, childhood rapping was seen as having been less ‘serious’ than the more practised engagement with black culture that occurs during and following adolescence. The adoption of a name that is recognised amongst one’s peer-group or beyond is one of the ways in which participation in black urban culture transforms the lives of a substantial number of young people in the capital.

UK Hip-Hop and Grime artists referred to youth clubs as important sites for the development of their skills, or spaces in which an admiration of MCs was ignited. However, youth clubs were not described as places in which young people first begin to rap. The artistic skills and cultural competence required to be confident enough to perform in front of others are developed either at home in private or with friends. Less formally organised spaces such as parks, a wall in the local neighbourhood or school corridors, provide opportunities to increase verbal facility.

Describing the scene in which his interest in rap music arose, DJ Excalibah recalled his friend's room in a house in Leyton. 'I remember us both sitting ... listening to the album, like into what we thought were the wee hours, but I had to be home by nine so it wasn't that late. ... And him trying to tell me why Hip-Hop was amazing.' The reconstruction of this event reveals one of the ways in which rap shapes experience. Excalibah's recollection of a discrepancy in the perception of time and the temporality by which his life was generally governed indicates how this engagement with rap music modified his experience of time passing. Engaging with rapping requires a temporal shift, as well as the development of interpretative techniques: 'I think it was Blackstreet I got into first, and it was like one song "You Blow My Mind" which had the rap on it. ...' At this point Excalibah and his friend break into the rap that the DJ recalls: 'Check baby, check baby, one two, one two'. Although his friend did not know Excalibah during the period he refers to, her participation in this performance signified her awareness of the track and familiarity with the cultural experience that he described. Significantly, the spontaneity of this brief

performance (and for them its unexceptionally) highlights the ordinary sociality that forms an essential component of black cultural production:

...and I was like "What's he saying, what's he saying?" and he was like "Oh it's rap." And he played me more rap which was the Fugees. Then I got into Foxy Brown cause she had the song with Blackstreet, then Biggie, then Little Kim, and the acts - Jay-Z - all the acts that were big at the time.

In describing the everyday moment in which he first identified an interest in rap music, Excalibah demonstrated how this developed, through a chain of references to other artists. The manner of his recollection also revealed the power of the rappers' performative utterances. This linguistic practice invokes a convivial being-in-the-present. The playful rhyming of Excalibah and his friend draws attention to the role of rap music in affirming social relations. Craig Mack's repetition and rhythmic play on this track evokes a response that not only involves repetition but a shift in position, from that of a listener to the enunciative position of the rapper. In doing so the temporality of that play is reinvoked in the present.

In contrast to Excalibah's narrative, Fx described asking his father's friend to make his Dad a mix-tape because he was fascinated by turntables:

He was the first person that I knew that had decks. He was playing House music, I never liked House music. But I so wanted to get into music that I used to lie to him and say "my Dad wants you to make him a tape." ... "So can I come up there and pick tunes that I think he will like, and you put it on a tape, and I'll give it to him." And boom! ... I used to go in and go through his records, I didn't know what any of the tunes were, but he used to say "alright then" and I used to pick the tunes, and he used to play them and mix them all together, and that was my first recollection of getting involved in being a DJ... I never used to give it to my Dad, and I never used to listen to the tape, 'cause I never liked House music. But it was me seeing them decks spinning around, and him mixing it, and me being intrigued.

The shift in focal point, from subject, to object, and back to subject, dramatises the process of identification that led to Fx's career in music. Both Excalibah and Fx's narratives emphasised the intersubjectivity that their interests in rap music

were built upon. In spite of this early interest in DJing, Fx first productively engaged with rap music as an MC, at school and in his friends' homes:

When we was 14 or 15 and that, there was one guy that I knew ... and he used to call himself MC Element. And he had Soundlab decks and I used to invite my friends 'round to his house. We wasn't even called anything then. And we used to go to his house - 'cause I used to buy Jungle records those times - and we used to go and do our sets. ... We used to MC, me and him, and Rainman used to DJ or whatever. And that's where the progression came from.

There is a reference to a social form here that is a fundamental component in the reproduction of contemporary black-British culture: the Bedroom set. Fx's reference to Element's self-identification is followed by the statement that the group of friends that assembled to practice their artistic techniques did not have a name at that time. They had not acquired a collective identity that they felt required naming. Nevertheless, Fx's practice of MCing over Jungle records enabled the cultivation of similar competences that Excalibah and his friend display, inhabiting a similar enunciative position. The bedroom set produces a form of social organisation that requires some division of labour. It also employs an inter-subjective linguistic play that is structured by the temporality of the selected recordings. The absence of a name for the group (in contrast to later associations in which Fx was a member) reveals the intermediate position of Bedroom sets. This position is made particularly distinct as a result of the individuals within that group adopting names that identify them as particular types of cultural practitioners. The bedroom set may be described as a private association of members, who have made public their identification with rap music culture, whose primary purpose is to develop the skills required to reproduce that culture.

Common Culture: The Aesthetics of Rap

The skills employed in the bedroom set are not only developed in private spaces. The public spaces of the school, street, and local parks are used in order to practice and explore these linguistic techniques. Through that exploration these spaces are, to a greater or lesser degree, transformed. Indeed, it is in the organisation of space that is not their own that personal development is mediated and oriented towards social development. Alim Kamara, now in his 30s, recalls playing in the park with friends during the early 90s, prior to the period that Fx describes above:

[He and his friends would be] freestyling, or trying to freestyle I would call it now. ... Someone would be beat-boxing the wackest beat-box, just [beat-boxes], just you know just beat-boxing - just us chilling, sitting down. And it was about who would come out with the freshest rhyme as well, at that moment in time. And that was encouraging, because it sometimes inspired lyrics, to see who could bring something next or something new to the table.

The friendly competition in which the group engaged encouraged participants to practice, privately, in order to improve. In addition to the different uses of public and private space (private for writing, oriented to performance in public space with and for other practitioners) the use of other materials such as video is further oriented towards this inter-subjective play through participation in black cultural production:

... and around that time as well was the movie *House Party*... you had Kid who wasn't exactly the most popular of students but he had been practicing, crafting his art, and now bringing it forward to get that recognition with it, that's how it felt for us back then, that was the early birth of the love for Hip-Hop.

Paul Willis argues that video 'has unique characteristics which change the nature of viewing in important ways':¹⁹

¹⁹ Paul Willis (1990) p. 39

It also gives viewers more control over the way they watch and over the materials of their own symbolic work. They can speed scan the whole thing, skip sequences they don't like, repeat one's they do, slow the action down, and freeze a single frame on the screen. By allowing a more active relationship to the screen than is possible with conventional television viewing, these facilities open up new possibilities for symbolic creativity and begin to blur the line between consumption and production.²⁰

Through this active relation to cultural material, young Londoners adapt these resources to their own needs. Like Alim, Ty recalls using the House Party video. In his case it was employed in the development of his repertoire of dance moves. Their use of video identifies how communicative technologies are employed in the process of vernacular identity formation. Alim's experience contrasts with Fx's, both in the use of space (the selection of a particular space as well as how it is used) and in the technological resources through which his engagement with rap developed. However, American Hip-Hop videos and British Jungle records have both been employed as raw materials in the production of rap in London. The bedroom sets organised at MC Element's home were identified by Fx as enabling a 'progression'. The use of technology, association of friends, and the practicing of linguistic skills are important elements in this process.

Through his participation in rap culture Reain came to know and became affiliated with Rhyme Asylum. The crew's comments about their development within the UK Hip-Hop scene bears important testimony to the subjective feelings that are produced through rapping and the effect of different forms of social organisation on those feelings. In their discussion of the open mic nights that they used to attend at Deal Real, Possessed and Skirmish emphasise its importance in the development of their skills and the feeling that it gave them:

Skirmish: I used to love that man, the buzz, it was the illest feeling.

²⁰ Ibid

Possessed: Yeah it was amazing, then I went every Friday for like three and a half years. Getting - doing the same thing. And that's how - yeah - where I learn't everything.

Skirmish: That's when you start learning your skills innit, you're learning how to perform in front of a crowd, what the crowd reacts to. When you'd come up with a new verse and you'd spit it and get a good response: that's a good Friday man. You're like "Yeah".

Possessed: It would make you write as well because you'd feel like a bit of a knob if you'd been there for weeks and you'd spit the same verse.

These comments bring together themes of subjective feeling, cultural practice and collective affirmation, that are important aspects of the social production of the aura of London's rap cultures. In addition to the open mic events, the crew discuss cyphers and freestyles as distinct forms through which MCs were organised in the practice of their art. The open mic events embody the democratic principle of allowing everyone the opportunity to take the mic when the feeling takes them. However, this principle is structured and operates in a manner that is distinct to that found in the cypher.

Asserting that the cypher is 'fundamental' to an MC's development, Reain identifies a particular competitiveness as an important feature that distinguishes this form of rapping: 'When you're in a cypher, and its other MCs - so you know - well the expectation is these guys are on exactly the same wavelength as me, so I can't slip things by them. So they'll clock on and if I'm shit... you're not gonna get a pat on the back or anything.' He emphasises the high levels of skill demanded by the close competition, in which the rapper works no longer as a member of a crew but instead as part of a cypher. This involves elated highs as well as low moments when one is found lacking:

Reain: But its in a subtle way - Noone's gonna come up to you and say "Ah, you're shit bruv" ... Yeah, you'll get a polite pat.

Possessed: Or the cut off "Yo"...

Reain: So you'll be rapping and someone will just jump in on your verse. The crew work together as an ongoing social group. In contrast to this, rappers who form a cypher work with and against one another in temporary formations directed to brief elevated highs. This socio-cultural formation incorporates a competitiveness that is unsparing of the ego of those that are deemed to not meet the quality that other members of the cypher expect:

Its just a really good feeling and sense of camaraderie as well. You know you're all MCs together, you're all just rapping. Everyone's catching joke off it, and everyone's feeling everyone. Well not everyone really - you know you've got your shit guys. But you know - you know you need everything to make the recipe work.

Reain and Possessed draw attention to the elements of spontaneity that are combined with the self-governing freedom of these temporary autonomous zones: 'they [cyphers] were my favourite part but its kind of like, where there is no scene you don't really get an opportunity and they're a lot better when they're spontaneous.' The festive quality of the cypher is an important component of the aura of this rap culture. The double edged freedom embodied in the relative uncertainty of the timing of the events themselves and the self legislation through which they are internally organised contrasts with the orderliness of the open mic nights. However, the timing of the events is related to the organisation of other aspects of the UK Hip-Hop scene. Cyphers were frequently associated with occurring outside organised events.

The lack of opportunity for cyphering is related to the stagnation of the UK Hip-Hop scene. With spaces such as Deal Real gone, artists focus on other means through which to develop themselves. The contrast between the spontaneous cyphers and open mic events reveals a difference in the formal arrangement of space and the participants in it. It also highlights the necessity

of institutions like Deal Real or youth clubs to the development of a healthy rap scene. The contrast between free-styling and using verses that had been memorised from previously written material draws further attention to the process of rapping and the ‘texture’ of the event. While either ‘writtens’ or ‘free-styles’ may be performed in a cypher, free-styling was identified by Reain and Possessed variously as ‘the most creative part of Hip-Hop’, a ‘lost art’, and the ‘rawest form’ of rapping. This is especially the case when a rapper refers to something spatially present in order to draw attention to the fact that he is free-styling. The mode of rapping ‘from the top of the head’ (which emphasises the ‘happening right there, at that moment’) can be compared to Bakhtin’s festive square and its free-speech: ‘a lot of the stuff, as long as you are free-styling, isn’t gonna get said again. And its special to that moment, and every time you do it, its something new and you can surprise yourself.’ The originality of capturing a moment in this form involves the inventive use of free language and the privileging of the present in contrast to the composition of written verses that are repeatedly honed, before memorisation for performance.

Pre-written lyrics may be used to support the build up of extemporaneous rapping. In one of Afrikan Boy’s videos published on You Tube, ‘Afrikan Boy 3Style 4Captian TB TV’, he raps ‘On the bus my Oyster card goes “Ding de ding de ding ding”’. These words form part of a lyric written in response to the introduction of this technology during his time at college: ‘it realises that I am Afrikan Boy so when it beeps, it beeps that tune’. The imagined scenario of the bus recognising him, by responding to him swiping his card through playing a tune he had become engrossed in at the time of writing,

is rapped along with a number of other '16 bar' lyrics in the production of an oral mash up for this video. The mixture of memorised lyrics was also used as the basis for extemporised rapping by Excalibah and his crew during their development as artists: 'what you normally do is start with something that you've written, and once you forget a piece of it, start making it up until you have to stop, until you've gone rubbish.' The lyrical content of Afrikan Boy's freestyle video were composed through an openness to developments around him, and the putting together of incongruous elements to produce their humour. His mash up of memorised lyrics involves a shift of consciousness. This movement is further developed in the process that Excalibah identifies as a type of fabrication combined with forgetting.

In contrast to Excalibah, Reain's statement that he began free-styling prior to writing lyrics reveals that the primacy of orality persists within this culture. Reain points out that skilled freestylers may enter the cypher with a phrase such as 'I'm coming off the top' to draw attention to their practice of rapping lyrics extemporaneously. Although Reain and Possessed both particularly value the spontaneity of free-styling within cyphers and the state of consciousness that is attained through this form of social organisation, they also emphasise the need to practice in order to develop this skill. Possessed states that he practices everyday and that he is comfortably able to free-style for over an hour. This skill is maintained through practicing with Reain and, alternatively, when playing tunes alone, beginning to free-style when he is 'feeling the beat'.

The regular practicing of free-styling, the value that is given to spontaneity, and the resultant uniqueness of the lyrics that are produced, highlight the ontological status of rap as an event. There is a prioritisation of skills exercised in producing these events over the existence of a textual artefact. These include linguistic facility, the ability to adapt to a beat, and to draw upon immediately surrounding material. In developing an outline of the aesthetics of London based rap, I wish to attend to the dialogical relationship between the rapper and recorded material (whether these be written lyrics, CDs or MP3s). It is also necessary to connect the shift in consciousness, or forgetting that Excalibah draws attention to, with the ‘shit’ that is discarded in cyphers as aspects of the ground upon which the aesthetic experience of free-styling and cyphering work. The rap music that is used in the composition of pre-written verses or as the basis for the practice of free-styling is transformed from a finished product into the raw materials of these processes. Afrikan Boy’s video presents a moment when disparate lyrics are employed in the production of an aural bricolage. Further to this, Excalibah’s identification of the process of ‘forgetting’ as an important moment in building a freestyle can be paralleled with the cutting off of an MC’s contribution to a cypher in order to allow the cypher itself to develop. Although pre-written verses may be employed within the cypher, Reain and Possessed identify that ‘free-style cyphers’ are amongst their best experiences of cyphering and maintain that it reveals rapping in its ‘most raw form.’ They emphasise an innate spontaneity, cultivated through ongoing practice. The development of this form of aesthetic experience amongst rappers through a combination of other artists’ beats in the production of

written material, the reconfiguration of that pre-written material as the ground to begin working upon, the drawing upon material presently at hand, and the putting other material out of mind in a spontaneous performance is important in the consideration of the manner in which MCs offer their lyrics to their audience. Willis emphasises that “messages” are not now so much “sent” and “received” as *made* in reception, often as a result of, or at least appearing in the space made free and usable by the operation of grounded aesthetics.²¹ The practice of developing linguistic skills through a variety of cultural and technological resources highlights how rap’s grounded aesthetics is produced in the reworking of meaning in the black public sphere.

Although free-styling may draw attention to the immanence that Kamau Brathwaite identifies as key to the development of nation language, the practice of rapping in contemporary London is fashioned through advanced technologies. This condition, which can be apprehended through both the form and theme of Afrikan Boy’s freestyle, sharply contrasts with those experienced by the impoverished Caribbean people that Brathwaite describes:

And this *total expression* comes about because people be in the open air, because people live in conditions of poverty (“unhouselled”) because they come from a historical experience where they had to rely on their very *breath* rather than on paraphernalia like books and museums and machines. They had to depend on *immanence*, the power with-in themselves, rather than the technology outside themselves.²²

In addition to the power within themselves, contemporary rappers draw upon advanced digital technology in their verbal expression. Developments in mobile phones played an important role in contemporary London’s black culture. The

²¹ Paul Willis (1990) p. 135

²² Edward Kamau Brathwaite (1984) p. 19 (emphasis in text)

playing and exchange of music via mobile phone facilitates the growth and reproduction of London's contemporary rap cultures. This mode of mobile digital exchange operates alongside comparatively fixed modes, such as those provided through desktop based tools like MSN.

The growth of this cultural economy is inseparable from a series of technological developments over the last 20 years. Although Fx and Ty recall early experiments with tape and vinyl, Alim's use of a minidisc player as a compressor, connected to a computer, identifies his early participation in rap as coinciding with the shift from analogue to digital media and processes. The declining cost of home computers during the late 1990s and first decade of the new millennium was an important step in broadening access to information technology. Willis states that 'Of the 33 per cent of UK 16 - 24 year olds living in a household possessing a micro in 1987, most were in affluent homes.'²³ It is possible to purchase a laptop in 2010 for less than £250, or a PC for less than £200, whereas twenty years ago a far less powerful PC could cost over £2000. The availability of 'cracked' copies of programs such as Fruityloops, that were freely distributed amongst rap music producers, increased the opportunity for amateurs to begin to produce music on cheap home computers. Groups of young rappers would gather in the home of one of their number to develop the technological skills required to produce digital rap music. Furthermore, the arrival of cheap CDR's increased the ease of duplication and distribution for both consumers and producers. The ability to use one form of media in a car, when walking, and at home, as well as professionally gave significant

²³ Paul Willis (1990) p. 40

advantages over the dead end technology of the minidisc. The advent of MP3 players in the early years of the new millennium displaced tape, CD and minidisces as media for listening to music and consequently facilitated the incorporation of this technology into digital mobile phones. The capture of video as well as audio through these devices and the ability to post material to the internet, signals a significant transformation in techno-aesthetic organisation of the black public sphere.

Schools are common sites for the development of the techniques and tactics of contemporary black-English culture. Residing within the structures of official learning corridors are transformed into sites of free-styling, the backs of exercise books bear marks of identification inscribed in lyrical form, and playgrounds become centres for the performance of black art. Fx contrasts his listening to music in class on a walkman with a friend 'one ear in my ear, one ear in his ear' with MCing in corridors, in which walls were used as instruments in order to provide the beat through which their rapping was structured:

Jungle emerged in the early 90s and it was like based on reggae dancehall so we naturally got into that as well, and it was literally just MCing in the school corridors and just clashing. Some kids would play football, and we'd play football sometimes as well, and when we weren't playing football we was MCing in the school corridors with a dictaphone like this [gestures to the dictaphone on which I am recording this interview] recording it and playing it back.'

Fx's sharing of a walkman somewhat modifies the privatisation that the device encourages, and his description of the clash emphasises the sociality of that cultural form:

Don't always end in fights, it hardly ends in fights, its just a friendly competition, just like some people play cards or they play dominoes, if you MC, or write lyrics, or you spit, competitiveness between you and your peers which results in you in a closed area maybe beating on a wall or someone beat-boxing or someone playing a tape recorder and you battling.

The way that the confines of space are transformed into the instruments through which the competition is structured is an important consideration for the study of this art form. The role of the wall is replaced in the playground by the audience who form a circle around participants, urging them on and responding to their performances. It is worth noting how, through the simple act of beating of a wall, the ‘context’ is brought into the centre of the performance. Through this playful technique a grounded aesthetic is developed and structures the performance of the central actors.

The festive activity of these clashes is for all and produced by all. Afrikan Boy’s recollection of the period in which he rapped at school provides a useful example with which to consider the carnivalesque aesthetic of London’s black culture. He describes going with school mates to the Town Centre: ‘Sometimes there would be a big group, there would be a big circle of like people ... and you know, everyone would just start MCing or just like rapping. So its kind of like everyone would go in terms of spraying like a 16 or whatever. ... everyone would go mad.’ In the midst of the shopping and ‘chilling’ this black cultural circle would form, in which all participated. In contrast to Fx’s description of rapping in the interstices of the school during ‘break-time’, Afrikan Boy refers to circles formed outside of his school, when he and his peers were free to be themselves. The verbal skills that are employed by these rappers facilitates the production of inclusive social relations. Through Fx’s description of the language used in the school’s liminal spaces during, informally organised, break-times we can see how both the content and form of the carnival grotesque are reproduced through contemporary black-British culture: ‘some MCs choose to talk about

mums and family members and stuff. Some MCs choose to talk about the MCs lips and hair and eyebrows and *teeth*.' The emphasis on those parts of the face that either grow and are shed, or that devour and take into the body that which is exterior to it, underscores the grotesque humour of this play.

Synthesiser: Identity Formation in the Black Public Sphere

The verbal skills employed in the circle of black-English culture are an expression of an essentially human quality. The expression of this quality takes form in the particular social and historical contexts of performance. The use of technology in London's black public sphere indicates a shift in the context and mode of expression from the primary orality described by Brathwaite to one of secondary orality. Ty recalled that 'the music chose me, I didn't choose the music,' and described how his interest in Hip-Hop prompted him to explore ways of producing music. Through that process he was able to reproduce the feeling that music gave him: 'I started taping stuff and then... I got two tape decks and started trying to make beats or whatever, and I didn't even know what I was doing.' Through experimentation with technology Ty creatively worked out ways in which he could express himself. This process leads to the development of how rappers are able to understand themselves and their relation to the environment they inhabit. In a rather different context, Jeff Bacon describes starting to recite lyrics to rap songs as a 9 year old in Northamptonshire, before he recognised that he could 'flip the record over and write [his] own stuff' at 15 or 16. Jeff's use of rap can be seen as response to the monotony of life in his village: 'Northamptonshire is a very dull backward kind of place. Its got the highest crime rate in the country, above Brixton and

Hackney - because it is that boring.' In contrast to this, Ty's musical exploration became a way of dealing with being an African boy in post-colonial London and the experience of social marginalisation: 'being African was not a good look, socially, in London.' The desire and ability to use rhythm and rhyme are essential parts of the human condition. The experiences of these artists show some of the ways that rap enables us to engage with the social and geographic environment in which we find ourselves.

Whether responding to socio-economic marginalisation in the urban environment, or using thrilling stories of the urban environment in rap lyrics to cope with suburban monotony, young people, both black and white, are able to find something of common interest and develop ways of exploring who they are through this cultural form. Ty goes on to explain that 'the reason I say it chose me is because it jumped out and I found myself interested.' He describes the experience of developing his understanding of music as a means to explore his own interests and abilities in an 'environment that suggests I'm not special ... "yeah, yeah, yeah. Really you're not".' By enabling young Londoners to find themselves, rap music produced in this city takes on the character of their interests, feelings, desires, identities and the environment in which it is produced. Ty's experimentation with music making without prior knowledge of how to accomplish this task, is one of the ways through which he and other Londoners find and develop themselves through rap. The use of technology in the process of self-development also leads to a broadening awareness of the social world. The communicative technologies that enable participation in this cultural practice, at a geographical and temporal distance to the performance

events, facilitate a process of social development. This radically alters the structure of the continuum in which Brathwaite found meaning to truly reside.

Jeff's early involvement with rap music production differs to the artists that were based in London. He himself recognises that he '[grew] up in a bit of a vacuum' with regards to black culture, but his attraction to London based rap gives an impression of the vitality of the culture produced in that city during the 80s and 90s:

I used to go into my little record store in Northampton, Spin A Disc, and they'd have Catch 22's *Tale of Two Cities* album, and there was a certain element of that's where I'm from so I'm gonna check it out. But I was almost always disappointed to be honest. London Posse was the first time I really heard - saying that a lot of my early UK Hip-Hop exposure wasn't from London - but London Posse was one of like the first three groups I got into. And it was then that I knew that there was stuff there that sounded like me. Or that was from my shores that I could really get into and it didn't feel like a weaker version of something else.

The strength of London based rap's sound is connected to the spirit of black culture in that city. As a result of his experience listening to UK Hip-Hop, Jeff eventually came to London to develop his artistic skills and ambition of a career in music. The passion that is produced within this black-English socio-cultural form possesses a vitality that attracts listeners throughout urban and suburban England. It is this aspect of black culture that lies at the creative heart of the social scene that attracted Jeff to rap music. 'It was when I was 13 that I then hit upon the idea of - oh right there was a whole scene and you can explore the scene ... and you could dig into different levels of it and there were different kinds of it.' Whereas Jeff's isolation resulted in him mainly producing written lyrics, privately in his bedroom, his motivations to write were derived from the creative energy of an oral form. Jeff's appropriation of rap may bear a greater similarity to the construction of the form of subjectivity that Habermas

identifies as the well-spring of the bourgeois public sphere, than the social continuum of either Brathwaite or Johnson. His emphasis on a poetic style and distaste for Grime may be related to this mode of appropriation. In contrast to the relatively isolated development that Jeff experienced Ty recalled that 'it happened around me, and the next thing I knew I was fully engrossed in it.' In his own way, Jeff began developing himself through the exploration of a culture that thoroughly absorbed artists growing up in London. It is important to distinguish the manner in which he began to participate in rap culture from those whose experiences within London's UK Hip Hop and, later, the Grime scene oriented them towards an intersubjective creativity. In explaining his self-development through a deepening involvement in rap culture, Jeff juxtaposes his educational achievements with home life:

I'm one of those kids that was always good at English you know, and came top of my school in English and liked to write and that kind of thing, and I love word play - so I guess that was a big thing. And my parents were Mods and I think that's where my kind of Soul fixation comes from.

His teenage fascination with rap and the 'knowledge it gave' him extended his awareness of black-American culture: 'I went to Uni and did American studies ... I ended up writing a dissertation about Hip-Hop and civil rights ... and I already knew who Rosa Parks was, before I got to Uni, you know. And actually that's not something you really study in school.' Engagement with rap music did not simply influence the educational choices made by Jeff and other artists, such as Afrikan Boy. It broadens and deepens their understanding of the world and how they themselves have been developed through black culture.

In an incident that highlights how the exchange of recorded material is used for further cultural production, Reain described how he brought a tape recording of a bedroom set into school:

I remember one time - 'cause this was when there was quite a few of us doing it - and we kind of split up into two small crews and we'd battle each other. And, erm, I went home one weekend I think and I had a freestyle session with my brother and a couple of other bredrins. And we were basically just dissing the other man dem, and we recorded it on a tape, or whatever, TDK. And erm we brought it into school and we was like "Yeah we got this tape for you" and we played it like: "right, what you got to say to that?" kind of thing. And then you know what a few people gathered round and was like "Well do it now" sort of thing. And like I went off on one, you know just rapping, I think it was in the corridor and it was kinda - I was just on the spot just rapping whatever, just dissing man like - you get me [laughs]. Its pretty jokes still.

The role of humour in rap is an essential element of the festivity it brings about. Through the collaborative labours of different crews, the exchange of recordings, and the improvisation of lyrics, a special collectivity is brought into being in the interstices of the city and its institutions. An important element of London's black culture is reproduced through this social form. Absorption into black culture through rap inclines participants towards particular dispositions. In Alim's recollection of working as a group to gain broader exposure, there is a suggestion of one way in which his awareness of the city itself was modified through his interest in rap:

It seems like once you start getting into something, whether it be poetry, whether it be drawing, all of a sudden the next thing you know, you start noticing and being attracted to certain elements of your field. So in writing I started noticing one or two posters for showcases. So, you know, we started entering showcases.

For his group, Any Thing Goes, performing as a crew was a key method through which engagement with the city's facilities broadened their social awareness and encouraged their artistic development. Alim's experience bore similarities to Ty's early experiments. He recalled 'finding means and methods of ways' to start

recording their material, using a minidisc player as a compressor to produce a ‘digital’ sound. Then developing their material through ‘the computer, using the bathroom as the booth’ in order to further his productive capacity. The collective work to build the studio, highlights the collaborative skills developed through participation in the black public sphere.

In relation to his own development, Excalibah described rapping along to artists before writing his own lyrics. He recalled choosing to write Rakim’s lyrics because he thought they were ‘so amazing’, alongside being able to memorise whole songs. He and other members of his crew would compete to play the role of different members of the Wu Tang Clan, in the performance of the complex interplay of that group’s songs.

It was all of us. Just an equal feeling among us. We were all excited and would tune into Westwood every Saturday night, every Friday night. Like waiting in the house half an hour before the show starts. Got our little bag of weed ready to go, like “come on Westwood, come on Westwood” and just like obsessed. We obsessed over Hip-Hop.

In addition to the collective listening that facilitated their remote participation in the black public sphere, collective performance was a key means through which these social subjects developed. Excalibah also referred to listening to tapes at school that were being passed around after getting into Hip-Hop, but prior to writing lyrics himself. The free exchange of music would later become an important indicator of the popularity of his own cultural production, and an impetus for the growth of the UK Hip-Hop scene. After performing at talent shows, Excalibah organised one himself, in order for he and his crew to further develop. This was the beginning of his role in the organisation of the London UK Hip-Hop scene: ‘We just wanted to perform, we thought we were the most

incredible rappers, all our mates in school thought we were really good. So we done shows at Hackney Empire, Stratford East, Waltham Forest ... Arts Centre. ... I organised a talent show in Stratford East as well.' However, it was as a DJ on a pirate radio station that Excalibah's organisational skills began to have a more substantial effect on London's Hip-Hop scene:

I heard tapes were getting passed around south London by a friend ... I was aware that there was a little following for the show, by which time I was so into my UK Hip-Hop, like I was literally phoning everyone. As soon as a record came out I'd call the contact details on it and say 'Right, let's get you on the show.' So I was getting Roots Manuva, Twang, Jehst, Taskforce. Just all the - entire scene - of that era passed through the Juice FM studio. ... it was really fertile times, lots of artists around and it felt like a community as well. Deal Real records was the main spot for people to hang out at that time, then I suddenly had the idea of doing an open mic night there, which I called 'Live from the Legend'.

Transforming the record shop into a space for live performance provided an important structure through which the vibrancy of the UK Hip-Hop scene was developed. The open mic sessions and performances by established artists, inside Deal Real gave rise to spontaneous free-styling outside these events by others. Through the work of DJs like Excalibah, using material produced by MCs such as Reain, Ty and Jeff, the identities and interests of young Londoners were collectively organised through the now fading UK Hip-Hop scene.

Building a Scene

The cultural resources used by subjects to fashion their social identities are also employed in the production of broader identifications. The practices employed in bedroom sets, cyphers, clashes and crews may achieve fuller elaboration in the production of London's rap scenes. As a result of their shared interest and commitment Klayze's crew, Red Hot, formed at his school. The crew constructed a position for itself within a vibrant scene in the school and beyond.

X Ray, who joined St. Bonaventures, and then Red Hot, first developed his passion for Grime and his admiration for MCs at his youth club. In this less formally organised institution artists and their audiences were more free to explore their creativity:

I started it when I was 16, 17. This was basically because I liked the hype when I would go to youth club and see everyone involved. I liked the vibe, I liked the hype caused by the main person that was on the mic. And I felt like I wanted to be that person that caused that hype - one day.

In addition to acquiring the linguistic skills of the rapper from school or through practices learnt at youth clubs, the radio is an important mechanism through which familiarity with rap is developed. Pirate radio was a particularly valued source for those who developed an early interest in Grime. Listeners would become performers by rapping along to a favourite MC, recording radio sets, and writing lyrics to played back instrumentals. When describing how they first began to produce lyrics, rappers frequently stated that they simply started by writing about themselves: 'Just talking about yourself really. About what you represent. As a kind of 14 year old I'd hear what someone would say, like say their own bars, say I'm this MC, I'm from here, where I'm from is like this.'

Appropriating the forms and themes of other artists and differentiating one's self from them is one way in which social awareness and artistic technique are linked and improved. Klayze continues:

Stryder went to my school, Tinchy Stryder went to my school. ... Because he was so young but he was good he was kinda like a main attraction. And he was a really popular MC. So hearing things that he would write, then I would think "OK, that's his style, he's talking about where he's from, his style. So I'm going to talk about where I'm from, my style." And that sort of thing, and obviously you don't start off being the best MC, but you get better and you ... your influences become stronger and you learn from your experiences and stuff. And you begin to write about what's really true to you, rather than what you've heard from someone else.

Klayze's analysis of other artists and production of his own style and content, draws attention to how participants in London's rap cultures produce 'objectively classifiable practices but also classifying operations that are no less objective and are themselves classifiable.'²⁴ It is in Klayze's identification of the value of quotidian detail in these circles, that contemporary rap's grounded aesthetics and ethical affirmation of commonality may be most manifest. In addition to developing their artistic and social awareness, contemporary black cultural production requires the formal development of the process of composition. In addition to writing alone for later performance, Klayze wrote with his friend, Terror, from about the age of 13 or 14, prior to forming Red Hot:

Me and Terror were always around each other, and was always writing bars together or about the same thing. Or we'd be doing like a back to back tune. So there was a lot of time where I'd just be at Terror's house or Terror would be at my house we'd play music in the background and just be writing bars to the music, to instrumentals and stuff...

By varying modes of composition a broader range of formal features may be explored. The investigation of shared themes and interests becomes an important process in the shaping of children's friendships. X-Ray's interest in MCing was an important consideration in becoming friends with the members of Red Hot, and eventually joining the crew.

The social relations produced through rap at this stage of development are not limited to small friendship groups. As described by Afrikan Boy, the circle has the characteristics of a larger collectivity. Klayze describes how the orientation towards producing tracks developed collaborative forms of working that enabled both personal and social growth:

²⁴ Pierre Bourdieu (1984) p. 169

It would be more about putting it onto a track ... When there was MCs around, there was DJs around, and there was Producers around, it would be like "Oh can you make me a tune like this - with this kind of chorus, 8 bar chorus, 16 verse, 8 bar intro," then they would work on that. Then you'd go to studio, then put it all together, then kind of send it around, like on MSN or give out CDs.

It is important in the analysis of rap cultures' grounded aesthetics to note how the process of consumption acts primarily to increase productive skills. The circulation of these cultural products is not directed towards economic accumulation, but social recognition and artistic development:

In my school ... there were certain people that would try MCing, but it wasn't really their thing. They'd go to Producing or DJing, and see if that suited them more. And that's how there became more Producers and DJs, ... so there was enough for kind of MCs. I mean there was a time when there was just loads of MCs and no Producers, so everyone had bars but no tunes to, like, spray their bars on. So there became more Producers, more DJs, so it became more of a collaboration. For everyone there'd be like an MC whose got a DJ that they always work with. Whenever they go to a youth club they want that DJ, or they want a tune from that Producer.

The growth of this practice in and outside of school brought about a division of labour. This not only produces particular forms of cultural economy through which crews and the wider scene develop. There is also an ethical dimension to this economy, in which tracks are the means by which productive labour is given in exchange for social recognition of that labour. The use of digital technology to produce and transmit the tracks that were valued by Red Hot and the other crews in their field, has been a key component in Grime's popularity. It is worth emphasising that the practices developed within this scene were not primarily oriented towards economic accumulation. The widespread production and distribution of music for free facilitated a specific relation to culture summed up in X-Ray's peremptory statement: 'I don't buy music.' The mobilisation of digital networks for the expansion of this cultural economy develops an

interpretative community of cultural practitioners rather than a market of consumers.

Following the establishment of a collective identity, Red Hot sought to publicise themselves: 'We went to youth clubs as a crew and we were always going around - make sure everyone knows the Red Hot name. We was always doing tunes in studio, writing bars together.' In a development from the establishment of personal identities as MCs, the crew worked together to publicise a collective identity and improve their collective skills. As was the case in the UK Hip-Hop scene, DJs have an important role in supporting MCs and organising the Grime scene. In addition to participating in youth club performances, Grime DJs have been influential in the expansion of the scene through digital technology.

Fx discusses his relations with other artists through his work on pirate radio: 'We was around a lot of the MCs, all the major MCs that you talk about. I'm pretty proud to say we are part of that generation ... Dizzee Rascal, Kano, Bizzle, all of them, Wiley, Skepta. We all came through at the same time.' Fx's advancement of his own role led him to further employ the internet as a means of organising the black public sphere through virtual as well as physical space:

We have two radio shows ... we have a fortnightly podcast, which has 85,000 subscribers and is listened to on average by 25,000 people ... that's about to transcend, or should I say develop into a video podcast ... we put out a lot of mixtapes. We are UK mix-tape royalty.

In addition to providing access to 'mix-tapes' online, the release of DVD documentaries is part of a forceful pushing of both the SK Vibemakers' brand and the scene. Excalibah and Fx's work enabled them to construct positions from which their actions can have profound effects through the structure of

London rap music scenes. Through their work younger listeners are able to participate in the production of black culture and established artists may utilise a variety of channels to communicate with their audience.

In their description of the emergence of the Grime scene, D'Explicit and Slik D refer to 2 Step Garage, the development of crews, and aesthetic changes that produced a form of social organisation that foregrounds the local and particular:

A lot of people say it starts in East London, in Bow to be precise. Like, erm, I think towards the end of like the old school Garage era, crews started to pop up. ... So you had So Solid Crew, they came out first. Pay As You Go came out and Heartless were around for a while, but they too went in that category, as a crew thing. And you had others. ... So yeah there was this sound that started coming round, it wasn't so much of a happier sound, it had a more darker side to it, and it seemed to be more based on MCs, opposed to you know traditional classic Garage.

It is worth briefly noting the Pay As You Go crew's use of mobile phone tariff jargon to refer to a mode of life in the city. This relation to mobile network operators 'freed' users from contracts and facilitated comparatively cheap communication. It also led to the practice of 'drop calling', in which users, short of credit, would allow the phone of the person they wanted to contact to ring once, and then hang up, in order to await the return call. This is suggestive of the technologically mediated relations between those in the black public sphere at the time of the emergence of Grime.

Although D'Explicit and Slik D acknowledge the geographic specificity of Grime in the Bow area, they highlight the influence of the south London So Solid Crew in the reworking of London's rap music tradition. The points are associated with the movement away from the 'dancier' beat of classic Garage towards the 'darker' sound of 'MC based' Grime. By plotting the development of

this scene through particular locations in south and east London, cultural producers and aesthetic qualities, this interpretation of the field's history engages with the complexities of the scene's development. In contrast to this overview, Excalibah traces Grime's historical predecessors, from the hosting of Garage MCs, through Jungle, back to Reggae sound-systems. He identifies More Fire Crew, Wiley, Dizzee, and the 'Bow scene' as key actors in the emergence of Grime, rather than So Solid Crew, which he describes as 'proto-Grime'. Slik and D'Explicit discuss the attachment of the name 'Grime' to the genre:

At the time when all this ting was kicking off, when the dark music started really kicking off and everyone was getting on to it, the street term at the time - just anyway - was "ah that's Grimey, aah that sounds Grimey". It was just a word on the road that everyone was using. ... Influential people started to go on radio and say it. ... So if you say that on radio, or on Rewind magazine or something - like Rewind would call that Grime, DJ EZ went on Kiss 100 and called it Grime. These are influential things, and they're targeting regions, not just a couple of people, they're targeting a lot of people at one time. So it just kind of got into everybody's consciousness and became Grime.

D'Explicit identifies a convergence between the appreciative terms employed within the black public sphere with the activities of rap music producers and the broadcast media, in order to explain the way that various social forces came to cohere as a distinct scene. The combination of communicative technologies and a particular grounded aesthetic are of central importance to the organisation of social consciousness in London's post-Hip-Hop public sphere.

D'Explicit, who began to produce his early tracks at 15, states that 'Grime blew up so much because it became so accessible due to music programs like Fruityloops where anybody, a 13 year old, could pick that up.' Pirate radio was also an invaluable part of the popularity of the genre. While Slik D asserts that 'within a month you could be making like suitable Grime song - tunes',

D'Explicit adds 'that could be getting played on radio, and you could hear your favourite MC spitting on it.' The links between friends that were involved in the scene with those who had access to pirate radio was an important element in the growth of the scene and popularity of the genre. However, Grime's accessibility is further underscored in Slik D's characterisation of the track 'Pulse X' as a moment which transforms the consciousness and activity of those who became involved in the emergent Grime scene:

Rumours started coming around "Pulse X was made on a Playstation" so everyone thought "so I could make that tune as well" before you knew it everybody started making the same sort of beats. And that's when - I think Pulse X is the moment when the scene blew open and all of a sudden anyone could become a Producer.

Grime's aesthetic is related to the increased access to commercially available technology in contemporary London. However, before suggesting a link to the exploration of the democratisation of technology, it is worth considering how access and expression are also limited within these arrangements.

Klayze's comments about sending files via MSN highlight the importance of broadband internet communication in the contemporary Grime scene. Social networking sites such as MySpace and Twitter, as well as online forums, also have an important role in organising the distribution of material within, and collective consciousness of, the scene. Wiley's posting of approximately 200 unreleased tracks on Grime Forum in July 2010 was reported in the *Guardian* as resulting from his tensions with the music industry:

I just need people in England to listen to me. I need people to embrace me, otherwise I'm just in my own little world going mad. And people who I want to hear me can't hear me. I've got all this music sitting on hard drives, and in the end it started to make me feel sick. I thought, let me give it away, and

then move on to make the greatest music I've ever made. I just had to get this out from under me, then start again from scratch.²⁵

Wiley's distribution of almost 1.5 Gigabytes of free music followed a tirade on Twitter directed at his management. The combination of access to advanced technology for storage, distribution and communication, with MCs' and Producers' productive skills does not readily fit within the record industry's commercial arrangements. However, the creative talent that is cultivated within the black public sphere is able to organise itself in ways that meet other, human needs. In addition to providing an example of the ethics of free exchange, Wiley's actions reformulate the question 'What does it take to be heard?'²⁶ for a new generation.

Your Mum! Constructing a habitus through London Based Rap

The antiphony and humour exercised through rap are significant sources of pleasure. This pleasure is connected to confronting the challenges of dwelling in postcolonial London. Reain's recollection of the 'jokes' derived from 'dissing man' emphasises the value derived from verbal duelling. Despite the competitiveness referred to by MCs and DJs in clashes, the vulgarity and insults appear directed to something other than beating one's opponents. Instead of responding to the recorded insults of Reain's crew directly, the other crew's demand that they 'do it now' highlights a prioritisation of spontaneity, verbal facility, and of bringing about a particular feeling through free language in the present. Afrikan Boy states 'there wasn't really such a thing as who won. It's just like when it finished it finished, and then people would take away what they

²⁵ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2010/jul/14/wiley-zip-files-free-downloads> [Date Accessed 15/07/2010]

²⁶ Paul Gilroy (2010) p. 148

take away.' Nevertheless, judgments are made of the performances, indicated by the 'Oohs' and 'Aahs' of the crowd and Klayze recalls the identification of particular qualities in MCs' boasts. Through the development of a free language by these judgements and urgings, that language contributes to the 'passion' that is developed within and taken away from the circle. Bourdieu states that a 'work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded.'²⁷ Here, the relevant cultural code is engaged with through linguistic and bodily practice rather than abstract contemplation. Although Afrikan Boy states there is no such thing as a 'winner' he does refer to 'destroying' others. The skills learned through this mode of cultural production are explicitly connected to self making and unmaking. The practices employed through clashes, or the Dozens, are means through which boys and girls begin to construct adult identities in their linguistic games. Through participation in black cultural production, young artists develop the means to challenge another's position as well as to resist attacks upon themselves.

Roger Abrahams highlights the significance of these verbal contests in adolescence, when played amongst males. Although his analysis does not account for female participation in the Dozens, his argument that it allows boys to reject femininity and begin to develop adult masculine identities (through insulting one another's mothers and allowing their own to be insulted) provides some valuable insight into this practice:

By such a ritualizing of the exorcism procedure, the combatants are also beginning to build their own image of sexual superiority, for these rhymes

²⁷ Pierre Bourdieu (1984) p. 2

and taunts not only free otherwise repressed aggressions against feminine values, but they also affirm their own masculine abilities. To say “I fucked your mother” is not only to say that womanly weakness is ridiculous, but that the teller’s virility has been exercised.²⁸

Afrikan Boy identifies that there is something other than winning or losing that is taken away from the clashes he describes. I argue that linguistic skills, the ability to stand one’s ground in the face of an ‘attack’, and quick wittedness, are special stakes in this particular game. Importantly, the social solidarity produced through these staged ‘clashes’ is its ultimate goal. Abrahams identifies practices of ‘talking broad’ in the West Indies that affirm male groups as well as events in which it brings the whole community together:

This is almost certainly because it involves foolishness or nonsense behaviour which is regarded as a frontal assault on family values. Therefore it occurs on the street and at places where the men congregate apart from the women. As a rule, only on special occasions like Carnival or tea meeting is this type of performance carried on in front of women...²⁹

At various moments, depending upon the position of an agent in the social space, the significance of the practice of a particular form of rapping will vary. Depending upon their trajectory, a rapper may be rejecting their position within a family structure, attempting to construct a particular social identity and occupy that position, affirming his position, consciously contributing to the production of a feeling of collective festivity, or a combination of these. It is through participation in this collectivity that the identity and identifications of young Londoners are structured: ‘I called myself Afrikan Boy because - I don’t know. I think people started calling me it. So it was just a name that kind of stuck...’ In contrast to Reain, Afrikan Boy’s name is a mark produced by and within that special collectivity, and borne by him as a member of it.

²⁸ Roger Abrahams (1993) p. 305

²⁹ Roger Abrahams (1972) p. 219

The practices that I have described here are principally concerned with the socialisation of young adults outside of the family. However, it is worthwhile bearing in mind artists, such as Reain, who first begin to rap within the family home. As with the contrast between the UK Hip-Hop rappers, Ty and Jeff, this points to the variety of social relations through which the linguistic skills and cultural disposition of the MC are acquired. The interrelation of these modes of acquisition does not merely evince raps' historical endurance, it helps identify the distinctive characteristics of contemporary rap scenes. Farmer, who himself became interested in black culture at an early age, states that his son 'fell into' rap without having anyone 'throw it on him.' Recollecting Remus' childhood he states: 'from the age of three ... we have a recording of him singing Snoop Dogg.' Even as Farmer consciously resisted teaching his son to rap, the familiar contact the child had with this form of black culture ('it was the main music that was played') led to the acquisition of the *habitus* of London based rap 'simply by contact with works of art'.³⁰ The form and themes employed in Remus' cultural production changed over time, according to his needs and interests. Farmer recalls his son's contributions when he first involved him in his own recording projects: 'He wanted to throw Yu Gi Oh ... and all these different - obviously from an eleven year old's point of view.' Remus' early contact with rap and his cultural inheritance from his father led to the rapid development of his cultural competence: 'now he puts me to shame, regularly.' Klayze's analysis of other rappers' performances and 17 year old Remus' highly developed skills, help to identify how these practices are objectively internalized and form part of the

³⁰ Pierre Bourdieu (1984) p. 4

acquisition of a habitus. Through the necessary work required to deal with the objective conditions that are experienced by social subjects, cultural strategies are developed and constraints are turned into preferences.³¹ Growing up in a household and attending a school in which rapping and playing rap music were ordinary, valued, practices underscores the extent to which rap is embedded in London's social fabric.

The visceral power of rap and the feeling it generates exerts a force on cultural initiates. They experience not only a feeling of sameness amongst others but recognise rapping as a means of acquiring a social identity, outside of the family, and recognition for developing their innate human abilities in a way that is oriented towards reproducing that passion. X-Ray's description of his absorption in the local Grime music scene through attending youth clubs, relates the music to a sense of belonging:

Everyone's bubbling, everyone's kind of friends. So, like, the DJ would be playing the music and - obviously first of all I like Grime music - and then all the lyrics and stuff that come with it. So you know, they have the microphone, they'd be saying their bars, and you know the crowd would be singing along and you know it gives you a real sense of belonging and you start to feel the music - *a lot*. And you know when the person on the microphone would be saying their bars if you like their bars you'd sing along, then the DJ wheels it up, its a nice feeling. Like everyone's shouting, making noises, and what not. That's the kind of feeling and environment that I liked and wanted to be a part of.

The antiphony at work in the scene that X-Ray describes can be recognised as a profaned cultural inheritance from the black church. Away from contemporary London's youth clubs, immersion in the culture continues through working on and listening to recorded rap music. In describing his own absorption Fx recalls staying up to tape radio sets, falling asleep with his walkman on, and listening to

³¹ Ibid p. 175

the taped set the following day on the way to school and in class, as part of a lifestyle in which he either listened to or produced music ‘all day, every day’.

Connecting the values and feelings, that underlie the name ‘Grime’, and trying to describe a ‘grimey feeling’ X-Ray nods his head and gestures with his hand, fists clenched, attempting to communicate the ineffable through gesture. He states ‘there’s a certain head movement and inside feeling - you just like - screw up your face and - when you’re really feeling it you just think - “Yeah!”’ Following Gilroy’s contention that we ‘need to talk more, not less, about sex’³² may lead to interesting questions about the link between the changing ‘moral proximity’³³ of the other in the black public sphere’s contemporary structure and how the Grime aesthetic provides a technological prosthetic for subaltern subjectivities. It is also worth considering how the motif of tension and release here may be connected with the subjective exploration of freedom.³⁴ I will deal with some of the issues that are explored through the idiom of sex as well as the practices of clashing in chapter six. However, it is worth noting X-Ray’s reference to the socialisation of subjective feelings and urges through collective responses to DJs’ and MCs’ performances.

Grime music production is geographically rooted in London, but the genres’ naming and subsequent popularisation must be seen within the politics of the mainstreaming of black culture. The popularity of this form in cities such as Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham, and Wolverhampton, can be seen as marking a later stage of development in Grime’s cultural production. In relation

³² Paul Gilroy (1994, 7) p. 75

³³ Ibid p. 74

³⁴ Daniel Miller (1991) p. 333

to this cultural politics, Klayze demonstrates not so much concern with a name, but rather a critical stance towards names and distinctions alongside an interest in playing with these distinctions in a forward looking manner.

Klayze: If you like that sound you wanna stick to that sound, but kinda switch it up sometimes. ... I prefer over all Producers Hammer, 'cause the way he does things is really different. It doesn't sound like Grime, but it's Grime tempo, and that's what I like. I mean it could sound like Soul, R&B, Electro-Funk, kind of everything but its at a Grime tempo. Me, personally, I don't see genre like this is that and this is that. I kind of see "yeah, this is good music". ... Whatever is good music, for me, I kinda see like: "I'd do something with that".

Me: Do you see yourself as a Grime MC?

Klayze: Yes, but only because I think that label's, that kind of title's, been forced on the scene.

There was a moment in which the Grime aesthetic socialised the subjective feelings of a generation of blacks in London. However, Klayze's emphasis on going beneath the categories that distinguish music, in order to respond creatively to other artists, suggests an awareness of the politics of cultural production and an exploration of freedom in his own production. Even as Grime loosens its connection with the time and places in which it first took shape, and its formal qualities change, rap continues to address the conditions of urban dwelling and the subjective needs of its users and producers.

The importance of naming should neither be overlooked or overstated in the development of urban subcultures. The names acquired by artists, crews, scenes and musical genres, are means through which the achievements of particular forms of cultural competence are marked. They also allow the forms of identification that are developed through distinct forms of cultural labour to be made public. Young people also assume these identities in order to adopt a social position outside of the family group. The significance of not having a

name should also be given consideration. Artists' perception of the development of new genres without names being developed from the Grime scene can be linked to their perception of distinct challenges posed by the structure of the scene. These, significantly, include the place of girls within it. Alongside the significance of proto-genres like 'RnG' collectives without names (such as bedroom sets and cyphers) may be seen as part of a process of exploration. The construction and exploration of social identities and relations through these forms of consumption and production are an important part of coming to be an adult in contemporary London.

Much of the material worked upon by these cultural practitioners will be either developed for, or processed within, the circle of black culture. This circle lies at the heart of a network of social relations and processes. In the festive humour with which this circle is imbued, feelings of passion and sameness are organised in meaningful ways. Young people find themselves through this form. They recognise subjective urges and abilities in response to the music and develop them in order to more effectively deal with the social forces to which they are subject. The organisation of a habitus through rap also enables them to accommodate themselves to the positions they occupy in the city's wider structures. By drawing upon the everyday material they find around them, in written compositions and when 'talking from off the top of the head' in freestyle raps, the inter-subjective relations produced through the circle are used to develop the innate qualities of its participants in ways that are appropriate to the conditions that they inhabit.

Conclusion

The appropriation of the black music tradition in London signifies the continued relevance of the cultural material from which contemporary rap scenes are formed. These resources include the structures through which the construction of an adult identity, outside of the family structure, is facilitated. They also enable the inter-subjective reciprocation through which self- and social-understanding are acquired. Young people's adaptation of these resources to the needs of post-colonial London is an active process. Their constructive labours link them to one another, and to a historical tradition. Through this cultural work they also craft deeply subjective relations to the spaces they inhabit and responses to their conditions of dwelling. These socio-economic contexts can differ considerably. For some artists the crafting of lyrics may be integrated with their relation to mainstream institutions. It may even facilitate their advancement through the formal education system. For others the music, lyrics and movement within rap cultures may provide resources to sustain the pressures of a society that denies them the opportunity to affirm themselves within it. The enunciative position that rap cultures allows participants to occupy is a vital component in the construction of identity and the development of social awareness.

The use of technology in the appropriation of this cultural tradition facilitates the inter-subjective reconstruction of the black public sphere in contemporary London. In addition to marking the aesthetic character of Grime music, technology facilitates participative modes of democratic organisation in the city's rap scenes. However, the issue of access remains a central question

within the black public sphere. Others include the character of these scenes as a whole, and the value of the circulation of music for free to their development. Nevertheless the collaborative working within various forms of organisation facilitate the construction of the interpretative communities in which these questions are discussed.

While the participation of friends, crews and other forms of social organisation in the city's rap cultures is important, the handing down of black culture within the family is also significant. In the inter-subjective relation between parent and child or older and younger sibling the intergenerational reproduction of black culture takes place. That the development of London's rap scenes are not dependant upon these modes of intra-familial cultivation is a testament to the endurance of the modes of communication and participation that are embedded within them. The popularity of rap music production across the capital is an indication of the mainstreaming of black culture. The technological modes of its reproduction enable it to weave its distinctive textures throughout the city. In its dissemination through radio, the internet, and mobile phones it changes the character of London itself.

Chapter 4 ‘On The Bus My Oyster Card Goes “Ding De Diing De Ding Ding”: Transforming the Space of London’s Public Transport

On an April evening’s journey from Streatham to Tooting the actions of two teenagers prompted me to think about the sociality of public travel, when they responded to the anonymous voice that organises their journey on the 319 through this area of south London. After our imminent arrival at ‘Tooting Bec Lido’ was announced through the speakers in the ceiling, the girl closest to me mimicked these words, giving an almost exact repetition of this voice from her position at the back of the bus. Her friend, in turn, responded to this marking of the received pronunciation of ‘Tooting Bec Lido’ employed by the disembodied female voice, by repeating the word ‘Lido’ in her vernacular English, common to the area. By signifyin(g)¹ on this announcement the first girl drew attention to the incongruence between the way in which that voice is used to organise bus journeys and the girls’ own understanding of their local area. Through the girls’ use of repetition, an aspect of the class politics of bus travel was briefly made apparent. There was a conflict between their local vernacular and the universalising, standard English of the announcement. The final repetition (which isolated and corrected the anomalous word) performed a different function from the initial marking. The second girl asserted the primacy of their language and knowledge over that of the anonymous female’s voice. Nothing further was said by either girl on this matter. There was no discussion of why ‘Lido’ was pronounced by the disembodied voice in that way, or of whether the

¹ I use the concept of signifyin(g) to refer to a broad range of linguistic practices of ‘encoding messages or meanings’ and marking as a more specific form of drawing attention to a third party’s behaviour. Claudia Mitchell-Kernan (1972) pp. 315-6

announcement was useful to them at all; the job had been done. Their values had been asserted. Their common sense understanding of the world and use of language had been affirmed by one another. The incident makes apparent how the organisation of space on London's buses, far from being neutral, embodies particular forms, values, and relations, and makes these felt in the lived experience of passengers. That space is meaningful to passengers, who do not simply travel on the bus, but interpret it, communicate with one another through it, and perform social acts within it.

The Bus is made up of a number of interpenetrating spaces. From its basic structure as a piece of complex machinery, a vehicle; through the safety notices and signs (inside and out) that mark it as a public vehicle; the interface through which the 'Countdown' technology updates bus stops with the arrival time of approaching buses; the 'Connect' technology that transmits live CCTV images from buses to a central location; to the various ways by which citizens are interpellated once they board the service; and the space that is used to advertise to consumers as the bus passes through the city. Each bus forms part of a network vital to the social and economic life of the city. The girls' signifin(g) on the received pronunciation of the announcement reveals the social distance between this aspect of the bus' soundscape and the common cultures of some of its passengers. The use of these rhetorical strategies also demonstrates how that social distance exposes the official soundscape to strategies of diversion. Instead of taking place through direct confrontation, a sidelining of the bus's formal arrangements may be employed in order to assert the common values of its users. The soundscape of the bus is a synecdoche of the sounds of multicultural

London. The form of the soundscape changes throughout the day in relation to the sounds of the wider metropolis. More flexible than the underground and rail networks, buses play an important social function in maintaining contact between family members and friendship networks throughout the Capital. This social function cannot be entirely separated from or opposed to the economic development of the city. Indeed, without a regular bus service some of London's most vulnerable residents would face worse employment prospects and greater marginalisation in a city marked by immense economic inequality and social divisions. By playing music on buses marginalised groups, particularly young people, draw attention to themselves, their values and interests. They are also able to make these felt in a way that mere visibility cannot. In doing so, the space of the bus is transformed and the dominant temporality is held in suspension. Deploying the advanced technologies incorporated into mobile phones, a set of relations are introduced by passengers into this space that are substantially different to those constructed through the received pronunciation of the disembodied voice.

The Social and Political Context of Young Bus Users

In the opening remarks of 'Way to Go', the Mayor's 'direction of travel'² document, Boris Johnson states that his team's objective is 'simply to get Londoners from a to b as quickly, as safely, as conveniently, and as cheaply as possible.'³ However, the consultation document adds a number of other aims related to improving the life and health of London's citizenry and to

² Greater London Authority (2008) p. 30

³ Ibid p. 5

contributing to the production of a ‘civilised city’.⁴ In spite of this, Johnson introduces tensions into the provision of a transport system that its users are happy with. His comments on bus ‘ridership’ place passenger comfort in opposition to the cost effectiveness of bus services: ‘It is no use having complete calm on the top deck of a bus, if that bus is itself beached in the traffic like an expiring whale Why is it that so many buses seem half-empty? Passengers may like it, but it is expensive in subsidy.’⁵ Why the Mayor sees a conflict between the economic efficiency of buses and the state of their social space is not made clear in this document. I argue that the production of a more convivial environment on buses may help, rather than hinder, the economic development of the city. A citizenry listening to one another, not with suspicion but genuine interest, is more likely to be capable of developing the cultural resources to deal with changing social and economic forces at work within the Capital. Under the aim of improving the urban realm the Mayor refers to ‘an imperative that all road users have to think responsibly about the needs of each other.’⁶ Although Johnson discusses this imperative in relation to road space, I argue that the sharing of the bus’s social space by music players, workers, and other passengers introduces greater opportunity to facilitate engagement with the needs of others. Pursuing this opportunity may enable bus users to transform the Mayor’s uncomfortable notion of ridership into a substantive citizenship.

⁴ Ibid p. 26

⁵ Ibid p. 20

⁶ Ibid pp. 23-4

In comparison to the playing of music by passengers on buses, the playing of music on the London Underground is limited, either to strictly defined positions for buskers or the classical music played by TfL in ticket halls. The fixed position in the passages of the underground from which buskers play, limits the exposure and impact of the music on passing passengers. Whether there is more opportunity for engagement by passengers with the music played in ticket halls is doubtful. Indeed the playing of classical music is not intended for the benefit of passengers rushing through this space. Despite drawing attention to the health benefits of walking and cycling discussed in 'Way to Go', when I asked Peter Hendy, the commissioner of TfL, about whether classical music was selected because it was good for London Underground users he avoided the issue of benefits to passengers and drew on market research based on shopping centres as justification for the playing of music within this civic space. The commissioner's response to my question 'Why is classical music played in London underground ticket halls, is that because it is good for us?' reveals that TfL's understanding of the appropriate use of music is related more to its effect on people as consumers than as citizens '... It has actually been shown by people who run shopping malls to have a very desirable effect on groups of people who congregate in public spaces.'⁷ In response to the same question Hendy discussed the cost benefits of encouraging bicycle use to improve health. In both cases the social benefits were sidelined in favour of economic concerns.

⁷ Peter Hendy, speaking at the 'The Politics of Mobility' at LSE on 18th November 2008 http://richmedia.lse.ac.uk/publicLecturesAndEvents/20081118_1830_thePoliticsOfMobility.mp3

Hendy's reason for avoiding the idea that classical music was selected for the purpose of its cultural value is possibly related to concerns about the class politics inherent in adopting this position. However, as the response of the girls on the 319 to the received pronunciation of the automated announcement suggests, the arrangement of the transit system cannot escape this politics. Christopher Small highlights the proximity of classical music to the state produced through the subsidisation of this art form, and the convergence of values embodied within this musical tradition.⁸ The use of this music on the public transport system in this particular way furthers that association with the state, while simultaneously demeaning the entire tradition. None of the composers whose music is played in this environment, like Muzak, produced their compositions for that space. Although particular forms of music are used in the Underground, the sustained engagement with the music as it was intended to be heard is not possible. Rather than cultivating an understanding of either classical music or the popular genres played by buskers, the social benefits of music on the public transport system are sidelined by TfL. Despite recognition by the transport authorities of music's ability to affect behaviour, there is a notable lack of concern with art as a social good. Instead, passengers are increasingly treated as consumers, as evidenced by the increased use of video advertisements in this space. The playing of rap music, by contrast, offers the opportunity of engagement with the views and values of London's junior citizens. The ethical relations at play within this socio-cultural form imply that such engagement could lead to wider dialogue. Through technological advances

⁸ Christopher Small (1987) pp. 164-9

there are increasing opportunities for the development of the bus for both civic and commercial purposes. The actions of young people indicate how social forms within the capital can be maintained with and through its transit system. The production of a public sphere on the public transport system may be developed, through a more sophisticated understanding of shared responsibility and being considerate, to facilitate a more socially integrated Capital.

In the radio four programme *On the Top Deck*, the presenter Ian Marchant states that he spent time travelling around London on buses in order ‘to discover what life is really like on the top deck.’⁹ The rationale given for the programme is the perceived increase in boisterous behaviour on buses in the three years following the introduction of free travel to under 16s. However, it begins with Marchant asking: ‘What’s the worst thing that ever happened to you on the top deck of a bus?’¹⁰ The programme does not make any serious attempt to develop an image of what life is ‘really’ like on London’s buses. Instead, it is composed of sensationalist flitting from youth violence, to the playing of music and loud conversation, back to violence and criminality. This is followed by a discussion of the surveillance mechanisms used on buses and a gesture towards highlighting the poor behaviour of some adults. Beginning the programme with a young person stating that the worst thing that has happened to them was ‘having a knife held to [their] throat’¹¹ and then seeking out ‘the most dangerous

⁹ *On the Top Deck*, Jolyon Jenkins Producer, [Broadcast on BBC Radio 4 at Wed 21 Jan 2009, 11:00]

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

bus in London’¹² cannot lead to furthering understanding of everyday social relations on buses. Instead it forms part of a process of demonising young people, sensationalising the practices of marginalised groups, and contributing to moral panics about youths. This chapter does not aim to discover what life is ‘really’ like on the top deck. However, it does aim to conduct a reasoned examination of the playing of music by children and young adults on London’s buses, and the effects of this practice. Through this I aim to investigate how black culture in general and rap music in particular contribute to the formation of adult social identities amongst young people in the capital. Going beyond sedentary notions of cultural production rooted to place, I explore how art can change the experience of moving through space. In response to Marchant’s question ‘do you ever think that people might not like listening to your music?’¹³ He receives several answers: “Yeah, I think like that.” “Some people sing along.” “Everyone is different.”¹⁴ That the playing of music on buses involves the consideration of other people’s responses is made clear in these answers. I intend to explore the significance of playing music to the players.

The pathologisation of adolescent behaviour not only contributes to the production of moral panic, but ignores important aspects of the ways in which people come to terms with the environment they live in. The creative responses of young people to their world is not only ignored but deemed a threat to society, in a manner that is fundamentally self-contradictory. In his response to

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

a petition regarding the playing of music on London's buses the previous mayor, Ken Livingstone stated:

Transport for London is developing a campaign to discourage all aspects of anti-social behaviour and crime on all types of public transport in London, and to further improve passengers' recognition of safety on the bus network. In response to concerns about the playing of music from mobile phones and MP3 players, the campaign will incorporate the issue of loud music, as well as smoking and drinking, and this will include posters in buses and at bus stops as well as across the Tube network.¹⁵

Livingstone later moved away from associating the playing of music with criminality, highlighting that 'the number of times there is a serious problem are very small indeed.'¹⁶ However, the London Assembly's Transport Committee restated this link between music playing and criminality in 2008. Under the section of 'Making buses a safe environment', in their 'Crime and disorder on London's buses' publication, the Assembly Members seamlessly move from reminding passengers of their responsibilities 'for example, not playing music too loudly'¹⁷ to the need to deal with pick-pocketing and for 'raising passenger awareness of potential criminal activity'.¹⁸ The classification of playing music as anti-social behaviour ignores the fact that the playing of music on buses is an inherently social activity, and an important part of developing an adult identity and shared identifications. Furthermore, the GLA seems to suggest that social isolation on public transport is a privileged mode of *social* behaviour. This stigmatisation of youth ignores the lack of sociability in public spaces. The

¹⁵ <http://www.london.gov.uk/assembly/assemmtgs/2007/plenarymar14/item05a.rtf> [Date Accessed: 7/4/2009]

¹⁶ <http://www.london.gov.uk/assembly/assemmtgs/2007/plenaryfeb14/minutes/mins-app2.pdf> [Date Accessed: 7/4/2009]

¹⁷ <http://www.london.gov.uk/assembly/reports/transport/crime-disorder-buses.pdf> [Date Accessed [7/4/2009]

¹⁸ Ibid

GLA's association of music playing with criminality indicates a serious lack of consideration of the everyday culture of London's young citizens.

It is important to engage with the marking of space by young people. Neither withdrawing free travel or criminalising players facilitate a considerate environment or contribute to a civil society. Instead of suppressing the expression of their identifications and missing the opportunity to extend social inclusion through entering a critical dialogue, I argue that TfL's representation of London needs to be revised. This may be achieved by challenging Johnson's suggestions that children and young people are a threat to others and the Transport Committee's representation of music as anti-social or potentially criminal. Through an extended consideration of how music transforms the social space of the bus, it may be possible to move beyond sensationalist depictions of young people towards an engagement with the forms of civil society that can be produced through public transport.

The Internal Organisation of the Bus

During the course of this study Transport for London phased out the last of the Route-master buses. The loss of conductors on the replacement vehicles is one of the most significant changes in the social organisation of London's public bus service. The working class conductors were a human presence who would not only provide meaningful announcements, but could be questioned by passengers or engaged in sociable discussion. Although the removal of the conductor reduces the operating costs of buses, the anonymous voice further distances passengers from those responsible for the organisation of the service. Instead of drivers using their own voices to communicate with passengers, there

has been a shift towards using the digitally stored voice to make announcements to them. This tends to impose a one way relationship on passengers. Although safety considerations may underlie some aspects of this arrangement, it is open to challenge by passengers. Nevertheless, other aspects of the bus' soundscape reveal a more interactive relationship between its users and the driver.

Along with the departure of the conductor, the single bell has been replaced by a number of buzzes and beeps used as signals to both drivers and passengers. From the Oyster card reader's various tones, through the beep of the passenger bells, to the buzzing doors, the soundscape of the bus is filled with meaningful, electronically reproduced signals that organise this space, and through which the state of the bus can be understood. The integration of digital technology into the bus, which replaces the bell's mechanical sound, enables more comprehensive management of the bus through the soundscape. An irregular pattern of passenger bell, buzzing door, and beeping Oyster reader, characterises journeys. This is accompanied by other sounds of human activity, including the turning of newspaper leaves, chatter, and the playing of music. The soundscape of the bus gives insight into the particularity of each journey, as well as into the general organisation of the bus. However, sound is but one of the aspects through which the form, function and structure of the bus is produced, and a full analysis of how this space may be transformed through the soundscape should not entirely exclude the other aspects that provide the context of this transformation.

In addition to the sounds that are needed to organise the space of London's public transport, TfL use posters and visual signs. In comparison with the London Underground, there is relatively little commercial advertising inside London's buses. However, it is important to note that mobile phone adverts form the largest component of the commercial advertising inside buses. A number of signs advise passengers to act in a manner generally governed by a principle of safety. These vary from requests to not speak to the driver while the bus is moving, through prohibitions against standing on the upper deck or stairs, to instructions on how to escape the bus in an emergency. Further to these signs, which explicitly tell passengers how to conduct themselves in this space, the bus is also organised through the arrangement of its seats, handles, doors and other fittings. The arrangement of the majority of seats facing forwards with large windows at the front and side may appear to be common sense. However, their configuration facilitates particular purposes and makes others less easy to accomplish. Certainly, by facing most passengers forward, bus users are oriented towards the onward journey rather than towards one another. This configuration of the majority of seats contrasts with the positioning of some (at the rear of the bottom and top decks) towards one another. The inward formal arrangement of that smaller grouping of seats facilitates discussion and other forms of exchange between passengers.

The forward orientation of this space is reinforced by the announcements of the upcoming bus stop and the final destination. The successive announcements combine with the formal organisation of the seats in the construction of a linear temporality and spatiality, through which the bus's

journey through the city comes to be understood. By contrast, the large side windows allow passengers to observe the bus' current locality. During the course of this study I observed a number of passengers who identified people on the pavement as the bus passed by. Sometimes this would be communicated to another party via mobile phone. Occasionally an exchange would take place between passengers and pedestrians. On other occasions passengers communicated their own location to absent parties by reference to local shops and landmarks. These occurrences highlight the web, or network of relations, that the bus passes through and help to reproduce, in the course of its passage. The ability to see out of the side windows does not necessarily conflict with the emphasis on the onward journey of the bus. Indeed, by allowing passengers to understand their position through various landmarks it can aid the framing of a forward orientation. By noting the different uses of features of this space I wish to draw attention to the subtly different social orientations that make it up. These are clearly influenced by the forward movement of the bus, but are distinct from the vehicle's physical motion. Both the forward and side-ward orientations are beyond the confines of the bus; however the insubordinate girls' activity mentioned above highlights that the internal space of the bus is also of importance to its passengers.

Further to safety notices, TfL's 'Together for London' campaign uses a number of posters on buses (as well as on the underground and the organisation's website) asking public transport users to be considerate passengers. This request contrasts with the 'Trust Your Senses' poster, which appeals to the citizen through the sensorium, but does not refer to any

responsibility for the use of reason. Significantly, the 'Trust Your Senses' poster asks bus users to immediately report to the police or staff 'anything suspicious' that they see or hear. Both the 'Trust Your Senses' and 'Together for London' posters invoke the idea of London as being in some way a product of individuals, either through the slogan '7 Million Londoners, 1 London', or the notion that through 'a little thought from each of us' a big difference can be made 'for London'. The precise nature of the relation between 'Londoners' and the city is not made explicit, but there is a suggestion that London may be produced through collective effort. Nevertheless, by circumscribing the subjects to be considered by passengers and limiting the extent to which citizens should think about what their senses tell them, there is an implication that while a little thought may be required from passengers, they should only think a little. In particular the anonymous voice's announcement that bus users should 'Consider other passengers, and keep your music down' implies that there is only one resolution to the issue of playing music on public transport. This seems to support one aspect of the poster campaign. The 'Together for London' campaign as a whole fails to encourage face to face discussion amongst passengers. Instead, dialogue is removed from public transport and moved to a virtual space - TFL's website - and the opportunity for collective decision making denied. Although it is not made explicit, there appears to be an assumption that passengers are innately hostile to one another's interests and that public transport is not the space to work out modes of collective being. I wish to explore how through playing music on buses it may be possible to

develop a larger sense of citizenship. In order to accomplish this it is necessary to understand how music transforms the bus through its soundscape.

Misfires, Misapplications and Misdirections of the Disembodied Voice

The received pronunciation of the bus announcements is a prominent part of the structuring of public transport space. However, this voice occasionally dislocates itself from the function of constructing, not merely a dominant soundscape, but authoritative sonic events within that soundscape. Erroneous announcements, and the limitations of these pre-set sonic signs are responded to in different ways. On several journeys I observed passengers ignoring the repeated announcement 'This bus terminates here' at successive stops.

Passengers relied on their own common sense stock of knowledge that the bus would continue its journey. Despite the announcements, they understood that they would be able to arrive at their intended destinations without the disruption to their journey heralded by the anonymous voice. In such cases the announcements became distractions in an otherwise properly organised journey. Similarly repeated announcements that 'the destination of this bus has changed' may have been ignored, but the following request to 'please listen for further announcements' places passengers in a rather more awkward position. Unable to completely ignore the announcements, their continuation on the one hand repeatedly drew attention to its own unreliability. On the other hand (had the announcement been taken as authoritative despite the apparent error) the constant repetition would raise the question of the nature of the change in the bus's destination. Would the bus terminate at a different location, would the

destination itself have undergone some form of change, or would passengers themselves undergo a change which had an impact on the way the bus approached its destination? As these repeated announcements were made in error there would, in all likelihood, have been no intention to raise such questions. However, I suggest that through repeated sonic figures, passengers' comprehension of the city can be altered. Of more immediate significance to passengers would be the understanding that the official soundscape of the bus, and the directions given through it, were so unreliable that it was necessary to ignore it.

Perhaps the most confusing error by the anonymous voice, that I observed, was that of the premature announcement of upcoming stops. On a southbound 59 an elderly man on the top deck commented that the voice was out of sync to the child that he was accompanying. Instead of announcing the next bus stop, the voice had become un-synchronised with the bus's present position and was announcing upcoming locations up to seven stops early. This resulted in confusion amongst some passengers, as shown by the elderly man's comment. In addition to the difficulties this would have caused those unfamiliar with the route, the announcement was misdirecting all passengers.¹⁹ The elderly man's comments, in a somewhat different manner to the two girls on the bottom deck of the 319, brought the status of the announcements into question.

¹⁹ This misdirection is clearly a result of the 'misfiring' of the announcement. J. L Austin (1962) p. 16

This misfiring reveals the way in which bus space is performatively constructed through the soundscape, as well as through its physical arrangements. Furthermore, the misfiring of the 'authoritative' announcement and the consequent result of this on that authority can be seen in inverse relation to the sustained 'misdisplaying' of music on the top deck of the bus by passengers and the social effects of these acts.

Errors such as these demonstrate that while sound can have an effective role in structuring the social space of the bus, the announcements themselves play a role in undermining the authoritativeness that is constructed through the anonymous female voice. However, in many of the cases in which I observed misfirings of the announcement, passengers did not seek an alternative source of information in one another. This indicates that they either employed their own knowledge of the bus route or they used other methods for obtaining the information they needed, such as looking out of the window. In either case this suggests that passengers would not have substantially benefited from error free announcements. This raises the question of the necessity of these announcements. More importantly it also highlights their supplementary character. I argue that their form - standard English, anonymous female voice, repeating the present position, route number and final destination - is considerably more important than its content in establishing a particular order. It is this supplementary character that gives the playing of music on buses its significance in the *détournement* of this space.

Alongside the errors made through the automated announcements, it is worthwhile considering the issue of their inflexibility. This issue is connected to passengers' needs to have basic information supplemented. That inflexibility demonstrates how the organisation of the bus service is ultimately reliant on human relations, and cannot be entirely automated. As I travelled on a 57 through Streatham, the Controller radioed the bus, to turn it, because it was running late. However, the pre-recorded message was insufficiently flexible, so when the driver announced that the bus will be terminating 'here' (outside

Streatham Megabowl) his statement was immediately followed by a conflicting automated announcement, '57 to Clapham Park'. In addition to ignoring a part of the official soundscape, passengers did not find the more authoritative announcement by the driver to be sufficient to their needs. Upon the bus journey terminating, they approached the driver in order to question him. He helpfully came out of his cab to explain that the bus was being turned around because it was late. Having found both the driver's initial statement insufficient and that the automated announcement needed to be ignored, passengers took advantage of the opportunity created by the stoppage of the bus to question the driver about his statement. By seeking more information the passengers highlighted the necessity of ignoring selected portions of the soundscape and that some of the sonic events that structure the space of the bus raise further questions. The conflicting announcement by the anonymous voice foregrounded the inflexibility of particular aspects of the dominant soundscape. This inflexibility is significant to understanding the space of the bus, and the strategies of *détournement* used to appropriate that space.

The Soundscape of the Bus

The irregular pattern of beeps, buzzes, and announcements that dominates the soundscape of the bus journey can be understood as part of the soundscape of the post-industrial city. Indeed, the dominant soundscape produced through the integration of advanced electronics into the bus never completely blocks out the sounds of London's streets: the traffic, road and building works, as well as other forms of urban activity. Throughout the journey the engine rumbles on, sometimes at a higher, sometimes a lower pitch. Its drone is a reminder of the

relation between the bus moving through the city and the other machinery that can be heard maintaining and developing the capital. In this essential part of London's social and economic infrastructure, passengers sit or stand mostly in silence. During peak hours the bus motors through the city fully laden, at its most cost effective. At such times there may be a few, muted conversations between colleagues. The most significant change within the dominant soundscape, relating to this period, is the reduction in sounds associated with stoppages, when the bus becomes crowded with passengers pressed together. Following a high concentration of Oyster reader beeps, coupled with fewer sounds of the doors closing or of the passenger bell, over a relatively short time span, the bus drives past large numbers of stops on its way into or out of the main commercial centres. The pattern of Oyster reader, announcement, bell, and buzzing doors (with a lull in the engine noise) shifts to announcement after announcement, with the engine idling only at traffic lights.

This form of the dominant soundscape has similarities to that produced on a near empty bus during off peak hours. The significant difference between the two forms is the duration of the engine's idling at transport hubs, and the lower number of Oyster reader beeps and passenger bells throughout the journey. This difference in the form of the soundscape marks the contrast between emphasis on the economic and social functions of the bus. Both of these soundscape forms (one produced by being at maximum or over capacity, the other produced by being near empty) generally share an absence of social activity. However, the soundscape is more likely to be disrupted, and become dominated by sounds produced by users independent of the bus's facilities,

during periods of low ridership. Mobile phone users, for example, may speak louder when they share the space with fewer passengers. The disturbance of the dominant soundscape through mobile phone conversation introduces a partial connection with another location, through users' exchanges with absent interlocutors. Alternatively, others are made present through the silences in the speech of present parties. The bus is connected with other locations in a number of different ways (via the driver's radio, the Countdown system on bus stops, and the timetable it is supposed to run to). Relations with other spaces are also constructed through sonic events produced by passengers, which often come to sonically dominate those sounds that structure the space of the bus, the official soundscape oriented towards the function of getting 'passengers from a to b.'²⁰

The Détournement of the Bus Soundscape

The connection made with other spaces through the playing of rap out loud on buses is of a qualitatively different form to that produced through mobile phone conversations. The disruption of the official soundscape by music is far more comprehensive than conversation. The rhythms that structure rap music produce an alternative order to the irregular pattern of the, socially dominant, official soundscape. This order is a digitally stored, asynchronous invocation of sonic events in another place; an ironic synecdoche of the soundscape of another space. Perhaps more significantly, the sounds of that other space now interrupts a soundscape associated with work discipline. The beeps and buzzes of the bus are subordinated to the sounds of pleasure, play, and celebration of the body. This interruption of the socially dominant soundscape functions on

²⁰ Greater London Authority (2008) p. 5

multiple levels. It is an assertion of a play ethic within this space and an aestheticisation of the bus. As a result of this effect, the playing of music also operates as a disruption of the anti-sociality constructed by commuters and facilitates alternative social relations. However, there is a substantial difference between the sound produced through tiny mobile phone speakers and that produced in the dance scene.

In his description of a sound system being set up in the communal area of Stockwell Skateboard Park, Roots Manuva refers to a 'life-giving bass'²¹ coming from the system's immense speakers. He highlights the visceral power of music in his statement 'It's just a bass thing, a volume thing. I don't know if I rose-tint the memories, but I remember it sounded so good, so rich. It's not like today when we go clubbing and it hurts.'²² In contrast to the bass produced by such sound systems, the mobile phones used on buses have a pathetic insubstantiality. Nevertheless, the *détournement* of the bus space, through the ironic synecdoche of the dance produced through the mobile phone, introduces into public transport the potential of producing a radically new form of social being. In its disconnection from larger sources of power, volume, and bass, rap music gains the freedom of the city and the ability to introduce its temporality in a sphere far removed from that for which it may have been intended by any of its producers.

The reproduction of particular social relations through rap was observed on a southbound 59. During this journey I heard the lively conversation of a

²¹ <http://www.rootsmanuva.co.uk> [date accessed 30/10/2007]

²² Ibid

number of boys on their way from school. They sat in the rows towards the rear of the bus and, from my position in the middle of the top deck, their discussion dominated the soundscape for approximately half of the bus's journey. This discussion both ignored and competed with the automated voice as it intermittently announced the bus's route and position. The boys were bound for their own particular destinations and the automated voice's repetition of the bus's terminus was apparently irrelevant to them. Their conversation was directed to themselves rather than to the linear journey constructed through this voice. Immediately before a track was played out loud, one of the boys rapped its lyrics. I was unable to see the rapper from my position, but whether or not it had been the same boy who both played and performed the song, there was contiguity between the two acts. Those actions took place within the framework of the boys' self-interested social activity. Although the purpose of these two specific acts was not to communicate information they did not disturb the other forms of social activity the group engaged in. Indeed, these phatic acts were supplementary to the social relations that the boys brought into being in this space. They also bear some resemblance to the use of language employed by MCs to contribute to the atmosphere in nightclubs. Some minutes after this performance another sound file was played. A member of the group asked that it be sent to them next, following which a list of the active Bluetooth devices was read out. Shortly after this roll-call the sound file was played again. Presumably from the recipient's phone. The use of music and other sounds through mobile phones does not merely enable the act of sharing within already existing groups. Through the establishment of ad-hoc technological networks, exchange between

wider groups and individuals previously unknown to one another may also be facilitated.

Although the boys' conversation continued throughout their journey, their playing of rap music did not. A member of the group called out 'You two, behave... there's an old man on the bus now.' Following this the music stopped. Then a short conversation took place between a man and the boy who had asked the others to consider their behaviour in the light of this man's presence. In this case the self-regulation of the group did not involve coercion. However, in other instances where there is an attempt to stop the playing of music a different kind of social force is employed. A young woman, in her description of an event in which she told a boy of about 12 to turn off his music, used hierarchies of age and size in her representation of the relations of power between them:

"Who do you think you are? You're sitting by yourself on the way to school. You're probably in year 7, and you're listening to these songs. It's early in the morning and these people are going into work. Have some respect and turn it off." ...And then he turned it down. Then I was like "Just turn it off or get off the bus." And then he just turned it off and then sat there with his little head down. Still sitting there like he was a big man.

The young woman's justification of this form of coercion relies on rendering the boy, his interests and feelings, insignificant through age and size. Needless to say, this is not a strategy that can be easily employed in other situations. The relations of power in this exchange, and the threat of force underlying her ultimatum, are easily reversed. In a group discussion of A level students, which included a young man (of approximately the same age as, this seventeen year old, woman) the right to play was again opposed to others' rights. In this case the young man stated that if he were told to turn his music off he would tell his

challengers to go downstairs. Even though he was not concerned with appropriating the entire bus for one purpose (as was implicit in the woman's ultimatum) there was a greater force in his statement that he would 'kick them [passengers who insisted that he turn down his music] downstairs', than in the young woman's confrontation with the boy. However, both approaches fail the self-regulation of the group of boys above. In this failure they demonstrate their limited value in contributing to a more civilised city.

Whilst the force implicit in the young man's assertion of the right to play music *may* have been inconsistent with the socio-cultural relations that his appropriation of space is purposive to, the woman's use of these relations of power in her assertion of the work ethic on the bus is a short-sighted and an ineffective contribution to social progress. I stress the word 'may' here, as there was a quality of carnivalesque hyperbole in his statement. This quality contrasts with the seriousness of the woman's description of the exchange with the school boy. His words were accompanied by gestures which dramatised the acting of kicking downstairs, and the performance was responded to by the laughter of the other students in the room. It is worthwhile considering the comic aspect of this young man's opposition to the imposition of seriousness on the bus in the light of Bakhtin's discussion of pregnant and regenerating death and gay abuses.²³ Nevertheless, although the boys on the 59 had avoided any such confrontation, greater and not less engagement by adults with the values, relations, and identifications of London's junior citizens is necessary. Through

²³ Mikhail Bakhtin (1994) p. 352

such engagement we may more fully appreciate this culture and how it shapes experience as well as how it develops understanding of the city.

After arriving at the terminus of the 59's journey I took another bus northbound. On boarding the new bus I noticed rap music being played on the bottom deck. Instead of taking a position on the upper deck I remained downstairs. After a few moments I realised that the sound was coming from the driver's cabin. A number of different genres were played through his phone, including reggae and R&B. After a few stops I approached the driver and asked him what was the rap song he had played. He informed me that it was Wu Tang, and immediately asked if I wanted him to send it to me via Bluetooth.²⁴ Although I declined this offer, I was struck by his spontaneous willingness to share. The use of Bluetooth clearly facilitates this impulse, and perhaps promotes the development of particular forms of it. Furthermore, technologies that enable a large number of sound files to be stored on portable devices and for these files to be wirelessly transmitted, are also integrated with technology that allows those files to be played. This enables multiple modes of distribution. Rap music listeners' sharing of music through mobile phones with strangers was confirmed as a widespread practice, both in interviews and a number of informal conversations. The young woman referred to above stated that she knew artists who relied on this method of dissemination to become recognised. The sharing of files via Bluetooth may be compared to sharing via the internet.

²⁴ Bluetooth is a wireless networking standard for exchanging data over short distances that enables the creation of 'personal area networks' between fixed and mobile devices. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bluetooth> [Date Accessed 12/11/2011]

These qualitatively different forms of network produce distinct social relations associated with the physical proximity of the participants.

In comparison with the bus driver's willingness to share, on a route 432 I observed two girls listening together to music through a mobile phone. After some time I asked who the performer in the recording was. One of the girls informed me that it was 'some boy called Specks'. She immediately added 'It's deep, innit?' In contrast to the driver's demonstration of a willingness to share in response to my question, hers was to express her appreciation and address me as someone also able to appreciate this form of music. In both cases, there was a decreasing of the social distance between myself and the players, by the players. This did not remove all social barriers. The driver declined to be formally interviewed and the girls' response to my request to listen to the song had a cautious note to it. Instead of passing the phone to me or sending the file via Bluetooth, I was told that I would have 'to come here,' to the back of the bus. Instead of transmitting the file to me she asked me to change my position. This exchange narrowed the distance between us. As she held the phone to my ear the girls commented on the song as they listened to it once more, allowing me to contribute to their discussion from my position next to them at the back of the bus.

In addition to forming an essential role in an ethics of sharing, rap music plays a part in the production of a range of identifications. On a northbound 68 four girls sang and rapped to a selection of songs at the back of the bus. Their interaction with the music was somewhat more complex than that observed by

the boy rapping on the 59 above. Instead of a single performer rapping the lyrics, each participant rapped a portion in interaction with the others. This produced a complex layering of sounds organised around the tracks playing through the mobile phone. Although this complex interaction did not continue throughout the entirety of their journey, it presented one form through which a set of social relations were reproduced. Their singing and rapping to genres from reggae to rap, and artists from Beverly Craven to Marvin Gaye, was interlaced with self-interested discussion. The discussion, their singing, rapping, and the music that they used to facilitate these activities, are part of the production of collective identifications. The use of transit space to enact these identifications was as significant as the activities they would have engaged in after alighting from the bus at Camberwell Green. Their after school activity was composed of the use of technology and the verbal facility they had developed through the use of music, which entailed the *détournement* of this space for their purposive performances. Along with the valorisation of the depth of Specks' music by the girl above, the interaction of these girls forms part of the production of a grounded aesthetics.²⁵ There was no clear separation between art and life here, both were enriched and developed through the production of this complex performance. Their activities also brought into being a convivial culture, which is at odds with the fear, suspicion and social disengagement expressed by Johnson and the Transport Committee and fostered by TfL.

The grounded aesthetics that are practiced in this space embody an awareness that the structure and organisation of the bus is not fixed and

²⁵ Paul Willis (1990) p. 21

homogenous. It involves the enactment of cultural exchange and social transformation. In contrast to Boris Johnson's emphasis on getting passengers from 'a to b', the playing of music draws attention to the human relations between those who travel through the city. These relations clearly involve the recognition and consideration of the needs of others. But this is not simply resolved by sacrificing music and play whenever they are confronted by other interests and social orientations. This recognition that public transport is a shared space and that its use is negotiated, may sometimes be found within the production of the music itself and at others in the relation between players and non-players. The ethical dimension of this grounded aesthetic may yet be found to be a valuable resource for the production of an inclusive civil society.

The Dancing Bus: Moving Bodies Through London's Space

Responses to the diversion of transit space through music are not limited to oral utterances, such as the appreciation of the depth of Specks' lyrics. On a journey to Brixton I sat at the rear of a 196. A man played a selection of tunes from the middle of the near empty top deck. Upon the selection changing to a popular Bashment recording, a girl of about 14 years of age orally and bodily responded to the playing of this music. She let out a tiny squeal and her body became poised. She then began to move her body subtly to the rhythm while repeatedly entwining and unravelling her hands. The older man, who played the music farther up the bus, was unaware of the effect of his actions. Through sharing he had clearly given pleasure to someone who had not expected to receive it. The intricate hand gestures that had probably been practised elsewhere were performed here, spontaneously, in response to the music. Significantly the act of

sharing that took place was not in response to a request, and its effect was all the more profound for being unexpected.

The social interaction that constituted the event was possible as a result of the participation in a convivial culture by two people that had previously not known one another, and who left the bus still unacquainted. The work that the two had engaged in to develop their cultural competence substantially changed the space of the bus. Though the girl had remained seated, the bus took on an aspect of the space in which this cultural form was practised, whether that was for her the youth-club or the bedroom. She had felt able to allow herself to use this public space for the pleasure that she gains through dance. Despite the impoverished sound that was generated though the elder man's mobile phone, the girl had the cultural resources at her disposal to make effective use of the transformed space. It may be that her willingness to allow herself to respond to music in this way owed something to her age. She had clearly not acquired the habit of private withdrawal, or work discipline, that could have suppressed such actions. Her response to the appropriation of public-transport space can be seen as a figure, a representation of a potential alternative to public disengagement and suppression of play ethics within public space.

The context in which this figure arose is considerably different to that in which I travelled from the area surrounding St Bonaventure's school towards Prince Regent. I anticipated that I would observe activity involving the playing of rap music on this bus, and had selected this area because of its relation to the Grime scene. Upon boarding the vehicle I observed that the lower deck was

populated entirely by girls from another nearby school. There was a considerable amount of shouting and screaming on the bus, which was so overcrowded that it was impossible to attempt to see if there was any space on the upper deck. One stop after I had boarded, a number of boys joined the bus. Unable to move past the stairway they remained towards the front of the vehicle. Some of the boys and girls recognised one another, but other than calls between them the two groups generally remained separate. The boys stood towards the front of the bus and the calls between the boys, as well as the calls between the two groups, now joined the girls' screaming and shouting amongst themselves. In spite of the noise on the bottom deck I noticed a small group of boys, just behind the driver's cabin. They were passing a mobile phone between themselves, MCing to the Giggs track that played on it. In comparison with the rest of the bus this group was calm and focused. However, they were not completely separate from the activity of their peers, and one of their members moved freely between the rappers and the wider group of boys, shouting out to others as he changed position. This movement between the group and the rest of the bus reveals that, for these children, the production of this art-form was very much part of their ordinary lives. Their self-interested performance was play without footlights, and a carnivalisation of this public transport space. In this case, rather than dominating the soundscape of the bus, the activity of rapping and playing rap music focused the efforts of the group. These efforts were directed to reproducing social relations and a cultural form that they had acquired elsewhere. They now operated within a space which (because relatively unsupervised) was free for them to use as they found most appropriate. The

activity of the other passengers on this bus was far more noisy and disordered than their purposive rapping.

Spraying Sonic Graffiti

The disruption of the dominant social relations through the bus soundscape results from maintaining, in transit, social practices developed in other locations. The reproduction of cultural forms, through dancing or rapping, within this space transforms it through the diminished aura that is produced through the play of these social relations. Even though the young girl's dance was not a response to rap music specifically, her actions nevertheless demonstrate the radical potential of technology to transform the space of the bus through music. However, that change was partial and, even with the combined efforts of the man and the girl, the *détournement* of the bus was incomplete. It did not appear that any other passengers were moved to respond to the music in a similar manner. The impoverished sound emitted through mobile phone speakers may invoke the practice of play and a structure of affective relations cultivated in other spaces and times, but it is insufficient to wholly transform the bus in the same way as the massive arrays of speakers that dominate the dance-space in night-clubs around the capital. However, this part of an organic whole can be mobilised in a form of class, and generational, warfare. Escaping the scrutiny of the CCTV cameras, young working-class 'Londoners' call attention to themselves amongst city workers, and other adults, who would rather ignore their presence. Nevertheless, prior to being deployed in this role, the music must become meaningful to the agents that mobilise it. In his work on graffiti in Chicago's ghettos, Herbert Kohl discusses the process of

identification and the development of, and play with, identities that take place through this practice. He rejects the notion that graffitiing is reducible to ‘the immediate pleasure of writing where one is not supposed to’²⁶ and indicates that ‘it may have to do with the important role names play in our lives and, in a larger sense, in the whole fabric of life in the society of men.’²⁷ In comparison with the practice of writing names on walls, I argue that music becomes an important part of one’s identity, and that the playing of music on buses is one way in which young people make public their identifications.

In most of my observations of the use of rap on buses the music was employed in the reproduction of a set of special relations within established groups. The ambivalence of the hyperbolic statement that the young man above would kick those who tried to stop him playing music downstairs, reveals the social conservatism at work in the appropriation of transit space through rap. The force of this utterance is directed at the imposition of seriousness in this public space, and the laughter that resulted from his dramatisation of this act presents the humour that this force is attempting to preserve. His expression of defiance must be distinguished from the sensationalist images of violence in news programmes and documentaries, such as *On the Top Deck*. Furthermore, Boris Johnson’s statement that ‘adults are often too terrified by the swearing, staring in your facedness of the younger generation’²⁸ does not contribute to an atmosphere of considered dialogue between passengers. Indeed, it even

²⁶ Herbert Kohl and James Hinton (1972) p. 119

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Greater London Authority (2008) p. 9

suggests that London's junior citizens should be hidden away rather than allowed to make themselves audible as members of their city. It is important for civic authorities to give a more considered response to how people, young and old, can live together and share public space.

Kohl argues that the 'way children choose to identify themselves to friends and enemies [...] or to associate themselves with groups of their peers is a crucial aspect of their growth. The way they and their friends stake out and defend the territory they inhabit is no less important.'²⁹ Demands to stop playing music on buses may be interpreted as suppression of something with which young people identify, or as challenges to their identities. The diminution and infantilisation of the school boy above, through reference to size and age reveals one of the ways in which these identifications may be dismissed. However, the lack of substantial engagement with ordinary young people's concerns by news media and the Greater London Authority is effectively *détourné* by the do it yourself publications of individuals and groups. They exercise their freedom to play their own and others' music. This is done principally for themselves, but they are nevertheless aware of the wider impact of their playing. The significance of these ethical acts is not restricted to supplementing the reproduction of subaltern relations. It makes those social relations public in a way that mere physical presence cannot. Following Kohl's confession of embarrassment for spying on young people's secrets to one of his pupils, he receives the response "Mr. Kohl, they're no secrets - that's why we

²⁹ Herbert Kohl and James Hinton (1972) p. 115

write them on walls. Only grownups don't read them.”³⁰ By marking the bus through their audio devices, this space is transformed for purposes compatible with the values expressed through the music and the technology it is played on. As a form of publicity, the playing of rap through mobile phones also facilitates the formation of new identities and associations.

In contrast to the distance between the young dancer and older man, the events during a journey on board a 196 reveal the closer forms of association that may be produced through the publicisation of the bus through the soundscape. A young man with a dog, accompanied by a young woman, boarded the bus and proceeded to the rear of the top deck. Two young men already occupied positions at the back of the bus, one of whom was playing rap music. After a short time the player struck up a conversation with the dog owner. When the newly formed group arrived at their destination they left together continuing their conversation. In comparison with this, research participants reported either a desire to speak to music players or events in which conversations were initiated on the bus as a result of the playing of rap music: ‘We went to go jam with him, to feel his music. We sort of made like, not a bond with him, but we started jamming with him; “Ah yeah, where are you from, where are you going?”’ The description of this exchange through musical and spatial terms foregrounds the form of the social transformation of the bus. There is a rejection of the term ‘bond’ for the relation produced and preference given to the more spontaneous and flexible notion of ‘jamming’ to understand the activity that took place at the back of this bus. Similar to the playing of the

³⁰ Ibid. 113

young female dancer and the older man, the socialisation of this space produced a bodily response to the music: 'One of my brethrens 2-stepped down the aisle to the tune.'

The playing of rap music facilitates the production of extemporaneous social forms. These are composed of a set of relations between the use of technology, dance and bodily performance, discussion, and ethics of sharing and play. Post-industrial time is suspended within this transformed space and an alternative temporality introduced. The bus driver discussed above stated that he played music in order to relieve the boredom and monotony of his work. Referring to a holiday in Mexico, in which he experienced music being played out loud on buses, he valorised a more convivial organisation of the bus than those under which he was employed. The need to relieve boredom was also provided as justification for playing music out loud in interviews with young people. Within the space of successive tracks the dominant temporality of the bus's stops and starts is displaced. This initially disrupts the construction of a linear post-industrial time within the bus. But through this the bus's space is invested with a sociality that brings the body, dialogue, and sharing into play. The bus driver's reference to a holiday, and the interviewee's friend's dancing down the aisle exemplify the extent to which an atmosphere of festivity can be created through the playing of music in this space.

The Play Ethic at Work

The assertion of a play ethic within the publicised space of the bus must not be taken lightly. It should be seen as part of the serious business of dealing with life in post-colonial London. The cultural identifications and social relations

reproduced through music are also at work in the production of an assertive, confident inter-subjectivity amongst its users. This could be readily seen when, on a southbound 432, the driver turned off the bus's engine. This action was immediately discernible through the soundscape. No passenger on the upper deck responded to this, other than two girls who were playing music. Initially their response simply focused on the stoppage and its conflict with their own aims: 'I got places to go.' However, the desire to continue their journey quickly led them to investigate the delay in this public service. Alone amongst the passengers in managing the situation, one of the girls went downstairs. She seemed to have identified that the bus had been stopped because the lower deck was overcrowded. As a result of this she then told passengers to go upstairs. After announcing to the bus 'there are places upstairs', the girls agreed between themselves that 'the driver can drive now.' One of the girls then informed the driver 'now you can drive.' In response, the driver resumed the journey.

Interestingly, the genre of the music that they had continued to play throughout the incident, changed from R&B to reggae following their intervention into the management of the service. Although it is difficult to specify how this change may have been related to their actions, their confident assertion of the desire to get the bus moving was essential to ensuring that other passengers did not experience a prolonged delay. The increase in volume and playing of sexually explicit lyrics may have formed a part of their recognition of their value, and that of their actions, within this space: 'My girl come up front and mek some gal gwan chat/She wet up herself when she see me Mavado rock'. The girls' manner throughout the incident revealed that their management of

the bus took place within the relations of serious play they maintained throughout the journey. Their disrespectful reference to the driver, 'tell the dick-head driver to drive', formed part of their interpellation of him into their social world. Despite thanking him for resuming the service, they did not attempt to occupy the social position from which the official soundscape makes its announcements. The playing of vulgar lyrics and the disrespectful reference to the driver underline the carnivalisation of the bus and the girls' challenge to the official order.³¹ Their reference to the lower stratum of the driver draws attention to the overturning of the established order in the manner of the girls' efforts to get the bus moving.

In order to fully engage with the significance of transforming the bus's social space it is important to move beyond the consideration of the immediate role of buses in supporting London's social and economic life. Placing the Bus in the context of the representation of the city itself may help to identify the potential significance of rap's transformation of the space of public transport. London 2012's contribution to the closing ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics incorporated a number of dancers performing various roles, dressed in business suits, construction wear, and casual clothing. Central to the eight minute sequence was the London 2012, Olympic bus. After a human path was made for a child to board the bus, the vehicle was transformed into a representation of the city's skyline. In the climax of this sequence, Leona Lewis emerged from the transformed bus, and the R&B singer was joined in her performance by the guitarist Jimmy Page. The musical union between this

³¹ Carolyn Cooper (1993) p. 141

black-British singer with the former member of Led Zeppelin presented a union of two strands of black popular music in the representation of contemporary London. How the playing of music on buses may have contributed to the development of this particular representation of London is beyond the scope of this study. However, some components of the image that this sequence represents may be useful in the consideration of a metropolitan imaginary, in spite of a number of problematic aspects in this attempt to represent London.

The troubling elements in the representation of the capital include the exclusion of contemporary forms of popular music produced in the city and the idealisation of black-British femininity through perching Lewis on a pedestal high above the city-skyscape that Page stood on as he serenaded her. Nevertheless, the relation between the people and the city was foregrounded through the figure of the bus. It is necessary to qualify how, the (now neutralised) rebelliousness of rock was combined with a (safe) image of London's racial diversity through Lewis' (petrified) soul performance. The transformation of the bus in order to provide a platform for two generations of its citizens to play, echoes the transformation of tens of thousands of journeys by ordinary people. That the transformation of the bus for musical performance formed a central role in the representation of London as a whole highlights the centrality of the bus to metropolitan life and the significance of the space of the bus in the metropolitan imaginary. It also draws attention to the extent to which black culture has been mainstreamed and its role in representing the city as a whole.

I want to contrast this staged, global representation of London with the figure of the young girl's spontaneous dance. The use of the musical bus as a representation of the city to the world, contrasts with the negligent assumptions about young people's activities on public transport advanced by Boris Johnson and the Transport Committee. However, the choice of performers and genres produced an inorganic, calcified approximation of the vitality that the young girl's dancing embodies. Her response to the playing of the older man, who himself was unaware of the relationship his playing had produced, is suggestive of the fluidity of the forces that are embodied in London's black culture.

Before drawing to a conclusion, I want to briefly touch upon an incident that occurred, some time after first drafting this chapter. While travelling on a southbound 68 I noticed the gentle playing of Jazz music. After trying to identify the source of the playing, I found that a middle aged white man was quietly holding his mobile phone on his lap. He got off the bus soon after I noticed this, and I didn't have the opportunity to speak to him. But the incident left me wondering how his playing might be indicate his sensitivity to the values and interests of others and constitute an expression of his own. It also suggested to me that technologies through which black culture is diffused through the city may already be producing modes of civic identification to which the metropolitan authority are, as yet, insensitive and inconsiderate.

Conclusion: Public Transport as Democratic Movement

The economic cost-effectiveness of London's buses may have been increased by the removal of conductors, but the rigid, impersonal announcement is not an adequate replacement. Conductors gave a human form to the act of organising

the bus, and enabled a dialogue that the announcement is incapable of and that drivers are discouraged from. However, the absence of the conductor, and the unreliability of the anonymous voice, has provided conditions for spontaneous forms of inter-subjectivity to develop within this transitory space. Although there may be conflicts between passengers' knowledge and the announcements made through the bus' sonic technologies, there is more frequently a dismissal, or refusal to recognise the authority, of the disembodied female voice. Whether it is in spite of or as a response to the inflexibility of the official soundscape and the arrangement of the bus' seats, the technology used by some passengers enables the production of a culture of exchange. Through the use of music, new social relations may be established, aesthetic materials freely exchanged and judgements shared, and the social body celebrated. It is important to work out ways of being together in the city that do not invoke the threat of violence. A civic culture needs to be developed that allows passengers to recognise the needs of others, without privileging categories such as age, employment status or social position. The actions of school children and college students on public buses demonstrate that the primary purpose of playing music is not one of disruption (although this may sometimes operate as a secondary aim). The values embodied within these practices are those of sharing and the self-conscious cultivation of affirmative sociality. Both playing music and rapping to it form the basis of a shared set of identifications, values, relations and needs. Through this young men, women and children make a claim upon public space and assert their right to be heard.

The GLA need to engage more constructively with young people's public demonstrations of their place in the city. Instead of associating music with criminal activity, the Mayor and the London Assembly should work towards fostering civic responsibility and dialogue. I suggest that all passengers now share a collective responsibility for conducting the bus. TfL cannot rely exclusively on technical means of organising bus journeys. They should enable citizens to contribute towards making public transport a truly public space.

In addition to operating as an essential mechanism in London's social and economic life, the bus can be seen as a synecdoche of the capital itself. A greater sense of shared space and of being truly considerate may be important steps towards developing deeper social understanding. This should involve the recognition of the value of the contemporary innovations made by young people, both black and white, in metropolitan culture. Black culture has come to represent London as a whole to the world. Young people, emerging into adulthood, need to be heard in order to develop in a healthy manner. Responsible citizens need to hear the city's black cultural production. The stigmatisation of music, play and sharing are a result of the lack of mutual interest and respect for others that is fostered by the GLA. By participating in the ethical relations of mutual recognition and exchange that are introduced into public space by players, it will be possible to develop a more civilised city.

Chapter 5 'I See The Glow In You': Summoning the Aura in London's Post Hip-Hop Culture

In his recollection of one particular evening at his old youth club, JJ described a scene in which about one hundred boys and girls gathered to hear the rapping of local MCs. The crowd, composed of slightly more boys than girls, counted about ten MCs amongst its members. They had been drawn to the Tuesday evenings at the Forest Gate Youth Centre by word of mouth, spread throughout the borough. JJ recalled that at the centre of this gathering 'MCs [...stood around the DJ] with the mic, in front of the decks so you can see what's going on and all that. And obviously it's important with sets that MCs have contact with the DJ.' The group of MCs 'spat' their lyrics while gathered in a semi-circle - in concert with the DJ. Their audience surrounded them and contributed to the atmosphere through their support, but the MCs focused on their own skills 'I'm gonna get tight with my bars, and get my flow tighter, and focus on the spitting and what I'm doing verbally' rather than on the audience: 'it weren't like a performance type of environment'. The rapping (or 'spitting') was directed towards the improvement of their linguistic skills. The spatial arrangement of the DJ, MCs and audience is closely linked to this socio-cultural process. Their collective efforts made the night memorable to JJ because of the build up of 'hype' as the assembled rappers passed the microphone to one another, practicing their lyrical delivery.

This scene represents a concrete event. However, it can also be seen to embody a set of ideal relations. The atmosphere was steadily built through the MCs' work up their own artistic practice. This is done in contact with the DJ,

and the audience who participate by singing along and urging them on. In *Music of the Common Tongue* Christopher Small proposes the term 'musicking' to emphasise the activity of producing music over the notion of music as an object:

Afro-American music making ... has resulted, seemingly, in the production of innumerable music objects - and we have the records and the tapes and the sheet music that we can hold in our hands - but as we examine these objects we find that they are not as stable as we thought, but are mere stages in a process of creative evolution, caught for a moment on disc, tape, or paper.¹

In the event that JJ described rap existed as a 'text' only in so far as MCs had memorised previously written lyrics and offered these to audiences who came, through their familiarity with these events, to rap along with the MCs in the production of a social text. This is not a closed process and MCs' often change lyrics as a result of the audience's response. Small argues that a set of relations are established during the course of a musical performance, and that the process of improvised musicking is negotiated.² Although I will give a detailed consideration to rap lyrics in the following chapter, I want to emphasise that in this event priority was given to the process of rapping and the production of a particular feeling through the special arrangement of social relations. Following Small's argument that musicking brings about a set of ideal relations, I suggest that the evening JJ referred to was memorable because the combined efforts of the participants brought about what I want to term the aura of contemporary black culture.

¹ Christopher Small (1987) p. 13

² Ibid pp. 62-3

In order to begin developing an analysis of this aura I wish to discuss a further event: the launch party for Roll Deep's album *The Return of the Big Money Sound*. Following the performance of a song early in their set, the crew appealed for more energy from the audience: 'Make some noise. Come on we need more energy than that, please.' This was followed by directions to the engineer to alter the sound and light levels, 'the music needs to be louder out there and there's a big bright light that's shining in my face. I can't work with it.' As the night went on, the technical adjustments to the auditory and visual environment combined with the efforts of the MCs and audience to develop the atmosphere of the event. The technical, linguistic and participatory work resulted in energetic dancing and cheers to the performers. I want to briefly pause to consider the appeal to the audience and engineer, along with the performance that preceded it. This makes apparent some of the constituent elements of the aura that rapping contributes to bringing about. The use of amplified sound and lighting arrangements, with the audience in relative darkness, combined with the efforts of the performers and audience to bring about the process that the MC's appeal for 'more energy' is directed to. The chorus of the song performed prior to that appeal involved the lead MC rapping, 'If I eat, I eat with my crew/ If I smoke weed, smoke weed with my crew...', as the rest of the crew emphasised the last few words of each bar. Both the lyrical content of the song and the structure of the performance emphasise the relationship between the members of the crew. The appeal to the audience foregrounds the relationship between the members of the crew and of the audience as constitutive of a larger whole. That greater whole does not precede

the performance. It is produced through the combined efforts of participants. In addition to representing a development from the youth club scene, I want to use this particular performance as an example through which to identify the different investments that participants have in this cultural form. The MCs work together as a crew in order to promote their album and to invigorate the audience, who have paid to be present at the event but who also have something more to give. Together they all must exert an effort to produce the aura of this event.

The Aura of the Art Work in the Age of Digital Production

The aura, produced in events such as these, is brought about through a process that involves various forms of investments: economic, cultural, and social. It is through the productive relation of the artists and audience members to the art-work that the aura is activated. Walter Benjamin considers the development of the art-work throughout the course of Western civilisation, up to the effect of film in transforming the artists' and the audiences' relation to the art work, in his time. My attempt to adapt Benjamin's insights, in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', to the analysis of the aura of London's black culture, requires me to highlight the processual character of the art-work. Whereas lyrical analysis inevitably entails a degree of textual reification, the analysis of this aura necessitates the foregrounding of the activities that are employed in the production of a special arrangement of social relations. In response to Benjamin's statement that 'the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function',³ I argue

³ Walter Benjamin (2007) p. 223-4

that if one considers the use of the Madonnas, to which he refers, in ritual processions after being hidden for most of the year,⁴ one can begin to adapt the concept from its association with the loss of these figures' cultic value. I want to attend to the process in which they formed an integral part. Although the economic aspects of the aura may be considered in relation to Roll Deep's event (including its role in the launch of their album, the money charged for entry to the performance, and the payment of Afrikan Boy to perform as a warm up act) I will leave consideration of the aura's connection to economic relations to chapter 7. I wish to use this space to focus on the socio-cultural organisation of rappers' work. By readjusting the lens that Benjamin provides to the requirements of contemporary London's black cultures, one can see the social text of rapping as a vital part of the productivity of the aura in the digital age.

My concern with the collective consumption of music requires me to distinguish my appropriation of this concept from Benjamin's application of the aura to his historical moment. In his discussion of the way in which the reproducibility of art transformed its use, Benjamin draws attention to the privatisation of music consumption: 'The Cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art; the choral production, performed in an auditorium or the open air, resounds in the drawing room.'⁵ I do not suggest that Grime music entirely resists commodification, or that it is not played in private. Indeed, through the use of iPods and MP3 playing mobile phones the trend towards increasing privatisation continues. However, it is also necessary

⁴ Ibid p. 225

⁵ Ibid p. 221

to analyse the significance of collective musicking in sites, such as nightclubs and concert auditoria amongst an audience that listens to it both privately and collectively in other locations.

MC's rapping organises the interpretative work of the audience. They urge dancers to explore the potentiality of the soundscape in which they are immersed and bring the audience together as an interpretative community. My discussion of the aura aims to engage with a variety of embodied identifications with MC's performative utterances. Bourdieu's discussion of the body as a materialisation of class taste may be helpful in understanding the dance space as a site of expression of a range of values and performance of strategies (either explicitly or implicitly) aimed at contesting dominant values:

It follows that the body is the most indisputable materialization of class taste, which manifests in several ways, ... its visible form, which express in countless ways a whole relation to the body, i.e., a way of treating it, ... maintaining it, which reveals the deepest disposition of the habitus.⁶

Whereas my earlier discussion of grounded aesthetics focussed on the role of verbal play in producing forms of social exploration and collectivity, I wish to shift focus slightly in the present chapter, to examine how MCs' linguistic utterances are registered in the body. Voloshinov's discussion of the linguistic relation between the psyche and the social can help connect the experiences on the dance-floor with the development of social awareness. He states: 'The more closely the inner sign is interwoven with the unity of this psychic system and the more strongly marked by biological and biographic factors, the further away will the inner sign be from fully fledged ideological expression.'⁷ I suggest that

⁶ Pierre Bourdieu (1984) p. 190

⁷ V.N. Voloshinov (1973) p. 35

through dance, MCs' audiences explore feelings and urges related to their conditions of dwelling that may have not yet achieved fully conscious expression. Through their bodily gestures and verbal repetition of rap lyrics, audience members identify with MC's linguistic utterances. Again, Bourdieu's discussion of popular art is relevant to the oppositional identities that may be constructed through rapping. He states:

It is no accident that the only area of working-class practice in which style itself achieves stylization is that of language, with argot, the language of leaders, 'godfathers', which implicitly affirms a counter-legitimacy with, for example, the intention of deriding or desacralizing the "values" of the dominant morality and aesthetic.⁸

Following Voloshinov's observation that every act of understanding involves a response, I argue that the linguistic skills employed in exploring experiences of freedom and collectivity in cyphers and other cultural forms also function in the production of identification and identity through bodily practices.

Bodily responses to MC's lyrics highlight the social force of these linguistic utterances. It is through the force of the rapper's perlocutionary acts⁹ that dancers' bodies register their identification. J. L. Austin's discussion of how, through swearing, we might relieve our emotions¹⁰ may be connected to Bakhtin's discussion of the material bodily dimension of language. Furthermore, Voloshinov's discussion of the multi-accentuality of the sign, indicates how MC's utterances may be understood by their audience through bodily gesture or dance as well as through verbal repetition. Austin's argument that the perlocutionary act always includes consequences, and his admission

⁸ Pierre Bourdieu (1984) p. 395

⁹ J. L Austin (1976) p. 100

¹⁰ Ibid p. 105

that ‘we can import an arbitrarily long stretch of what might also be called “consequences” of our act into the nomenclature of the act itself’¹¹ underscores the issue of the sign’s multi-accentuality. Furthermore, it draws attention to the antiphony that structures the collective performances of the DJ, MC and audience. The range of audience members’ responses to the artists’ performances constitutes the total expression of this interpretative community. This enables the exploration of identities and social solidarity. It is in the total expression of the perlocutionary act that the aura is constituted. The social force of the MC’s utterance is an important consideration here, and must be seen as a product of the relation that the MC negotiates with the other members of the assembled gathering. Through the collective production of the aura, participants explore the meaning of MCs’ lyrics in a manner that is not limited to its sense and reference.

The Aura of London’s Contemporary Rap Culture

The active role played by audience members in the production of the aura, can be seen through 19 year old Peter’s¹² description of the feeling he gains from Grime music: ‘You’ve got power and you can do anything you want’. His use of Grime to experience feelings of empowerment is directly connected to its being played communally. Prioritising physical response over disinterested contemplation, he insists ‘Personally, I think it would be a waste to listen to the music playing and just sit down, and listen to it - doing nothing.’ When asked what he does with the ‘power’ that he feels the music gives him, Peter states: ‘I’ll

¹¹ Ibid p. 107

¹² Peter is not the actual name of the young man interviewed.

spit the lyrics to it as well, in the same *tone* as the actual artist does it as well. For example, Lethal B, he makes these noises. I'll make the same noise as well, because it gives off the same feeling.' In contexts such as youth and night clubs, sonic technology is used to facilitate a process rather than to produce a product. Peter's adoption of an enunciative position draws attention to the narrowing of the gap between audience and artist to produce a social continuum through this total expression.

Peter's emphasis on tone above the semantic content of lyrics in his use of the freedom granted through music is significant. It may aid the analysis of how the aesthetic experiences produced through rapping are responded to through the body. Following his statement that 'the music permits you to do what the hell you want', I argue that the phatic element of the MCs' rapping conveys a freedom to use the music to explore the feelings that it produces within the audience. This phatic element may be overlooked in textual analysis, but forms an important part of rap's social value. The social function of rap empowers audience members to explore their collective energy, and animates the dance-floor as a whole.

Describing the subjective experience produced in response to the lyrics of Lethal B's 'Pow', on the 'Forward Riddim' instrumental, Peter states: 'It kind of feels like you're telling someone off and it feels good at the same time. I can't really describe it.' This reference to disciplining another may be linked to Peter's emergence into adulthood. The reversal of social relations, in which he adopts the position of the adult while using another club goer to perform the act 'disciplining' upon, is also connected by him to the ineffable. His professed

inability to fully describe the feeling that he has already - at least in part - related, suggests that the urges that the music allows him to explore are deeply felt. Rapping and gesturing with others, in the social freedom produced by the musicking, forms part of the working through of deeply felt emotions. It is significant that Peter emphasises noises and tone in his discussion of his response to Grime tracks. This draws attention to how the material dimension of music and language are employed in the exploration of feelings that have not achieved 'fully fledged ideological expression.'¹³

The lyrics offered to the audience by the MC or DJ are incorporated into the psyche of audience members through a process of reorientation to their given context. The collective response to the lyrics through common gestures and verbal expression also draws attention to the ritualisation of this process in order to explore common concerns. The lyrics are employed in the construction of a meaningful relation between the subjective and communal. For Peter, the music allows him to express deeply felt feelings in a socially acceptable manner. His assertion that 'whenever that ['Pow'] comes on in any club everyone will just go mad' suggests that the ability to express his feelings amongst others produces a commonality, a collective talking in tongues. When questioned on what he means by 'go mad' his answer emphasises purposive collective performance: 'Well, they'll just you know. Everyone will be spitting the lyrics in the same tone as he does, they'll be making gestures as well - like the gun gesture. But in some cases it does get really violent. This is why I'm picky with my clubs.' Peter's admission of the possibility of violence that may result from what he describes

¹³ V.N. Voloshinov (1973) p. 28

as 'pretend' confrontations, attempts to negotiate the boundary between expressing urges in a sociably acceptable manner and the possibility that ritualised gesture may lead to physical violence. Peter's position on the boundaries of 'violence' and ritualised release in nightclubs is significant and I will consider this issue later in this chapter. However, before dealing with that matter in detail, it is necessary to examine how the collective expression of feelings takes place through physical gesture as well as verbal enunciation. There is an affirmation of rap's relation to the body in this collective response. It is also necessary to, at least, briefly consider the position of this collective affirmation of black culture in the wider context of post-colonial London and the securitocracy that orders daily life in the capital.

696: That's the Sound of the Beast

The limited number of major Grime events held in London was related, by artists and club goers that I spoke to at events and in interviews, to the policing of the city's entertainment. In particular '696', or the 'Promotion Risk Assessment Form - 696', was identified as a key instrument in suppressing the scene's development in the capital. This controversial measure for policing leisure activities was criticised as disproportionately targeting blacks. The original form asked promoters for the 'make-up' of the target audience. The use of this question was abandoned by the Metropolitan Police, following objections by artists and a review by the London Assembly's Metropolitan Police Association. Although Detective Chief Superintendent Richard Martin claimed that the police 'dropped the question about which type of music will be played

[because] it really does not add anything',¹⁴ the MPA's report reasoned that this and a number of other questions in the 696 form, had the 'potential to be perceived as racially discriminatory'.¹⁵ The questions to which the MPA referred included the request for details about the 'make up' of those attending music events and details of the music to be played. Several interviewees highlighted that the policing of music in the capital disproportionately affects black artists, and one claimed that several artists could not perform at all in London.

All the events that I attended in London during the course of this fieldwork would have been subject to the metropolitan police's regime of risk assessment. This raises wider questions about the political economy of London's nightlife than I am able to deal with in this study. These include issues of who may perform, the police's influence over what may be played and the types of venues that are accessible to black performers. During the course of this study a central London club that had hosted a number of Grime events closed down. The future of another was put into doubt after the police served notice that they wanted the club's licence to be reviewed in order to prevent 'public nuisance' and 'crime and disorder'. During the same period, Matter, a club on the Greenwich peninsular, began to host Grime events. Its location contrasted with the busy London streets leading to Plastic People. The wide open space that

¹⁴ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2009/sep/07/met-police-form-696-clubs> [Date Accessed 1/4/2010]

¹⁵ The MPA's report into the use of the form stated: 'It was concluded that requesting the music style was at best unnecessary and at worst had potential to be perceived as racially discriminatory' and that 'the "make-up of patrons" reference has been removed as it was felt its inclusion could be perceived as potentially racially discriminatory.' <http://www.mpa.gov.uk/committees/cep/2009/091112/09/?qu=Equalities%20Impact%20Assessment%20696&sc=2&ht=1> [Date Accessed 1/4/2010]

allowed large numbers of officers to assemble and observe club goers on their way to the venue may have posed fewer challenges to the policing of the area.

These developments signify a very different political economy to the sound-systems and Blues parties of London's black culture in which Bovell and Johnson participated. Further to this, although some of the bouncers at the events I attended behaved in a civil manner, the use of metal barriers, metal detectors, and the scanning of identity cards, materialised a sense of the city's securitocracy. However, the effect of the militarisation of civilian life was heightened on a number of occasions at the Ministry of Sound and other clubs, when bouncers barked orders at me and other club goers or were unnecessarily aggressive in their manner of organising our entry into the venue. One of the events that I discuss in the following sections took place outside London. By highlighting the regulatory context that may have forced that event to be held in Bristol rather than London, I want to accentuate the political significance of practices within the event itself.

Time, Space, and... the Rolex Sweep

Peter's description of dancing to Grime music emphasises the commonality of responses to the music. Live rapping over recorded tracks also works toward the individuation of responses to the soundscape that the audience are immersed in. At an event in the Ministry of Sound nightclub, in South London, the MC called to the audience over a Tribal House track: 'Whose got a futuristic skank inside the place? I wanna see some funky skank. Yeah man, we're taking you deep down inside the bush right now.' His MCing employed themes of temporality and spatiality, urging dancers to explore futurity through the music

while locating a spatiality ‘deep down inside the bush’ in a process of exploring human possibilities. The live MCing enabled a more dialogical relation to the soundscape than the events described by Peter. In addition to allowing the DJ to adapt her selection of tracks to the audience, the MC’s rapping was directed to developing particular ideas in relation to those selections.

Later in the event, these themes were further explored through Skepta’s track ‘Rolex Sweep’. The MC followed the track’s request that its audience ‘Count with me’, by asking ‘who can do the Rolex Sweep?’ Interweaving his raps with those on the track, he urged the audience to produce ‘futuristic skanks.’ Although a large number of dancers responded to his call, he singled out two young men. Their performances incorporated elements of the dance featured in the song’s music video, with gestures of their own. They swept their arms in a circle while rocking their bodies back and forth, with heads held high. The relation between the MC’s rapping, the music played by the DJ and the audience’s dancing was oriented to bringing various cultural resources together to be worked upon in the space of the dance. The live MCing and the ‘Rolex Sweep’ track combined commercial branding, temporality, spatiality, and movement. These concepts were offered to the audience through the soundscape. The exaggerated gestures of the dancers singled out by the MC was the mode through which they participated in the aura, *the process of working upon the resources*, of London’s rap culture. The MC’s rapping organised the dancers’ exploration of the potentiality of the DJ’s musicking. His occasional calls to the audience (such as ‘oli, oli, oli’) maintained contact with the audience

as a whole and developed their active participation (as when they respond ‘oi, oi, oi’) in the unfolding of the event.

The antiphonic call of this MC worked in a similar manner to the insertion of stock rhymes and the repeated use of phrases by other artists, including Wiley and Scratchy. They bring the audience into the wider performance. Through this the crowd are able to respond, and collectively adopt an enunciative position in relation to the MC’s rapping. The boundaries of the performance are expanded to include the audience as active participants. Susan Stewart’s discussion in *Nonsense* is also relevant here, she argues:

Play is an intrinsically rewarding activity. It is done “for play’s sake.” It takes up time and space, has discernible external boundaries, and yet endows the player with a consciousness of timelessness, with an experience outside the everyday lifeworld that partakes of infinity.¹⁶

The strategies that artists employ can be seen as a play with space and time and, whether they are engaged in speeding it up or generating an excess of movement, their raps draw attention to both temporality and spatiality. The exaggerated arm gestures of the dancers above, along with the MC’s use of the rhythm of his lyrics to draw attention to the temporality of language and the thematisation of time, highlight the meta-communicative aspect of rapping. Stewart argues that ‘Like any form of ostensive metacommunication, play implicates itself - is caught up in a reflexive and infinite gesture. Its every utterance undercuts itself and gives us movement without direction, temporality without order.’¹⁷ Through their privileged position in the dance space, MCs work to change the parameters of the context, making the abstract tangible and

¹⁶ Susan Stewart (c1978) p. 120

¹⁷ Ibid p. 119

producing an experience that moves beyond the temporal order of everyday life. The aura can be seen, in this this light, as ‘the production of nothingness’ and the work of ‘reflection and self-perpetuation’,¹⁸ transforming the ‘texts’ of the live MC’s raps or the DJ’s recordings in an infinite process of unproductivity.

Producing Funky Femininities

The Sidewinder event in Bristol’s O2 Academy, in February 2009, provides a useful example with which to discuss the relation between rap and the body. Although the event was not held in London, the artists involved were based in the capital. The Bristol event is useful within the scope of the study of London based rap because the Sidewinder brand was recognisable within London’s Grime scene and a number of prominent artists within the scene performed. These included Scratchy of Roll Deep and the so-called ‘Godfather of Grime’, Wiley. While each club night is unique, in that the place, time, audience, performers, and the selection of music are never the same, this event also possessed a number of similarities to the majority of large events that I attended during the period of nightclub based ethnography in London.

Prior to dealing with common practices that were also observed in other events I want to analyse how femininity was materialised in this particular event through a grotesque aesthetic. During the early stages of this night the DJ played Sticky’s ‘Booo!’ featuring Miss Dynamite’s vocals. As this Garage tune played and Dynamite could be heard repeating the phrase ‘hitemwitdadrum’, the MC on the stage called to the audience ‘Ladies, I wanna see your bums touch the floor.’ The topographical inversion involved interpellating the young women

¹⁸ Ibid p. 119

on the dance-floor as 'Ladies', with the cultural and class connotations that the word carries. This was followed by travestying the concept through referring to their bums. The shift from high to low was then reinforced by asking them to touch the floor. This vulgar linguistic play was followed later that night with the more complex and ambivalent performance of a full figured young woman dancing vigorously. She repeatedly adjusted her clothing, possibly in order to avoid the exposure of her breasts, but never slowed the pace of her movement. Her energetic performance and somewhat revealing attire articulated an ambivalence of sexual and physical freedom with complicity in the sexualisation of females within the dominant culture and the demands of the male gaze. In order to engage with the complexity of this performance I want to draw upon Carolyn Cooper's defence of 'Slackness' against Gilroy's charge of its political conservatism. In *There Ain't No black in the Union Jack* Gilroy describes slackness as 'crude and often insulting wordplay pronouncing on sexuality and sexual antagonism'¹⁹ that developed in Jamaican dance-hall culture in the 1980s. In response to this assessment Cooper argues:

[Slackness] can be seen to represent part of a radical, underground confrontation with the patriarchal gender ideology and pious morality of fundamentalist Jamaican society. In its invariant coupling with Culture, Slackness is potentially a politics of subversion. For slackness is not mere sexual looseness - though it certainly is that. Slackness is a metaphorical revolt against law and order; an undermining of consensual standards of decency. It is the antithesis of culture.²⁰

Sociological conceptions of culture simply as what people do, without regards to the notion of the 'best', can slip into ignorance of the processes of cultural development. Without accepting Cooper's opposition of slackness to culture

¹⁹ Paul Gilroy (2002) p. 252

²⁰ Carolyn Cooper (1993) p. 141

entirely, I suggest that slackness may be thought of as an overturning of, or withdrawing from, particular ideals within a culture. The slackening of constraints directed to particular forms of propriety, may potentially allow previously impossible forms of engagement or the reemergence of repressed relations. I want to highlight the continuing importance of effort in relation to notions of ‘sweetness and light’²¹ and, consequently, how slackness may be understood as a revolt against dominant social and cultural values.

Within this analytic frame, the young woman’s performance may be seen as both complicit within and in revolt against the dominant culture. Through Bourdieu’s analysis of the body as the materialisation of class taste, the ample and energetically mobile body of this young woman may be considered alongside the MC’s topographical inversion, as opposed to dominant norms. In her movements and physical form she conducts herself as a *bon-vivant* ‘someone capable of entering into the generous and familiar - that is, both simple and free - relationship that is encouraged and symbolized by eating and drinking together, in a conviviality which sweeps away restraints and reticence.’²² The conviviality, of which her dancing body is a material manifestation, is not in this case produced through her eating habits. She manifests her disposition in the way in which her body moves in response to the soundscape produced through this event.

In his study of wining in Trinidad, Daniel Miller reports that his female informants state that ‘the dance uses the idiom of sexuality rather than being

²¹ <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/arnold/writings/1.html> [Date Accessed 1/4/2010]

²² Pierre Bourdieu (1984) p. 179

“about” sexuality, in that they describe their experience of the music and dance in terms of a more general feeling of a release from pressure.²³ I want to draw a connection between the vigorous movements of the young woman as she danced separately to, but near, her female friend and Miller’s argument that low-income ‘Bacchanal’ women objectify Absolute Freedom through the embodied action of wining and the idiom of auto-sexuality. The rhythm of the music that she dances to and the MCing that urges her on, enable her body, with others, to revolt against ‘law and order’²⁴ at a material and symbolic level. She develops and reproduces a set of dispositions that preserves elements of freedom that can also be seen within particular forms of rapping. This aesthetic work is achieved through efforts directed away from refinement towards perfection and vigorous gestures unconcerned with the cultivation of the dominant forms of femininity.

Judith Butler’s critique of Bourdieu is valuable here. She argues that his emphasis on the authority of the authorised speaker in the efficacy of speech acts overlooks how the expropriability of dominant discourse ‘constitutes one potential site of its subversive resignification.’²⁵ Her example that being ‘called a “girl” from the inception of existence is a way in which the girl becomes transitively “girled” over time’²⁶ draws attention to the force of non-official, everyday illocutionary acts. MCs’ calls and the linguistic and bodily responses of their audiences produce an antiphonic structure. With this antiphony in mind, Austin’s contention that the ‘performance of an illocutionary act involves the

²³ Daniel Miller (1991) p. 335

²⁴ Carolyn Cooper (1993) p. 141

²⁵ Judith Butler (1999) p. 123

²⁶ Ibid p. 120

securing of *uptake*²⁷ may be considered alongside Butler's argument that the 'body does not merely act in accordance with certain regularized or ritualized practices, but it *is* this sedimented ritual activity; its action, in this sense, is a kind of incorporated memory.'²⁸ The uptake that we are concerned with in relation to this MC's speech, is one that is registered in the young woman's body.

It is necessary to consider how Miss Dynamite's repeated reference to the materiality of music 'hitemwitdadrum' and the live MC's references to the body may have a social force which summons a particular form of identification from this young woman. The DJ's demand was not responded to literally: she did not place her bum on the dance-floor. However, I argue that through her movements in that social-space, the dispositions of a funky femininity were materialised in response to the MC's summons.²⁹ In Miller's analysis of wining in the Trinidadian Carnival, he states that 'for a minority it represents a crystallization rather than an inversion of values. In this case what is enacted is essentially a sexuality which does not require men; it is not lesbianism but auto-sexuality.'³⁰ I suggest that as a consequence of the social force of the MC's perlocutionary act, the young woman that I observed engaged in a bodily exploration of freedom, through the idiom of sexuality. The MC's raps solicit identification from the audience, and her performance was expressive of the production of a feminine identity in response to that call. Together, MCs, DJs

²⁷ J. L Austin (1976) p. 117 (emphasis in text)

²⁸ Judith Butler (1999) p. 115 (emphasis in text)

²⁹ Ibid p. 117

³⁰ Daniel Miller (1991) p. 333

and dancers conjure cultural relations and identities in a ritualised exploration of the freedom that this space offers. In the context with which Miller was concerned, the oppressive sexual relations that he observed justified his ‘invocation of the notion of “Absolute Freedom”’³¹ in order to identify the negation of everything that binds the individual to the social world. I suggest that this young woman’s dancing body and the vulgar raps were involved in a serious play that produce alternatives to the existing social order.

The Aura of the Circle

The work of MCs, whether in cyphers or on stage, is valued not so much for its semantic content as for its social function. As I have shown above, performative speech acts and bodily movements solicit and enact identification. Through this antiphonic structure, identities are produced and explored in the black public sphere. These strategies may be mobilised in the subversion of the processes through which dominant social groups represent, criminalise, marginalise and commodify black culture. Forces operating outside of the space of the dance may be resignified through linguistic and bodily practices. A processual understanding of the aura radically changes how we understand the rap ‘text’. I have provided a close reading of Dizzee Rascal’s ‘Sirens’ in the following chapter, but want to *détourn* that reading here by drawing attention to how that ‘text’ may be transformed in the dance space. It becomes productive rather than a product.

At a ‘Milkshake’ event in the Ministry of Sound on the 16th December 2008, Zane Lowe appeared as a guest DJ. During the high point of his set the

³¹ Ibid p. 334

DJ played 'Sirens', but radically 'cut and mixed' it. Dizzee's vocals were played over a guitar based rock track, defamiliarising them from their context within the music video or with the instrumentals on the album recording. After the first verse, Lowe repeatedly played Dizzee warning 'I can hear the siren's coming' while mixing it with KRS-One's 'woop, woop' from the chorus of 'Sound of da Police'. The effect was to heighten the audience's response to the soundscape that Lowe produced by overlaying these artists upon one another and the instrumental backing, which I am unable to identify. The audience cheered, danced in their groups, and thrust their hands in the air, as they worked through the sonic shifts and danced to the heavy bass that replaced the guitar instrumental during the segment in which the two MCs' vocals were cut to, back and forth. This highlights to the role of the soundscape in producing a field that inclines the body towards particular forms of identification.³²

At that event, as well as a number of others, I observed groups of dancers forming circles. The members of these groups participated with one another in the production of the aura by working upon the cultural resources brought to bear upon the dance space by DJs, MCs, and other dancers. In relation to this, Peter contrasted the way that he shouts 'in people's faces', when on his own, with dancing in a group, noting that 'there's some tunes where people get in a circle' in which participants 'spit the lyrics at the same time.' For him these circles produced 'not friendship, but it shows that, yeah, we're in the same group or category and that we all do the same thing.' This emphasis of shared feelings within the circle can be related to Sterling Stuckey's discussion of the

³² Judith Butler (1999) p. 116

ring shout, in which African cosmology was combined with Christian elements in a ritual involving dancing in a circle:

The intensely religious atmosphere was encouraged by the “plantation leader,” a figure whose precise religious role was not defined, but who called slaves to praise meetings three evenings a week and “thrice again on Sundays.” Those among them who moved furthest into Christianity - or led whites to think they had - the ones who seemed to “distrust the institution [of the ring shout] a little,” found license for it in the Bible, “which records, they say, that ‘the angels *shout* in heaven.’”³³

Stuckey’s discussion of the circle’s role in ancestor worship and spirit possession may be used to understand how religious practices associated with the summoning of spirits have been adapted to the conjuring of identity in the contemporary black public sphere.³⁴ Peter continues ‘...because we’re in the circle we’d all be, like, shouting *within* the circle. So its kind of like to everyone. Everyone shouts to everyone within the circle.’ While rap’s relation to slave culture may highlight the circle’s formal similarity to religious ritual, its profaned form in the commercial context of the nightclub reveals how the appropriation of this cultural form is reorganised in its contemporary urban context. The coarse materiality that can be seen in the repetition of noises. The emphasis on tone over semantic meaning as well as rap music’s vulgar lyrical content also suggest a link with the festivity of the Bakhtinian banquet.³⁵ This quality can also be noted in the bodily practices exercised on the dance-floor. Whether they are concerned with the construction of funky femininities or the exploration of a temporality ‘deep down inside the bush’ the bodily responses to MCs’ lyrics form part of a social continuum. The continued use of this practice

³³ Sterling Stuckey (1987) p. 86 (Emphasis and brackets in text)

³⁴ Ibid p. 56

³⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) p. 185

suggests the enduring value of this cultural form in its role in producing collective identification and providing resources of hope in postcolonial London.

The coarse materiality of Bakhtinian festivity³⁶ was visible during my observation at the O2 Academy in Bristol and an event at Matter on the 31st July 2009. At that event a group of young men pushed and shoved one another as they danced together. Importantly, their actions did not result in fighting. The familiar bodily contact was sustained for a substantial amount of time (almost the entire duration of Boy Better Know's performance). Rather than describing this as 'violence' it is more appropriate to relate the shifts between their pushing and shoving, their jumping together with arms around one another's shoulders, and their turning towards each other in a circle to perform gestures that punctuate the rhythms of the MCs rapping, as 'a tangible equivalent of improper speech.'³⁷

The Bristol Academy and Matter events were structured, as live PAs, around MCs performing on the stage. Rappers faced the audience, who stood in front of and below them, while DJs were positioned behind the MC. At Matter and a BiggaFish promotion, at the London Astoria, the organisation of the MCs seemed to promote a coarse bodily excitement within the audience. The crews, in particular Boy Better Know at Matter and Nu Brand Flexx at the Astoria, moved around the stage rapidly, interacting with other performers and urging the crowd to move through their gestures. Although they were separated and elevated from the audience by the stage, the combined activities of the audience

³⁶ Ibid p. 264-5

³⁷ Ibid p. 265

and MCs produced affective identifications. At Matter and the Bristol Academy, I observed members of the audience turning from the stage in order to interact with other members of the audience or to dance alone amongst the crowd. This behaviour occurred mainly amongst those who were involved in the coarse bodily contact discussed above. It is possible that the turning away from the staged performance is a material recognition of the self as part of a larger performance. If this bodily movement is, as Bakhtin argues, the tangible equivalent of speech then the acts of everyone shouting to and being in physical contact with everyone may be considered material and linguistic manifestations of the primary purpose of these events, rather than as secondary to the rap performance on stage. Without doubt, by turning away from the stage, dancers severed the oracular link between themselves and the artists performing. In this movement, material-linguistic identification is privileged over the visual or spectacular.

In contrast to the actions of the audience at the PA events, in every club night I attended in which rap music was played, groups within the audience would dance in circles. During my night club ethnography I spent some time focusing on one particular club, the Ministry of Sound. In successive events I observed young men and women dancing in circles, or in pairs, often rapping the lyrics of the songs they danced to. In some circles the dance incorporated the gestures observed in music videos, in others dancers stooped low, gesturing forwards with their hands. In one particular event on the 26th August 2008 I observed a circle of boys and girls dancing to Doneo's 'Afrikan Warrior'. The members danced vigorously, dipping low and gesturing with their hands.

However, I was surprised to observe that after the song the group broke up, walking away from one another, and that the individual members seemed not to have previously known the others in the circle. Peter recalls that 'in some cases, in fact in most cases the circle will form because someone might know a few people who are around as well. And then I think that acts as a catalyst and attracts other people, people who were feeling the same thing, to form the circle.' He highlights the common occurrence of circles being formed amongst people who are unfamiliar with one another, stating that he does it 'all the time.' Peter also suggested that participating in these cultural forms produces a feeling of commonality and sameness: 'we still wouldn't know each other but we know that we have something in common. So you know, if I was to pass by someone who I was in the circle with earlier I'd be like "oh, cool." You know, just be safe.'

The circle enables the collective affirmation of a class disposition, sharing feelings of sameness and reproducing a familiarity essential to the continuation of London's black culture. These affirmations of a convivial culture are produced both linguistically and through physical gesture. In slackening the constraints of urban dwelling, the vulgarity of these temporary autonomous zones enables the exploration of ways to be together that the formality of the dominant cultural mode does not permit.

'What Do You Know About Violence?'

This study was conducted during a period of widespread media speculation about 'gang violence' and 'knife crime' in London. As some of this news coverage

attempted to link Grime to that violence,³⁸ I want to deal with Grime and its relation to the political, economic, and social context more fully than I am able within the present discussion of the aura. I will therefore leave that broader discussion to the final chapter, where I can relate the issue of violence to the economic and political concerns of artists and their publics. However, I will use this space to consider some aspects of what may be perceived as violence and its relation to the social process of rapping. Before doing so it is necessary to state that the print, radio and television media's association of Grime with 'violence' and knife crime limits the ways in which we see the black body and black culture more broadly. Bourdieu draws attention to the 'specifically political effects of moralization'³⁹ through what he terms 'the new therapeutic morality'.⁴⁰ He argues:

The most fundamental principles of class identity and unity, those which lie in the unconscious, would be affected if, on the decisive point of relation to the body, the dominated class came to see itself only through the eyes of the dominant class, that is, in terms of the dominant definition of the body and its uses.⁴¹

It is important, therefore, to open up the ways in which we understand how the body, gestures, and unconscious urges, are explored and how understanding is developed through their relation to music.

It is clear from Peter's statements that he experiences through some Grime music a form of catharsis. In the ritualistic rapping and dancing to 'Pow',

³⁸ <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/2396038/Defoe-brother-dies-after-street-attack.html>;
<http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/2402448/Defoe-brother-suspect-appears-in-court.html>;
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6938411.stm> [Date Accessed 1/4/2010]

³⁹ Pierre Bourdieu (1984) p. 384

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ ibid

repressed feelings may be brought to the surface and dissipated. However, it is also apparent from his statements that these powerfully felt urges may not always be contained within the cultural forms that have been developed through which to express them. A number of DJs and Producers stated that the usual way to deal with the potential of violent conflict is to follow a track such as Lethal B's 'Pow' with either a different genre or a Grime track that would not heighten the physical response further. This identifies that the DJ's organisation of these events aims to contain the possibility of violent physical conflict by allowing the audience to release its energy in a controlled manner. Johnson's discussion of Jamaican music's cathartic qualities is relevant to these confrontations:

The dances which complement the popular music ... are at once erotic and sensual, violent, aggressive and cathartic. ... But it so happens that, at times, the catharsis does not come through dance, for the violence that the music carries is turned inwards and personalized, so that for no apparent reason, the dance halls and yards often explode into fratricidal violence and general pandemonium. Whenever two rival sound systems meet, violence often erupts between the rival supporters, so the dj is often both the musical pace setter and the musical peace keeper. He tells the dancers, 'those who deal in violence shall go down in silence.'⁴²

The sensual qualities of the music and its role in allowing suppressed emotions to be released may potentially spill over into physical violence. This highlights the efficacy of the MCs and DJs' performances in soliciting identification. But it also requires them to carefully orchestrate the audience's response. This may either work through selecting songs that will not further heighten aroused passions or, in the strategy that Johnson identifies in Jamaican popular music culture, the MC's direct appeal to the audience: 'the dub-lyricist who has developed the dj talk into a form of music-poetry, tells his listeners that they are

⁴² Linton Kwesi Johnson (1976) p. 400

invited to a musical happening, but he warns them, “when you come/I don’t want you to bring your skeng/I want you to leave your skeng at home”.⁴³ There is a self-regulation at work in the social relations produced through rap’s dance scenes that is directed towards avoiding violence, while not avoiding the problematic of dealing with ‘violent’ urges.

Before continuing this discussion of the control exercised in London’s contemporary rap culture, it is useful to pause in order to consider Richard Wright’s discussion of culture and identity in the ‘literature of the American Negro’.⁴⁴ Wright outlines his use of two concepts that he opposes to one another: ‘Entity, men integrated with their culture; and identity, men who are at odds with their culture, striving for personal identification.’⁴⁵ In his analysis of black American writing he contrasts Phyllis Wheatley (who he saw as integrated with her culture) with poets, such as George Horton, whose work conveys ‘a sense of distance between him and the land in which he lives.’⁴⁶ Wright’s discussion is relevant to London’s Grime scene because of his attentiveness to the changing social conditions in which black cultural expression was produced. He describes the intent of the dozen’s as jeering ‘at life; they leer at what is decent, holy, just, wise, straight, right, and uplifting’ and states that this profane form sums up ‘the mood of despairing rebellion.’⁴⁷ I will consider some dozens lyrics in detail in the following chapter. However, I want to draw attention to

⁴³ Ibid [“Skeng” is a Jamaican creolism meaning pistol’ Ibid p. 401]

⁴⁴ Richard Wright (2008) p. 731

⁴⁵ Ibid p. 738

⁴⁶ Ibid p. 742

⁴⁷ Ibid p. 755

this cultural form here because of the role of such profane lyrics in generating the ‘hype’ of the circles that MCs and DJs refer to and the potential for ‘violence’ to be expressed. The dozens manifests the pressures faced by young blacks in the capital and dramatises the confrontation with such social forces.

In H ‘Rap’ Brown’s discussion of the mother and sister rhyming that occurs in the dozens he describes social and economic conditions in which ‘You’d be walking down the street one night and some white dude in a car would pull up next to you and say, “Hey, boy, you got a sister?”’⁴⁸ The mother rhyming of the Dozen’s that he participated in is related to the pimping and prostitution that was prevalent in American ghettos. Following Brown’s description of the Dozen’s as ‘a mean game because what you try to do is totally destroy somebody with words,’⁴⁹ I argue that this is part of a process through which young people learn to bear the pressures they are subject to. In the context of Brown’s mother rhyming, cultural practices developed in Africa were adapted to a situation in which the incest taboo was travestied by the wider society. To castigate the practice of mother rhyming by black men without considering the social context in which that practice takes place, is not simply irresponsible. Such an approach reinforces the unjust relations that lead to these ritualised releases of pressure. The practice dramatises the social pressures faced by this subordinated group and offers the opportunity to construct an identity capable of dealing with those forces.

⁴⁸ H. ‘Rap’ Brown (1993) p. 356

⁴⁹ Ibid p. 354

It is important to bear this role in mind when considering how this cultural form is adapted and used in post-colonial London's Grime scene. During informal conversations both JJ and Peter discussed incidents of unjust treatment by the police. Whereas JJ described being stopped without just cause by the police on several occasions, Peter described an incident in which he witnessed two police officers observing his friend at a train station as he saw his girl friend off. Once she boarded the train they approached the young man and conducted a search of him in public that involved the removal of his upper garments and exposure of his body. I argue that London based rapping uses themes of brutality, misogyny and violence in a process through which young people learn to bear the pressures they are subject to. This often takes the form of resisting jeers at themselves, and being able to return as good as they get. Alternatively young artists may use aspects of their own identity to bolster their position in the face of a lyrical assault.

As a Grime fan, Peter had begun to write lyrics himself, some of which he showed me. I was struck by the subject matter and asked him about the source of their content. In particular I was interested in the relation between his own physical appearance (he had a rather severe case of acne) and the following lines: 'Looks like I can play dot-to-dot on your face/ How humiliating to show any place/.../Soap and water won't do for you niggerr/ A face flannel isn't good enough niggerr/ Medication won't work on that figure/ The only thing I can subscribe is sandpaper.' Peter informed me that some of the content of this song was adapted from his mother's criticism of him. The lyrics were written in a manner that directed criticism that he had received outward, towards an

anticipated opponent. They also elaborated and extended upon those criticisms to produce a hyperbolic humour. Johnson's discussion of the cathartic quality of Jamaican popular music refers to Frantz Fanon's analysis of colonised cultures: 'The occupier, in fact, likened these scathing denunciations, outpourings of misery, and heated words to an act of catharsis. Encouraging these acts would, in a certain way, avoid dramatisation and clear the atmosphere.'⁵⁰ The experiences of unjust policing as well as how social and economic pressures affect home life, should draw our attention to the *colonial* character of life in post-colonial London. Neither 'violent' lyrics nor 'violent' behaviour within London's youth cultures will substantially change until the lived experience of young people changes. I argue that by exploring their experiences through song and dance they already deal with much of the pressure that could potentially result in outbursts of physical violence. The acts of catharsis have an important role in accommodating young people to their position in the wider social whole.

Peter's reference to 'pretend' confrontations, within the dance space, highlights the social function of rap in staging scenes in which emotions expressed in lyrics, such as these, are dealt with in a productive manner. Such performances enact the primal scene Fanon describes, in which the black man seeks recognition of his humanity:⁵¹ 'If there's no fights then, its just gestures really... pretend fighting, No, no, - pretend - if you can imagine someone coming up to you and saying "Oh what? What? You got a problem?" In your face kind of thing. But it's not actually meant, its just during, its just during the actual song.'

⁵⁰ Frantz Fanon (2004) p. 173

⁵¹ Frantz Fanon (2007) pp. 191-7

Further research may be required to investigate the living conditions of black mothers, fathers, their children, and how they respond to the pressures of social and economic marginalisation in the urban environment. Such research will need to address issues of racism and its brutalising effects on ethnic minority groups. However, the study of contemporary black culture can also lead to increased understanding of the role of art in social life. Rap provides an important entry point into underlying socio-economic and political issues.

The avoidance of violence by Peter and the vast majority of young people in Grime clubs suggests that music, rapping, and dance are generally sufficient to contain the 'violent' urges of those that need to express them: 'Because of the vibe that the tune gives out, it makes everyone feel like they've got power, and so they like to let it out. But because everyone knows that its just the tune, no-one really gets - well some people do get mad, I don't know why they do get mad, but usually people know that its just a joke.' Peter's experience of Grime music as aiding the dissipation rather than the precipitation of 'violence' suggests rap music has a significant role in the social organisation of the audience's consciousness and dealing with these subjective feelings. It is important to bear in mind that 'violence' is only one of the issues that rap is employed to deal with in contemporary London. Among those other issues, it also confronts racist oppression as well as the production of subaltern black identities. The means through which MCs and DJs organise the collective consciousness of their audiences and the manner in which Peter works through his subjective feelings highlights how effective these practices are in giving collective expression to subjective feelings.

JJ's discussion of the difference between the 'shoreditchy crowd' and those that would have attended his youth centre is relevant to this issue, and what he describes as incidences of 'madness' in clubs:

I think them Shoreditchy people are a lot more free - than the people that come from my youth centre would have been. ... In the sense that they all bubble, if someone looks at them they won't hype like. Dunno, you stare at a man too much in the youth centre back in the day it would have been a lot for you in the youth centre, innit.

In one of the events in which he observed the two crowds mix, as happened 'from time to time' in the Grime scene, he recalled: 'It was alright. But you know what it was, you saw how timid the Shoreditchy crowd was around them kind of people. That's the only thing I would definitely say. They weren't as relaxed as they normally was. They weren't as loud as they normally was.' Significantly JJ insists that the 'youth centre' crowd do not cause 'madness' and are not to blame for it, but 'they can relate to it a lot better. Cause I would say they are around it a lot more than them shoreditchy crowd people are.' He continues: 'They can relate to it on a level where they see it a lot more and its not gonna phase them as much. But in a sense of - boy how they deal with it, they deal with it extremely different to how the shoreditchy crowd would deal with it.' Johnson's discussion of the naming of Jamaican popular music may be useful in the analysis of JJ's use of the terms, free, timid, relaxed, madness and being phased: 'The youth sufferers who live in the ghettos and shanty towns of Jamaica describe the music in terms of their own existence: they call the music *rebel music* ... and this is so precisely because the music is expressive of how they "feel".'⁵² The rebel music is expressive of forces that produce subjectivities

⁵² Linton Kwesi Johnson (1976) p. 399

such as 'I Roy's "screw-face man"... the man who has completely internalized the historical experience of violence and the violence of his existence, and acts this out through an existence of violence.'⁵³ The term Grime conveys a sense of ingrained dirt, or of being blackened through repeated contact with dirt. It is significant that this term was used as an aesthetic quality and later taken up to identify the music that was produced by the 'youth centre' crowd that JJ described. The term is expressive of the process of racialisation or the acquisition of a habitus through contact with experiences of unfreedom, tensions, and having to face up to these. JJ's contrast between these two groups highlights the exploration of freedom through Grime and the subjectivities formed through familiarity with experiences of particular kinds of tension, of which the music is expressive.

Concluding this discussion of rap's role in the socialisation of 'violent' urges, I want to consider the formal mechanisms through which this occurs. When discussing their interest in Grime with a group of A-Level students, one directed me to a YouTube clip. The video, *Dizzee Rascal vs Crazy Titch*, was used by him as an example of the Grime scene's violence. In the video, it was possible to see a breakdown in the order of the staged encounter, or 'battle', between these artists. However, rather than showing any actual physical violence, what I observed in this scene was the exercise of self restraint following this breakdown. I later discussed the video with the student after watching it. My examination of its content proceeded through conversations with other members of the Grime scene. During this process I noticed an

⁵³ Ibid p. 401

overemphasis on violence as a constituent feature of the scene amongst listeners and a sensitivity amongst artists to the scene being represented as violent.

My analysis of this video identified a principle of order that governed the structure of the 'battle'. The exercise of masculine self-restraint by the participants following the breakdown of that order was a significant socio-cultural performance in this event. The video shows physical contact and verbal confrontation between the two antagonists. Importantly, this assertion of their masculinity does not develop into physical violence. During the prolonged face off between the artists there is a substantial amount of physical contact amongst the onlookers and between onlookers and the two artists. That material reassurance of belonging was accompanied with calls for the artists to 'allow that' and disregard the breach of order. The reassuring physical contact between the participants in this scene should not be overlooked in the consideration of how young black men deal with the social forces that act upon them.

The breach was caused by Crazy turning towards Dizzee as if to pass him the microphone, then turning away from him and continuing to rap his lyrics while retaining possession of the mic. Dizzee responds to this by pushing him and, in the subsequent standoff, repeatedly asserts 'I'm not a mook'. That offence was caused by this foregrounds the principle of reciprocal recognition that constitutes the underlying order of this collective performance.

In contrast to the cypher, in which a rapper is likely to have to deal with the vexation of being cut off by another at any moment, this confrontation results from the antiphonic structure of the encounter being disrupted. In opposition to JJ's claim that anyone could be involved in the 'madness' that

might occur through rap music, I argue that the music is expressive of the social pressures and subjective feelings of a particular marginalised group. Consequently, they are more likely to be involved in the manifestation of 'violence'. What I want to emphasise here is not whether or not violence is present in particular rap scenes, but that the social relations that are produced through rapping are directed towards reciprocity and collaboration. Furthermore, I argue in opposition to H. 'Rap' Brown, who remains in the position of one of the players in his description of the Dozens, that 'violence' is produced in the breach of these relations and not as their aim, which is to develop linguistic and bodily control and to produce social identity. Clearly the assertiveness that is expressed in Dizzee and Crazy's performances of masculinity has the potential to shift towards actual physical violence. Just as importantly, this possibility is also contained by and dissipated through the physical contact amongst members of the assembled group.

When considering this potential for violence, it is necessary to bear in mind the character of London's post-coloniality as well as how cultural resources are employed to deal with the conditions of urban dwelling that give rise to such urges. In the light of the overemphasis on and sensitivity to 'violence' amongst those in the Grime scene, it may be possible to discern the expression of social being through the idiom of violence in the way that the video is used, if not in the event recorded by the video itself. Even if what the video shows is a principle of reciprocity, which when breached, gives way to masculine self-assertion, self restraint, material reassurance and collective being, the idiom of violence has considerable interpretative power in this scene.

It is necessary to emphasize the importance of this problematic, as the video's 'violence' perhaps also holds the potential of developing non-violent, and affirmative social relations.

The Organisation of the Collective Body

In nightclubs across the capital dancers may perform gestures that mimetically identify with those recorded by artists in music videos. This occurred significantly less than the formation of circles in the events that I attended. However, the practice highlights a cultural context that goes beyond the walls of the nightclub. In addition to the Rolex Sweep, the Migraine Skank became a recognisable feature of the nightclub scene during the course of this study. The dance was popularised by Gracious K (a member of Red Hot) through an instructional video circulated via YouTube. The video combines oral directions with visual demonstration, which supplement the instructional content of the lyrics: 'First step is take your right hand, next step is take your left hand, and then put your hands on the head, and then show me the migraine skank.' The video assists the introduction of a novel pattern of movements into contemporary black popular culture. It also contains recognition of a common fund of embodied knowledge within the dance culture: 'anyone here who goes to a rave knows about going down low.' Gracious K's skank incorporates elements of the preexisting cultural tradition and contributes to that culture. Following the dance's popularisation in nightclubs across the capital, Afrikan Boy performed a gesture recognisable as part of the migraine skank (moving the palm of the hand around the head) during the freestyle section of 'Kunta Kinte'. At this stage in its 'life cycle' the skank had become detached from the 'text' of

the video and used as material for the continuation and revitalisation of the culture from which it emerged. The process of production, internalisation, and adaptation of cultural signs may be seen in the aura of the dance space. In this process the changing practices through which appropriation takes place is of paramount importance, as opposed to the integrity or supremacy of the 'text'. Afrikan Boy's incorporation of a particular gesture from the skank into his own freestyle dancing may be considered alongside the performance of slackness as part of the exploration of black human possibility in these spaces. His performance helps to engage with the dynamic interplay between sound, text and body in the production of identity and identification in the black public sphere.

Through Afrikan Boy's comments on the power of music and poetry it is possible to draw out a connection between his grounded aesthetic and the process of soliciting identification from the audience:

When you listen to like a slow jam, while you just feel heart broken. Like there's certain tracks that you feel they've witnessed everything that's happened to you and they're just singing it. But obviously they haven't, you know. And it's just like that's the power that music or poetry or sort of anything like has, even adverts. You know there's some people that watch adverts and think "aah they're talking to me" and then go out and do whatever the advert says.

His association of advertising with art, and both with the idea of 'witnessing' one's feelings, experiences, or subjectivity, draws attention to the grounded aesthetics of his own creative work. In contrast to the, apparently simplified, example of 'some people's' relation to adverts that Afrikan Boy presents, Paul Willis highlights how advertisements may be considered by their audiences to be 'expressive forms capable of giving symbolic pleasure, whose ability to

produce pleasure can be evaluated.⁵⁴ Afrikan Boy's alternation between what 'you feel' and the 'obviousness' of artifice is suggestive of the complex relationships that are constituted between audiences and particular cultural forms, such as music, poetry, and television adverts. The ironic relation to these forms, that he constructs through the figure of 'some people' foregrounds the interplay between identification with lyrics and the performance of identities constructed through black cultural representations. His comments are suggestive of his approach to the organisation of the collective consciousness of his audience. The use of the term 'witness' suggests a relation between himself and the audience through which he summons identification in order that they attest to a truth. This may be considered as the audience's ability to take up⁵⁵ his solicitation and produce identities that correspond to his performance.

After accepting a beat offered to him by a Producer, Afrikan Boy 'attacked it in many different ways' before the name Kunta Kinte came to mind. After using You Tube to find clips from the film he experimented with working his lyrics, the sampled clip, and the beat together. There is clearly much work done and intentionality exercised by Afrikan Boy. However, the creative process also had an aspect that appeared to come from outside of that intention: 'I decided ... let me see what happens when I carry on playing the Kunta Kinte clip until my ... verse starts. And what's so weird is when ... you carry on playing the clip And the minute he says "It's Toby" that's when my verse starts and I was like "Wow, this track is just meant to be.'" The creative development of this track

⁵⁴ Paul Willis (1990) p. 50

⁵⁵ J. L Austin (1976) p. 117

also took place through performance, initially in private 'I like writing my lyrics standing up, so I always try to perform my lyrics whilst I'm creating them', and then in public:

When I go on stage the performance influences.... Fairfield Halls was the first time I performed it, everyone loved it. ... Everyone loves that track. I've done it in two clubs ... I think what grabs people is the way I say the lyrics but more so the performance I like that track, I'm gonna record it next week. It's not even recorded yet, that's how fresh it is.

The honing of the rap through a combination of private and public performance before recording it is an important aspect of the social creativity of London's rap scenes. It is possible to see, in Afrikan Boy's experimentation with video and encounters with his audiences, the refinement of the process of soliciting identification. Afrikan Boy's experimentation with video on his computer and offering of his reinterpretation of that clip to his audience, highlights the role of rap in an ongoing social process of questioning, experimentation, appropriation and affirmation.

The social creation of 'Kunta Kinte' is linked to the social purpose for which Afrikan Boy wrote his lyrics. He adopts the persona of the fictional enslaved African in his performance: 'the reason why I came up with them lyrics ... I'm gonna make a track and I'm gonna do it like I am Kunta Kinte.' The Kunta Kinte persona was adapted to a contemporary setting, combining the background of the film's Kunta with Afrikan Boy's contemporary cultural references:

That's where the "praise be to Allah" comes in, cause obviously where Kunta Kinte's from in the film its like 99% muslim.... So then I wrote the track like I'm Kunta Kinte but I done it in a weird way like I'm sort of like a modern day Kunta Kinte, but I sort of like flip back to all them back references, like: "My name is Kunta Kinte, I don't drive a hummer but I get many whips from my old slave masters/ Praise be to Allah, thank Jesus for Obama."

By sampling the scene of Kunta Kinte being broken, and then drawing out the theme of 'being yourself' Afrikan Boy develops a complex historicism that combines digital technology, a non-linear temporality, and references to both African, black-American and European culture. The mixed 'race', but predominantly white, audience at his performance in the Notting Hill Arts Centre responded by chanting back the lyrics and dancing. This active reception is part of the process of organising a collective consciousness that is both aware of the history of racial terror but focused on the production of affirmative ways of living together today. The playing of Bob Marley's 'Redemption Song' immediately after 'Kunta Kinte' at this performance is one way in which the rapper offers the audience a means of dealing with the issues raised in his lyrics. The heavy beat and the low light, in which he performs his rap and the dancers move, was followed by a stillness as Marley's guitar gently plays.

The range of activities practiced on the dance-floor demonstrate the various modes through which members of the audience appropriate the material available to them. Audience members respond to the DJ's production of the soundscape through the cut and mixing of tracks and the rhythm of MCs' raps (whether recorded, live, or a combination of the two). They also respond to the performances of other members of the audience. In the profaned sphere of the 'rave' the symbolic actions of the audience are not mechanically controlled by MCs and DJs. The assembled gathering affirm, reject, or reinterpret the cultural resources produced by privileged interpreters, such as Gracious K or Afrikan Boy. Before drawing to a conclusion, I want to highlight the dancing of a group of young women at the Sidewinder event, in relation to this. Dancing in a

circle, the three white women with one young man, gestured to Doneo's 'African Warrior' in a similar manner to the group described above, with the exception that they did not dip down as that group had. Although the young man appeared distracted in his performance, the women's movement and gestures were visibly more engaged with the music. Just as white and Asian MCs participate in London's rap scenes, it is important to consider how white and Asian dancers participate in the reproduction of the conviviality of this culture. In their embodied identification with 'African Warrior', these young women engaged in a process of cultural interpretation and identity construction that produces a larger, sensual collectivity and a convivial culture that prioritises reciprocal recognition.

Conclusion

The aura of London's black culture is produced through the investment in the dance space of the subjective will of the DJs, MCs and their audiences. MCs contribute to the production of the aura through their performative utterances, in which they solicit identification from the audience. It is important to attend to Austin's distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts when considering the MC's role in night clubs, arts centres and youth clubs across the capital. Their performance requires the audience to recognise the subject position from which they speak. The uptake of identification is secured through the antiphonic structure of the MC's and audiences performances. As a result of this solicitation and production of identification, young Londoners' demands to be recognised as MCs are affirmed. It is through a similar process that MCs' exhortations to the audience to respond to the soundscape produce

material and linguistic responses that conjure with human possibilities and identities. The rhythmic patterns of their verbal art as well as its interplay with the beat of the soundscape are registered in the body as well as semantically. The response of the audience to MCs' lyrics is indicative of the perlocutionary force of these acts. Their dancing to the beat of the lyrics and the DJ's musicking, draws attention to the significance of the non-semantic elements of rappers' performances. Through techniques, including the use of particular lighting arrangements, amplified sound, rhythmic patterns, rhyme runs and schemes, antiphony, gesture and dance, rappers and DJs work with their audiences to generate the aura of contemporary London's black culture.

As a result of the passions invested in this space Londoners are empowered to respond to the conditions in which they dwell. These responses may include the symbolic overcoming of racist oppression, the exploration of gendered subjectivities, the bodily play on abstract concepts such as time and space or the production of collective identification. The performances within the dance space cannot be separated from the social and economic relations within post-colonial London. Through the repetition of noises and lyrics as well as the movement of their bodies, audiences give expression to their collective feelings and aesthetically explore the freedom granted in this space. The combined efforts of the participants produce a form of communicative action that challenges, subverts, and turns away from, the hegemonic utterances of the dominant social groups responsible for their stigmatisation and marginalisation. Through offering reinterpretations of the material that is brought to bear in this context the assembled audience become engaged in a

democratic unity in which all speak to all. The reworking of cultural material in this space also enables the production of substantive identities that may be employed to deal with unequal relations of power outside the dance space. Although MCs and DJs occupy privileged positions, it is the collective voice (expressed through both linguistic utterance and bodily contact) that speaks the truth of their social being.

Chapter 6 ‘That There Kind of Sumthin’ Sounds Strange to Me’: Social Representation and the Recorded Soundscape

As I stand in Rhythm Division record shop, in East London’s Bow area, JJ recommends J2K’s album as a suitable purchase for me on the basis of this artists’ lyrical and technical accomplishment. Elaborating his statement that J2K is ‘one of the best, lyrically’ JJ explains:

Like, play on words - what he does verbally - he’s one of the best MCs. ... His rhyming patterns, the content of his lyrics. Like what he’s actually talking about - he doesn’t talk poop. His vocab’ as well - he doesn’t use the typical, like, words. Like he doesn’t use typical phrases. Dunno like - he just - his rhyming patterns’ just different, but it stands out a lot, like technically. I can class it lyrically and technically, he’s one of the best MCs.

Other criteria that form the grounds of his recommendation to me are the ‘production’ of the tracks and the artists’ flow. He states that consideration of the production includes the selection of beats and how the vocals fit into the track. JJ describes flow as a ‘beat in a beat’ and distinguishes this from lyrical ability and the track’s production, in that it concerns ‘how you adapt to a beat.’ Once considerations of the album’s soundtrack are exhausted, he identifies the visual artwork used on its cover as a factor that may influence a purchase. JJ’s explanation of the categories that purchasers may use draws attention to the modes of perception and appreciation that are acquired through the use of these products in other contexts. We discussed these qualities within a commercial context. However, from the perspective of an MC, Ty commented that ‘every now and then [listeners] break down’ the lyrics of his songs or analyse one of his performances. He recalled the interpretative practices employed by listeners and the subjective meanings that they construct through his work, in encounters

after his performances or on the street. It is clear from both Ty and JJ's comments that formal and thematic analysis is an integral practice in both the Grime and UK Hip-Hop scenes, and a necessary part of the development of particular forms of cultural competence.

The practice of interpreting rap song's thematic and formal qualities is also embedded within the songs themselves. Durrty Goodz's 'Switching Songs 2' begins with a quotation of Monstaboy's Garage track - 'I'm Sorry', and the MC commences his rapping with the questions 'Do you remember them times? Do you remember these days?' The prompt to recollect begins a personal and social history of the Grime scene's development, including its emergence from Garage. The sampled instrumentals used in the track include So Solid Crew's 'Oh No (Sentimental Things)', references to More Fire Crew's 'Oi', Dizzee Rascal's 'I Luv U' and Tinie Tempa's 'Wifey'. The combination of a personal and socio-historical narrative with this instrumental montage produces a soundscape within which the generation of London's contemporary rap scene is thematised. A further and related theme is the representation of this artist's subjective view of that socio-historical formation.

The content of rap songs and videos cannot be separated from the social consciousness of those who participate in London's rap scenes. I want to use this chapter to investigate the relation between rap music products and the interpretative practices of artists and their audiences by examining the formal and thematic content of these cultural products and performances. Although I will focus on the Grime scene for the greater part of this discussion, I begin with an examination of the lyrics of a popular track by Roots Manuva. Through this

close textual analysis I want draw out some of the qualities of his lyrics that anticipate particular responses from his audience. By combining close textual analysis with participant observation I aim to probe how lyrics anticipate and produce particular forms of social identification and organisation. Following this, I discuss how certain practices and rhetorical strategies that form a part of the black cultural tradition have been adapted in the production of the Grime scene. This leads on to an engagement with the representation of racialised and gendered identities in the black public sphere. Finally, I discuss how young black Londoners' self-representations challenge hegemonic utterances that attempt to stigmatise urban youth and their culture. Through the analysis of artists' representations of post-colonial London's social and economic order, I attempt to connect rapper's organisation of a social consciousness and the circulation of rap music products to a cultural politics that attempts to overcome the marginalisation of urban youth.

Techno Shamanism

During the course of my research I observed Roots Manuva perform on three occasions, and closely listened to his albums. At each of his events that I attended he performed 'Witness (1 Hope)' a track on the *Run Come Save Me* album. The audiences at those performances responded by singing the songs' lyrics, jumping in unison to the beat, or waving their arms - up and down - to the beat during the chorus. Within this crowd I experience something of a collective pleasure in the bubbling, synthesised beat, and the track's driving energy. The popularity of the track facilitates the experience of being part of a moving, collective body, through its performance. 'Witness' begins with a

thumping bass line that provides the structure that Roots Manuva's lyrics drive against and that the audience dance (or jump) to. The heavily processed synthesised effects that accompany the bass line focus the track's energy. The first bar of lyrics 'Taskmaster burst the bionic zit splitter' seems to make absolutely no sense whatsoever, but the alliteration works with the bass to produce a pleasing psycho-somatic response through the placement of the heavily stressed plosives 'bionic' and 'burst' on the beat. This effect is picked up again at the beginning of the second bar, with 'Breakneck' reaffirming the beat by providing an additional emphasis at the beginning of the new bar, whereas 'bitter' ends the bar by forming a couplet with 'splitter'. The opening of the verse has an energy that drives the audiences' response. This is somewhat lessened in the following bars. The third contains an internal rhyme of 'day' with 'say', and forms a couplet with the fourth through the forced rhyming of 'productive' with 'your stuck with?' There is a shift in the fifth and sixth lines away from ending the bar with couplets and, although 'most' is (again forced) rhymed with 'toast', the next sentence begins within the same bar. This gives 'pain' an additional stress as it is placed at the beginning of the following bar, on the beat. Depending upon how one analyses the lyrics 'famine' and 'jamming' can be seen as internal rhymes between bars. Alternatively, one could register that by beginning the following line within the bar of the preceding one, the couplets receive an additional stress by falling on beat, and the space after the beat is taken up by words that do not need an additional emphasis. This allows 'scumbag' to receive an additional stress, which is further emphasised by the repetition of 'scum'.

The repetition of 'jerk' in the references to West Indian cuisine that follow Roots Manuva's assertion that he will stay 'top shelf material', might be associated with the song's concern with the meagre and undervalued. The possible reference to pornography may link bodily responses to such products with the nourishment provided by West Indian food. The theme of poverty and hunger has clearly begun to emerge by this point. The earlier association of 'famine' with 'jamming' suggests music to be a form of sustenance. Later it is represented as a means of economic gain. 'Break away slave bliss' is rhymed with 'Swiss', and the vernacular reference to banking associates freedom from dehumanising work with making and saving money. The lines '...progressing in the/ Flesh. Esoteric quotes most frightening/ Duppy took a hold of my hand as I was writing' combine the theme of the psycho-somatic effects of music with the process of writing. This is formally linked with a concern with spirituality through the couplet 'frightening/writing'. There is a sense, in the performance of these lyrics, that the artist is not entirely in control of the creative process. The experience of surprise at what emerges from this creativity is attached to the word 'Duppy'. The use of the Jamaican word for ghost to refer to the creative process invokes a cultural tradition, and relates it to a struggle with spirit possession. This may in turn be connected to the theme of nourishing food and the references to drug and alcohol use at the beginning of the verse. Rap as part of a cultural tradition, that for Roots Manuva connects him back to Jamaica, is invoked within the context of a spiritual and bodily struggle within the urban environment, and an engagement with various ways of dealing with that struggle. The song conjures references to drugs (including alcohol), food,

rapping, and money making as means of dealing with life in the city. This theme is returned to in the final verse with the line 'We in collision with the beast/ Lost we religion and we can't get no peace.' There is a suggestion of the tradition's disconnection from the sacred sphere, alongside a celebration of its continuing value in dealing with contemporary urban dwelling.

The chorus allows an increased participation by the audience. After the relative density of language usage towards the end of the first verse and in the later verses, the internal rhyme of 'witness' and 'fitness' along with the repetition of 'one' in 'One hope, one quest' allows the pleasure of rhythmic repetition to again become dominant over semantic depth for a few bars. The repetition of the chorus, and its privileging of the semiotic, contrasts with the semantic depth and apparent linearity of the verses. The audience's collective response, moving their bodies and chanting the lyrics in unison, brings about a corporeal solidarity.

A pre-conscious understanding of the track (including its lyrical and musical aspects) is combined with the presence of the artist, the collective response to his performance, and other environmental factors (such as the dimmed lighting that heightens the audience's non-visual senses) to produce the truth of 'Witness'. The most significant aspect of this song is the way that its formal qualities anticipate the collective witnessing of the track's unfolding in performance. Each performance is a singular event witnessed by participants in their total communication. In consideration of the role of the audience in the creation of the aura (that I have identified here with the truth of the art-work) it is notable that the majority of Roots Manuva's audiences at the events I have

attended are white. The space that this performance opens up explodes essentialised concepts of racial difference. The aura of London's black culture enables an exploration of human sameness through common participation in producing this aura. I argue that Rodney Smith anticipates this audience's response in the composition of his rap music, and that the formal antiphony of 'Witness' is related to the theme of spirit possession and creativity.

Through his performative utterances, Rodney Smith orchestrates the audience's response. His references to food, the body and spirit, as well as his repeated calls for the audience to 'witness the fitness' invokes collective identification with the Roots Manuva persona. A collective spirit is summoned, in which the gathering is invited to attest to the MCs' fitness. His lyrics urge the audience to attest to a collective truth of their being: 'whether we hitch hike, or push bike, or travel kind of trash, manifest that with wholesome roots rap. Manifest that, yeah.' Through the use of rhyme and the rhythmic qualities of the lyrics, the rap song works with the beat and other features of the recorded soundscape to elicit a bodily response. The poetic interplay of the lyrics with the heavy beat facilitates the uptake of the song by registering the material qualities of their performance within the body. Smith's sonic organisation of the lyrics in this soundscape highlights the material power of language in this ritual setting. It is through this material dimension that particular forms of identification are solicited by Roots Manuva and produced by the audience. This is then thematically connected to the MC's truthful re/presentation of the audience's collective experience. Roots Manuva offers this to the audience in order that they testify to its truth, and through their dancing and chanting the aura is

made materially manifest. The track's concern with spirit possession is repeatedly constructed in everyday, material terms. This is related to the anticipation and orchestration of the audience's responses in the production of modes of social being in the contemporary urban environment.

Social Representation and the Grime Scene

Shifting focus from the way that Roots Manuva's track anticipates and is, therefore, constitutive of the audience's responses, I want to consider two Grime music 'texts': 'Black Boys' and a clip circulated on YouTube entitled 'Bashy goin at Wiley and Scratchy (live)'. They both feature Bashy rapping, and I want to discuss them in relation to the social relations that constitute Grime's subaltern public sphere. Although the performance captured in the clip may not have been intended for publication by Bashy, and was recorded prior to the production of 'Black Boys', I wish to look at the later video first in order to engage with its role in the mainstreaming of black culture. I will then compare it with the position that Bashy takes in the earlier recording.

The 'Black Boys' video, which was also circulated on YouTube, features a sample from the Stairsteps' 'Ooh Child'. Whereas Gilroy discusses R. Kelly's reference to this song in 'Bump N Grind',⁵⁶ I suggest that the use of this sample here owes more to Tupac's 'Keep Your Head Up.' That track urged men to support women, and fathers to take responsibility to work with mothers in the raising of their children. Bashy's use of this chronotope, within the context of a valorisation of black boys (according to the video's subtitles 'For black history

⁵⁶ Paul Gilroy (1994) p. 53

month 2007') represents a narrowing of the aspirations of both the Stairsteps' utopian and Tupac's somewhat more utilitarian performances.

Bashy's lyrics name a number of black males recognised within the Grime scene, and others in the mainstream broadcast media. The video shows a number of young black men and boys, it celebrates the achievements of black artists, both male and female, and concludes with a roll call. The use of this form of genealogy and other mnemonic devices in constituting a community has been discussed by Walter Ong in his work on oral cultures.⁵⁷ Gilroy identifies that the form of citation that Kelly employs in 'Bump N Grind' 'does not play with the gap between then and now but rather uses it to assert a spurious continuity that adds legitimacy and gravity to the contemporary.'⁵⁸ Alongside this creative ordering, Bashy's roll call produces a homeostatic society. The video constructs a form of social collectivity that, while not entirely excluding females, is principally concerned with fraternity. Its use of bright summer sun shining through leafy trees in the urban landscape, represents this inner city fraternity as 'positive', and the long roll call has a prominent place in this representation. Rather than examining the representations of masculinity formed in the video more closely, I wish to place the issues outlined here alongside the more problematic clip, 'Bashy goin at Wiley and Scratchy (live).'

This clip begins with Bashy asking 'Is that what it is, yeah?' Shortly after he raps: 'They said that my flow weren't good enough, flow got good, said I weren't hood enough. Got hood then they said that Bashy weren't real, fuck

⁵⁷ Walter Ong (2002) p. 46

⁵⁸ Paul Gilroy (1994) p. 53

them niggers now I say what I feel.' The lyrics are performed as a response to verbal attacks by Wiley and Roll Deep. These justifications for Bashy's response are followed by a series of attacks, first against Wiley, and then Scratchy. The most problematic aspect of this attack may be Bashy's use of references to Wiley's sister:

I didn't ask for this, like...
I'm looking to strike like thunder
Kick Willy in his face just like Wanda
Put Willy six foot under
Even though I'm six years younger
Willy - suck your mum brum
Me and [your sister] will do the bar-rumba
I will bend her over and put my willy in her p'fumbla
Your sister's a slag, your sister's a hag, looks like you in a drag
Looks like if you was holding a bag

Following this Bashy focuses his attention on Roll Deep before returning to Wiley, repeatedly attacking him through references to his sister. In a one minute and fifteen second segment, Bashy lists a number of rappers and crews from throughout London that he will call on to perform various sex acts on Wiley's sister, which ends with the line: 'The whole industry's been through your sister, how does it feel Wiley?'

The use of a roll call in both of these songs shows contrasting ways in which this rhetorical technique is used by rappers. The strategy itself is, of course, neither 'positive' or 'negative', but is used to construct a notion of community and simultaneously places the orator in a privileged position within

it. Bashy's rhetorical skills allow him to represent himself as possessing sufficient social capital to mobilise against Wiley. It is important to highlight his repeated assertions that he 'didn't ask for this.' The opening of his rap represents him as acting in defence of himself. This is followed by his playing the dozens on Wiley and a movement from the defensive to the offensive. Bashy explicitly invokes and discards Wiley's mother as a means through which to stage his attack, in favour of his sister. Midway through the verbal assault Bashy pauses to ask 'What is it really?' calling into question the status of his verbal play. The dozens is clearly designed to attempt to produce a response from the opponent: 'The real aim of the dozen's was to get a dude so mad that he'd cry or get mad enough to fight.'⁵⁹ Further to this, I suggest that it is important to consider how the playing of this game in contemporary London has both a regulating and reproductive social and economic role.

In a scene from Bashy's DVD, released after this verbal duel, the artist sits in a studio and acknowledges Wiley as 'one of the pioneers of Grime' before stating 'I do like him, me and him is cool now.' He then introduces a video recording of a conversation with Wiley in West London. The conversation between the two rappers turns around the issue of which artist is better than the other. Both MCs refer to the age difference between Wiley and his younger rival. After Wiley states that Dizzee Rascal is the best artist and acknowledges that Bashy also is 'in the thing', the scene is cut and we are briefly returned to Bashy's commentary in the studio. He now explains what the 'battle' was about, following which the street conversation is continued. Bashy, who holds the

⁵⁹ H. 'Rap' Brown (1972) p. 206

camera, now claims to have ‘merked’ Wiley. Wiley denies this and states ‘whatever you say about my sister is air.’ He goes on to argue ‘I’m not saying you merked me, I would never say that. What you did is, you woke me up because I was asleep to you. I was asleep to you if you understand. So you didn’t merk me because merking means I’m never gonna come back and I’ll walk off...’ The DVD reveals how, in responding to put downs from more recognised artists within this scene, Bashy sought to both defend his position and to further develop his cultural capital in that field. Wiley’s insistence that Bashy’s references to his sister were ‘air’ foregrounds the ambivalent status of this play: simultaneously insubstantial nonsense and possessing a social force that can be brought to bear upon the ordering of the scene.

The conversation between the two artists engages with the nonsense talk of Bashy’s verbal attack. Although Wiley dismisses anything said about his sister he admits being forced to respond to Bashy. This is not merely because some of the contents of Bashy’s rap may have been regarded as justifiable. More importantly the dozens game, as constituted in this scene, requires a response in order to reproduce the social order through which Bashy launches his offensive. Seen from this perspective, Bashy refers to Wiley’s sister as a synecdoche of Wiley himself, while also affirming the social ordering of young black Londoners outside of the family structure. In order to maintain his position in this extra-familial society Wiley needs to show himself capable of defending himself/family members. There is a paradoxical affirmation of the family, but this is subordinated to the ability of the participants to respond within the rules of the game.

It is worth pausing for a moment to consider the historical development of the dozens game within the black cultural tradition. Roger Abrahams highlights that the ‘practice of mother-rhyming’ has been observed in ‘a number of groups in Africa, including the Yoruba, Efik, Dogon, and some Bantu tribes.’⁶⁰ In relation to its use in the Caribbean, Abrahams connects it to the development of a masculine identity and rejection of family values.⁶¹ Through such play, boys learn how to develop a sense of self that is independent from their familial relations, while still acknowledging those relations. Abrahams argues that adolescent boys use the dozens in the rejection of the ‘feminine principle’⁶² as part of the search for a masculinity outside the family home. The ultimate goal of the dozens is the development of a form of self-possession that combines physical self-control with verbal facility. African Boy’s recollection of ‘destroying’ one of his peers and his assertion that ‘there was no such thing as who won or who lost, you just took away what you took away...’ articulates an axis of ironic abuse that is ultimately affirming - if not of the individual then of the social whole through which the subject develops a sense of self outside of the family unit.

It is also worth noting that Bashy’s invective was directed to someone in a more senior age group, and a more recognised figure within the scene. Afrikan Boy’s comments suggest that a sense of being above the game (while still participating in it) is crucial for the mastery that is necessary to withstand a verbal attack on one’s self, while maintaining the ability to reply in kind in a

⁶⁰ Roger Abrahams (1972) p. 217

⁶¹ Ibid p. 219

⁶² Roger Abrahams (1993) p. 305

manner that is appreciated by the audience. Instead of prematurely attempting to class this practice as a form of misogyny, I suggest that the ritualised performance more likely has historical roots as a means of dealing with Oedipal urges through their socialisation, and the production of healthier social relations. In considering the appropriation of this tradition in contemporary London, it is important to observe that the DVD through which the 'battle' is explicated and particular elements of the verbal duel - notably Wiley's response to 'Black Boys' in 'Off the Radar' on the *Race Against Time* album - all form part of the economic growth of the Grime scene. Not only are the rhetorical skills developed through the dozens game employed in more conventionally progressive tracks like 'Black Boys', but artists working within the tradition have used the social order constitutive of the scene to economically develop what Bashy (in the DVD) terms the 'spitting industry'.

Although I have sought to highlight how the dozens affirms the values of a wider community, I do not want to avoid the problematic gender politics at work within Bashy's songs. The playing of the game away from family space may partially explain why males figure disproportionately in his representation of the scene. However, the focus on black boys as a contribution to black history month substantially impoverishes the significance of black history. Even if his focus on living members is admitted - perhaps highlighting a concern with recent historical achievements of black MCs and media personalities - the marginalisation of females in his representation of black community indicate that his social and historical awareness are narrow, shortsighted, and politically regressive. This is more readily apparent when one considers the presence of

females (both as rappers and active members of audiences) in the Grime scene more generally. In my conversation with two girls on a bus, they both expressed an enjoyment of the lyrics of an artist called Spec's - a friend of one of the girls' boyfriend. In the track they played to me they highlighted the following line as being 'deep': 'If your mum comes out I'll move to your dad.' The song featured Specs speaking to a (silent) female interlocutor and plays on specific gender relations. Through this it represents Specs as willing to defy social conventions. The girls' pleasure, derived from his verbal play on social norms, cannot be dismissed in the examination of the gender politics of the scene. It is apparent that socially dominant constructions of femininity are not reinforced in the girls' response to this song. Through their participation in this scene they produce themselves as potential respondents to Specs' rhyming. They are able to both express pleasure at Specs' travesty of family values and inhabit a position capable of attacking (and therefore offering the possibility of reaffirming) the form of masculinity through which Specs constructs his persona. Bashy's 'Black Boys' does not entirely exclude women and girls from its roll call, but it fails to account for the far reaching and complex contribution that they make to the history that he attempts to represent.

In this engagement with the lyrics of contemporary London's rap artists, it is not my intention to offer a simplistic opposition of Roots Manuva to Bashy, as good and bad artists. There are substantial differences between them that would make such an opposition untenable. These include their difference of age, the relation between this and their participation in distinct rap scenes, and the generic expectations of the UK Hip-Hop and Grime scenes. However, there are

more particular differences between the two artists that can only be ascertained through attentiveness to their work. Roots Manuva's lyrics reveal a concern with reinventing a profane art-form with a material techno-spirituality. He presents himself as a shamanic figure, and his performance of 'Witness' and other songs form part of his organisation of the consciousness of his audience along particular ethico-political lines. Nevertheless, Roots Manuva uses many of the same cultural resources as Bashy. Bashy's uses of the roll call shows that his development as an artist has involved taking both superficially 'negative' as well as (within the limited terms of black male uplift) socially 'progressive' positions. Although Roots Manuva's 'Witness' may be more inventive than the examples of Bashy's work that I have discussed, this is not my central concern here. Rather than opposing these artists to one another, I have sought to present contrasting forms of analysis. I suggest that they may be used alongside one another to offer a more fully developed examination of London's contemporary black culture than either technique could deliver alone. I now wish to spend some time attending to representations of gender and gender politics in two specific works, before broadening my consideration of black cultural politics.

Gendered Representations of black Londoners

In the opening of 'Unorthodox Daughter' No. Lay sends shout outs to several artists. Through this rhetorical form she acknowledges these artists and expresses her affiliation with a particular group within the Grime scene. This is preceded, in the accompanying video, with a series of shots of a council estate, each from a different perspective. No. Lay first appears sitting with another young woman, watching TV, while a child jumps in the foreground. A male

artist's track plays during this opening segment and it is his video that we see on the TV in several other shots. No. Lay is then shown walking through a corridor, leaving the flat, and we hear the shout outs as the door is shut behind her. The scene changes to her performing in a bedroom studio as two young men sit listening to her perform. Her rap opens with the lines: 'How are these boys gonna chat about Berreta when you've never had a metal tucked under your sweater/ And chicks pose like female skankers when a lot of you chicks are female wankers/ This chick will move to your troopers, spit a couple bars and put you in Bupa.' She begins with a generalised attack on unidentified others that is comparable to Bashy's more focused assault on particular individuals. The agonistic assertion of herself takes the form of a verbal strike against the inauthenticity of other (male) MCs and posing females. The substance of No. Lay's authenticity is expressed through the image of her as a 'chick' whose rapping is sufficiently potent to hospitalise those who are mere pretenders. Like Bashy, No. Lay's opening establishes her authenticity and lyrical ability as a rapper. Whereas he presented his playing of the dozens on Wiley as a response to attacks on his flow and claims that he was neither 'hood' nor 'real', No. Lay preemptively establishes herself as an potent female MC who is able to take on any frauds, male or female.

Her verse continues through an attack on 'looser' chicks, with a warning of the sexually transmitted diseases that can be caught as a result of such behaviour. She then refers to the violence of the illicit drugs trade, girls who won't stop 'bitching', 'breres' who act as police informants, and a variety of other social tensions. The verse ends with the lines 'Now your doing time while your

breddrin's linking your yat/ Banging her out at your flat/ How do you feel he ain't got your back/ Well that's how it goes he ain't got your back.' During the chorus the video predominantly shows No. Lay in the foreground with a number of young men, either behind or around her. The images emphasise the importance of others' support, which is thematised towards the end of the verse. They also function in the representation of 'truth' as social solidarity and personal authenticity. The second verse begins 'We creep deep and hit the P colony/ Speech articulately. Supreme lick mainstream and redeem myself/ Not for the welfare, I'll bun this if I'm honest a little dough really helps/ No guns on the belt, just strictly bun MC with spit keys lick down these wannabes...' The video continues to rapidly shift perspectives, accentuating the speed of No. Lay's delivery. In addition to the views of her walking or driving around the estate with her crew or with a small group of young black women, several shots show her inside a flat, with the girl seen in the opening sequence braiding No. Lay's hair as she in turn plaits the child's.

The final verse continues the theme of No. Lay's lyrical prowess. Building upon her reference to rap as a means of economic gain in the previous verse, she now develops the theme of her authenticity as an MC through emphasising the cathartic power of the form:

Frustration - in my heart/ Been torn apart by daily war. Been scarred/ So I'm gonna spit these bars/ And to the fake girls, wanna part/ But you get nuttin', wanna start suttin' get the ball rolling/ And pussy holes strollin'/ Moanin' for a chance to light/ But life cuts like a knife. Yo!/ So I get thuggy, do you feel lucky/ Shut your mouth star don't tell me about bucky.

Throughout the track No. Lay attacks the use of guns in rap lyrics and in life. Further to this she uses the hyperbole of other 'fake' artists, and their talk of gun

play, against which to construct her authenticity, as well as by emphasising the potency of her lyrics. Her criticism of 'bitching' and 'posing' girls, and representation of herself caring for a child and being cared for by another girl establish No. Lay as real. This representation of authentic black femininity is articulated with the redemptive power of rap, and working class solidarity. In addition to referring to the cathartic power of the form and its potential to lead to economic gain, her tight lyrics and authenticity are contrasted with the loose talk and behaviour of others. Looseness, individualism, and fakeness are associated with a variety of social ills, from sexually transmitted diseases to being killed. She represents a black authenticity that is composed of social solidarity, vernacular articulacy, and the need to deal with the difficulties of poverty and other challenges by toughening up, as a solution to these ills.

Like 'Unorthodox Daughter', Dizzee Rascal's 'Sirens' deals with issues of poverty, gender, and the urban environment. There is a significant gap between the video and lyrics, so I wish to treat them separately before engaging with that disjuncture. The video opens with images of a housing estate. A horn and hounds are heard before the instrumental begins, and are followed by a proleptic scene of the video's climax: Dizzee trapped by dogs. As the first verse begins, he is seen at home rapping with a younger boy. A photograph of an older man wearing a trilby stands between them, representing the historical contiguity of this black cultural form. This scene is disrupted by a huntsman violently breaking into their home. Following his entry we see a modernist painting of a face - half black, half white. As the horseman proceeds into the living room, he smashes objects out of his way, and the horse steps on the

framed representation of the older man. The cracked glass symbolises the death of this figure of paternity and black cultural tradition. Before the huntsman is able to discover the younger boy, Dizzee dons a fur lined coat, steps in front of the painting and calls to the hunter, drawing him from the boy. As the horseman begins his pursuit, we see him emerge from behind a wall, upon which is mounted an African face carving. The juxtaposition of the white man dressed in his red hunting jacket and the carving develops the imagery in the painting and the video's theme of race and class.

This theme is further developed through a number of written signs, including a poster that asks 'Drowning in debt?' and graffiti declaring: 'Only cowards steal from the poor'. The horseman's horn is sonically juxtaposed with the sirens of the instrumental, producing an association between racist policing, hunting and class conflict. The horsemen are seen smashing recreational facilities in the estate as they pursue the young black man. When Dizzee knocks on a window to seek refuge, a white woman is shown closing the curtains and moving away. This injects into the dominant theme of race and class a gender politics that positions white women as (at the least) unconcerned with the plight of working class black males. However, the grinning faces of the female hunters intensify this disjuncture between white women and black men. After being caught Dizzee removes his coat, exposing his body. As he does so, several huntresses look on intensely, with voyeuristic grins. One of these women's face is smeared with the blood of the catch, as part of an initiation, by an older huntsman. The initiation practice and the representation of the black male as an object of the white female gaze complicate the representation of race that is

figured in the modernist painting at the beginning of the video. White women in the dominated and dominating classes are depicted, on the one hand, as unconcerned with the plight of black men, and on the other, with an intense and lethal interest through which they may enter into the socially dominant culture. Black women are entirely absent from the video. This omission suggests, as a corollary to the emasculation of black culture by the dominant social group, the suppression of the interests and identities of black females within the representation of the subordinated race.

The lyrics of 'Sirens' tell the story of the arrest of the rapper by the police following the assault of a man and woman by he and his friends. The second verse is framed by the statement 'let's go back to that old-school story telling shit.' Aside from this the song offers no other justification for its narrative and closes with a defiant declaration: 'I'll break the law, I will never change'. The first verse is composed of four quatrains, and relates the arrest of the rapper and his response to being told of the evidence that the police have of his acts: 'Gotta stay calm gotta keep my cool/ If I go jail I'll be a damn fool/Gotta rise up gotta stand up tall/ Can't let them see the end of Dizzee Rascal'. The second verse has a much faster pace, is composed of rhyming couplets, and describes the boys' stalking of their victims, the attack, and their flight after being seen:

...

We was on a robbing spree, I forgot to mention Clayton
Was this bredder rolling with us, he was scared and it was blatant
He was prang but back to the story, Adar spotted a man
Straight ahead of us in the distance with his wifey holding hands
So we followed them through this little alleyway into the flats

When we thought the time was perfect, we crept up and we attacked
I took the first swing, unexpected causing panic
We was ruthless causing agony in public, it was tragic
Me and Adar lost the plot, acting like we was from Hell
Beat this bredder to the floor, moved his wifey up as well
Clayton stood back shaking, wishing that he'd never came
Then from out of nowhere was Alicia screaming out my name.⁶³

...

The horrific narrative depicts the rapper and accomplices violently assaulting a man and woman. It also shows Clayton's fear and revulsion at the rapper and Adar's actions, and the brutality of the attackers. In reciting the rap, I find the linguistic control necessary to deliver this verse within the tempo of the soundtrack to be substantial. There is a tension between that control and the statement that the rapper 'lost the plot.' Indeed, the references to perfectly timing one's 'attack' and the 'shit' that is difficult to 'digest' are appropriate characterisations of the verse's form and theme. Although the final verse slows from the considerably rapid pace of the second, the unrepentant stance of the rapper persists:

It's no joke, man, woman, and child I'm seeking
See, no sex, no age, I'm creeping
Anything for the dough, code of the wheelers
Duck from the feds and I roll with the dealers
Par with the hard heads and young offenders
No, my life ain't nothing like Eastenders⁶⁴

⁶³ Dizzee Rascal (2007)

⁶⁴ Ibid

Despite the earlier reference to story-telling, the final verse implies a verisimilitude. I argue that the rap maintains a claim to truth that lies in the story's form as much as its theme. The pace of Dizzee's performance is rapid - not frenzied. His control over this material, combined with the rap's unrepentant narrative, is a significant quality of 'Sirens'. The song sets the shameless assault within the form of a tragic representation of social tumult. This tragedy does not allow any easy way of finding redemption but presents itself without justification. The tragic rap employs a form of aesthetic nihilism, and Dizzee Rascal's unrepentant representation of a street robbery challenges his audience to engage with the complexity of his form of representation.

By telling the story from the perspective of the attacker, listeners are denied the privileged position from which to view the story that is available to viewers of the video. The rapper affirms his association with 'dealers', 'hard heads', and 'young offenders' and speaks to the listener from that social position, with considerable linguistic control, rhetorical force, and (while avoiding any glamorisation of the attack) substantial sagacity. Whereas the video places the rapper in a bleak context of poverty, destruction of public provision for social recreation and the policing of blacks by a hostile white society, the song speaks from and asserts the integrity of the position of someone subject to these forces, but without reference to them. The video represents this tragedy not only through the bleeding of the young huntress, but also in the image of the roundabout 'hazard' sign with which it begins. This indicates that what we see is part of an ongoing cycle. However, the video may possibly be seen to represent the rapper's stalking of the couple as a form of

sport that is comparable to fox-hunting as well as the policing of young black men as if they were vermin. In doing so the video's sound-track complicates the attempt to take the privileged position that is constructed through its images.

I argue that the rapped lyrics and video are composed through an aesthetic nihilism. It is necessary to distinguish this from the notion of meaninglessness and hopelessness that Cornel West asserts 'increasingly pervades black communities.'⁶⁵ Through an aesthetic nihilism, that is, artistic composition through discarded or deprecated material, black Londoners may in fact *affirm* themselves by drawing upon and engaging with the conditions in which they live. The gritty representation of the assault in the rap, should also be seen in the context of the development of the Grime genre itself. By turning the word 'grime' into the appreciative term 'grimy' and privileging it as an aesthetic quality, young Londoners identified and recuperated the undervalued, soiled, and undesirable in the urban environment and brought it into the world of art. This process developed through the production of soundscapes that articulated ideas of urban life with feelings of coldness, as in Wiley's 'Eski beat', or the idea of filth captured in the word that came to identify the scene in its entirety. The affirmation of social relations with the groups referred to in the final verse presents the issue of how to deal with a social whole that includes those who, being subject to the dehumanising forces depicted in the video, act in the inhuman manner enunciated in the lyrics. That this issue is represented through a tragic plot underscores the difficulty of resolving it through existing social and economic relations. 'Sirens' punctuates the urgency of producing an

⁶⁵ Cornel West (1993) p. 22

art that is capable of representing the discarded and undervalued while presenting itself without shame.

Richard Wright's discussion of Native Son, can be usefully brought to bear upon the problematic presented by 'Sirens'. In his discussion of the dehumanising effects of racism, Wright is critical of superficial efforts to distract black boys by liberal whites. He draws attention to the role of these efforts in preserving social and economic inequality. In his essay, 'How "Bigger" was Born' Wright describes the many issues that confronted him in trying to construct this character. Detailing how he approached the composition of Bigger's 'dual' social consciousness, Wright states:

I placed the nationalistic side first, not because I agreed with Bigger's wild and intense hatred of white people, but because his hate had placed him, like a wild animal at bay, in a position where he was most symbolic and explainable. In other words, his nationalist complex was for me a concept through which I could grasp more of the total meaning of his life than I could in any other way. I tried to approach Bigger's snarled and confused nationalist feelings with conscious and informed ones of my own. Yet, Bigger was not nationalist enough to feel the need of religion or the folk culture of his own people. What made Bigger's social consciousness most complex was the fact that he was hovering unwanted between two worlds - between powerful America and his own stunted place in life - and I took upon myself the task of trying to make the reader feel this No Man's Land. The most that I could say of Bigger was that he felt the need for a whole life and acted out of that need; that was all.⁶⁶

Wright continues through other aspects of Bigger's personality that he needed to draw out, including 'what oppression had done to Bigger's relationships with his own people, how it had split him off from them, how it had baffled him.'⁶⁷

After spending a considerable time contemplating his character, Wright pinpoints two specific events that committed him to the task of writing Bigger's story. The first of these was his work in a Boy's club 'an institution which tried

⁶⁶ Richard Wright (1989) p. xxiv

⁶⁷ Ibid p. xxvi

to reclaim the thousands of Negro Bigger Thomases from the dives and the alleys of the Black Belt.⁶⁸ In this institution wealthy whites provided a diversion for the deprived black boys of the city in an attempt to ensure that they 'might not roam the streets and harm the valuable white property which adjoined the Black Belt.'⁶⁹ The second event is of more direct significance to the complex set of problems presented by 'Sirens':

The second event that spurred me to write of Bigger was more personal and subtle. I had written a book of short stories which was published under the title of Uncle Tom's Children. When the reviews of that book began to appear, I realized that I had made an awfully naive mistake. I found that I had written a book which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears. It was this that made me get to work in dead earnest.⁷⁰

What I have termed an aesthetic nihilism, in contemporary rap music, challenges the audience to respond 'without the consolation of tears.' The unrepentant representation of the subject position of a contemporary black-English Bigger confronts listeners with the complex economic, social and psychological forces that produce dangerously alienated youths and social misery.

Both Dizzee Rascal and No. Lay engage with issues of working-class solidarity, the urban environment, and racialised identities. In the videos that I have analysed here, the artists also represent the gendered reproduction of black culture. The inter-generational hair plaiting in 'Unorthodox Daughter' parallels the rapping in a circle in 'Sirens'. Proceeding from these artists'

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid p. xxvii

⁷⁰ Ibid.

engagement with the maintenance of the social individual's integrity, I wish to distinguish these representations of the black self from globalised American images of blackness, before considering London based rap's black cultural politics more generally.

As I write this chapter Rihanna is currently promoting her album, *Rated R*, prior to her tour of the UK. The video to the song 'Hard', which features Young Jeezy's rap lyrics, shows Rihanna in a variety of militarised settings. She rapturously fires an automatic weapon, and confidently struts through the desert in a black spiked jacket (figuring a transformation of her breasts into protective armour) while bombs explode in the sand around her. Here, US Hip-Hop works at the service of the state in its drive to gain support for its efforts in the 'war on terror'. The 'hard' femininity represented by her riding the gun barrel of a pink tank, is one that sexualises war. It positions itself in opposition to an Islamic other, that is depicted through the Arabic graffiti on the side of a building as Rihanna sings 'who'd think they'd test me now, run through your town I'll shut it down'. In his discussion of the aestheticisation of politics Benjamin quotes Marinetti's manifesto on the Ethiopian colonial war 'War is beautiful because it initiates the dreamt-of metalization of the human body.'⁷¹ Benjamin's critique opposes the politicisation of art to fascist aesthetics in which mankind's 'self alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic experience of the first order.'⁷² Rihanna's video is only the most recent product in the process of the co-optation

⁷¹ Marinetti in Walter Benjamin (2007) p. 241

⁷² Walter Benjamin (2007) p. 242

and globalisation of black American culture by corporate interests and of a state that maintains the mass imprisonment and economic marginalisation of blacks. In that process artists such as Rihanna offer African-Americans compensatory stardom, global prestige, and a platform for aesthetic expression. In contrast to 'Hard', both No. Lay and Dizzee's representations can be seen to either resist the state's apparatus or to figure dominant representations of English identity as an active part of the subordination of blacks and a fractured social world. I draw attention to Rihanna's track here in order to highlight the necessity of nuanced analysis that avoids assumptions of resistance and marginality in black cultural products. The London scene that I am chiefly concerned with offer substantially different routes through which to deal with issues of gender, freedom, and politics.

Rap and Postcolonial London's Cultural Politics

In the final section of this chapter I will broaden my analysis of black cultural politics in contemporary London. In order to more fully investigate rap's role in that politics it is necessary to alter the focus. Consequently I will address the processes through which rappers develop their awareness of the world they inhabit and their social critiques of that world. No. Lay's lyrics refer to the cathartic power of rap as a means of dealing with the challenges of urban dwelling. This should be considered along with the way that Bashy's playing of the dozens demonstrates how practices that deal with oedipal urges have been organised into a means of developing wider social recognition and economic gain. These artists representations highlight the need for an examination of rappers' engagement with contemporary issues in the city.

One of the issues raised by artists in interviews and dealt with in tracks listened to on the radio during field study was a concern with violence against young people. There had been considerable media attention given to 'London teen killings'⁷³ and several MCs and DJs raised questions about the policing of young people. They expressed deep concern with the role of art in dealing with issues of social violence. In the first track that I want to deal with, in relation to London's cultural politics, Sincere raps: 'Its a god damn shame Gordon Brown don't care/ Cause all I hear is gun shots and see fiends around here.' The statement responded to the Government's failure to act to protect young people from violence. Some time after the track began to be heard on radio sets around London, the Prime Minister announced plans to tackle what the government termed 'Youth Crime.'⁷⁴ However, those announcements (such as having offenders go to hospitals to witness the injuries caused by knives)⁷⁵ were met with confusion and the plans were reported in the mainstream media as inadequate and out of touch. Furthermore, despite the subsequent identification of several of the alleged murderers of London's teenagers as adults (including one 45 year old civil servant) the Government failed to acknowledge any connection between these killings and wider social issues. Instead it remained actively complicit in the pathologisation of urban youth. It is also worth noting that only after over 10 years following Tony Blair's speech about bringing an end to 'no hope areas', on the Aylesbury estate in Southwark, had redevelopment begun in that area, which had been blighted by chronic poverty and

⁷³ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7395875.stm> [Date accessed 5/1/2010]

⁷⁴ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7777963.stm> [Date Accessed 11/9/2010]

⁷⁵ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/7503845.stm [Date Accessed 11/9/2010]

underinvestment.⁷⁶ The commencement of this redevelopment took place in a context in which the Labour Government had effected a massive redistribution of wealth to prop up the banking system and Gordon Brown failed to make any announcement on his 'race' relations policy.

Rather than looking to the state to solve a problem that it was implicated in producing, Sincere's rap offered a critique of 'reckless' ways of making money and connected this with urban violence. It adopted this critical position while also presenting itself as a legitimate means of economic gain. As part of his effort to construct an economically progressive position, Sincere asked 'can you blame us? English-Africans, English-Jamaicans, Ghanains, Bajians get frowned at when we say Feds are racist.' The track dealt with violence amongst youths and the racist policing practices that are employed in the maintenance of social inequality. Further to this, it attempted to represent a black-English culture that was capable of independently transforming the economic position of the groups that it simultaneously conserved socially.

Rap's role in reproducing the social relations through which this culture is developed can be observed as the video opens with an image of a Fish and Chip shop. The store-sign advertises both 'Pies and Cod' and 'Curry Sauce', in a reference to the syncretic development of black-English cultural identity. The video represents a vernacular post-coloniality that leaves behind what Gilroy describes as 'any left over agonising about being black and British.'⁷⁷ Its attempt to recuperate an identity that is inclusive of non-whites by constructing a

⁷⁶ http://property.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/property/article4964769.ece [Date accessed 5/1/2010]

⁷⁷ Paul Gilroy (1999) p. 57

vernacular Englishness goes further than adopting the relative openness of British cultural identity.⁷⁸ A group of young people, which includes black and white males and females, stand outside purchasing the ‘Good Fast Food’ from the salesperson. Almost in direct opposition to media stories of the menace that ‘hoodies’ pose to society, Sincere initially appears with his face covered by a hood, before taking it down. The shift of scenes in Sincere’s video - from the street, through a musical stage, to a brightly lit set with ‘Sincere’ in lights - trace an attempt to represent rap as a legitimate means of escaping urban poverty without calling upon the state for assistance. This representation of the aspiration of economic progress is coupled with the expression of a socio-political conservatism ‘unity’s gone, I’m just trying to replace it’. Although this unity is constructed through an opposition with British-Asians, that group is also taken as a possible model for the development of a black-British economic progress. The opposition also allows the construction of commonality of African and West-Indian descendants while affirming a black-English socio-economic and cultural development that is inclusive of the working-class whites represented in the video. It is significant that economic gain is foregrounded in the track’s attempt to represent a substantive black-English citizenship. Whereas No. Lay refers to poverty as a source of the social tensions she describes, economic uplift is represented in ‘Once Upon A Time’ as a key to overcoming social barriers.

Whereas Sincere’s song directly critiques the government and police in his representation of the need for ‘unity’, Afrikan Boy’s ‘Lidl’ employs a rather

⁷⁸ Colin MacCabe et al. (2006) pp. 35-6

more ludic strategy in its representation of black urban life. The first and second verses describe the rapper being caught shop lifting. After he is banned from Lidl and Asda supermarkets in these verses, the third deals with the issue of immigration. Although Afrikan Boy stated that the first two verses are based on his direct personal experience as a school boy, the third also drew upon his proximity to real events. The track deals with all these matters in a humorous manner: 'I take a serious issue and then rap about it in this sort of ... comical way.' He recalled that seeing people organising others' entry into the country was an ordinary matter. However, he used a comic mode in order that his audience can enjoy the humorous aspect while also hearing the more serious issues in his work: 'It's everyday life. I hear my mum talking on the phone like "Ah, how am I gonna get this person in?".... Its everyday life, so I just put it there for - you know - as a joke, but ... there's truth behind the joke.' The progress of the 'smelly' breathed rapper from being thrown out of the supermarket by a Nigerian security guard to having immigration knock on his door highlights links between black urban poverty and global economic inequalities. The comic justification for his attempted theft, 'EMA didn't pay me,' highlights the poverty of working-class urban youth dependant upon this support. It also alludes to the difficulties in negotiating a course through the social service and education systems for marginalised groups.

In our discussion of the various interpretations of this song offered to him by listeners, he pointed out one that he considered particularly interesting: 'Afrikan Boy is this kid yeah. And he's so broke that he has to shoplift in the poorest ... shop'. Although he emphasises that he wrote 'Lidl' because of his

personal experience, his engagement with his audience following its composition is part of his development as an artist and of his social and political awareness. His comments about other people's interpretations of his work highlight the social processes through which meanings are produced in this culture. This is perhaps even more significant in relation to this track, as Afrikan Boy did not make the decision to publish the song. It was placed on the internet by someone in the studio. Nevertheless, the track forms a significant part of his performances, and his audiences respond to it with energetic dancing and antiphonic chanting.

In order to put this track in its legal and political context, it is necessary to draw attention to the coming to an end of the rioting of 300 African migrants in Italy.⁷⁹ The immediate cause for the rioting was the shooting of several migrant farm workers by Italian youths. This may be compared to the shooting of ethnic minorities in Sweden. Despite the overall negative impact of the EU's Dublin convention, which regulates the movement of asylum seekers within its boundaries, their treatment in different signatory states varies considerably. Further to this, non-refugee migrants from Africa experience high mortality rates in their journey, often followed by poverty and racist abuse when they arrive in Europe. Although Britain may currently tend to employ more Polish migrants as farm labourers than Africans, the electoral fortunes of the BNP during the first decade of the new millennium highlights the substantial effects of racism across Europe. It is clear that Afrikan Boy's particular local experience is connected to broader legal and political structures. Although he does not

⁷⁹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/8447990.stm> [Date Accessed 30/1/2010]

highlight these specific structures himself, he insists that his lyrics deal with 'a serious, deep issue'.

Afrikan Boy's emphasis on personal experience is a significant feature of his cultural production. His comic mode of representation in 'Lidl' contrasts with the formal construction of 'Kunta Kinte'. Nevertheless, he insists that 'what the track means to me is just to be myself.' However, the use in the track of the sampled audio of racist brutality from the film *Roots*, foregrounds conditions in which being oneself was extremely difficult - if not deadly. His personalisation of this meaning suggests his awareness and openness to the making of other meanings by his audiences. He identifies additional socio-historical concerns in his discussion of the lyrics' relation to the Tribal House beat that they were written for: 'The type of music which is big in London now, I wanted to link it back to its original roots, cause obviously Tribal House music, it comes from African music Imagine if I took that track ... back to the deep roots of Africa so they could then use it as a tribal ritual or something.' As part of his performance of this song Afrikan Boy builds in an element of spontaneity, with a 'freestyle' at the end in which the rapper repeats 'You can take my ...' inserting various references as they occur to him. These may include trainers, clothes or body parts. The construction of the song as part of a ritual that connects his London audience to Africa, while dealing with contemporary issues, bears some similarity to Rodney Smith's construction of the Roots Manuva persona.

Although Afrikan Boy does not attack political figures in the direct manner of Sincere, his organisation of the audience in the form of a tribal community with a black historical consciousness is an important part of the development of

London's black cultural politics. The use of humour does not detract from the seriousness of the issues that he raises, but perhaps instead facilitates the effective delivery of the song's underlying themes. His concern with racism and poverty does not advance an economic solution. Instead he questions the construction of identity through possession of branded goods: 'My name is Kunta Kinte, I don't drive a hummer, but I get many whips from my old slave master.' His lyrics invoke the social memory of slavery and allow members of his audience to make new meanings and to construct new relations to the continuing historical effects of racism.

Before bringing this discussion of rap lyrics and their role in London's cultural politics to a conclusion I want to allow some space to consider less recognisable artists than those I have dealt with above. In doing so I also want to draw attention to the use of rap in advertising and return to the issue of constructing a cultural economy. On Grime Online Radio's website a number of promotional tracks are available to users. Most of these employ artists' self-promotional 'boast' raps. I have already addressed the role of such boasts in dealing with the social and economic pressures faced in post-colonial London. However, one track in particular deals with life in the urban environment and explicitly connects the artists' boasts with political aspirations. The two verses of the 'Grime Online Freestyle' transcribed here are performed by two different members of the Grime Online team. Whereas the first verse deals with an attempted street robbery the second responds to this theme with a combination of the lyrical boast form, that No. Lay and Bashy employ, with the representation of this lyrical ability as part of anti racist struggle:

I was on road with Wides and I see four guys to my side on a hype though?

One of them said I'm on a grind so cough up your phone right now quick time.

I was gonna teeth ready to fight cause some of these guys don't really wanna hype.

So then I was like 'Alright then bruv'

Two of them ducked and fought and the other two hopped on bikes.

I'm warning these guys like you don't wanna start hype.

Dark skin yout' but I shine in the starlight.

So tell me whose got a bar like -

You can eat your butter I'm something like marmite.

A'ight take a break at half time 'cause

Your CDs won't sell not even half price.

I'll be part of the movement that's gonna last like

Nelson Mandela putting an end to apartheid.

...

In their depiction of resistance to street violence the rappers, Tiny Wides, R2K and Baby Fusion, confront media representations of youth violence that stigmatise young people. They speak from the subject position of the intended victims. The confrontation that they portray highlights that young males are more likely to be victims of violence than any other social group. It also challenges the racialised rhetoric of media reports that attempt vague connections between black culture and street violence.

In the media context in which this track was produced and circulated, Doytun Adebayo's comments on rap music fed into a cycle of newspaper reports connecting black youths and rap music with violent criminality. The simplistic

assertion, in *The Sun*, that after ‘12 hours of gangsta rap I could have knifed someone’⁸⁰ suggests that young people naïvely ingest stories that contain violence then act that violence out. This overlooks both the constructive artistic engagements with social violence that artists such as No. Lay and the Grime Online team attempt, as well as more the probing representation of street violence that Dizzee develops. Adebayo’s understanding of London based rap and its connection to the city’s social structures falls far below the level of sophistication that these artists develop in their work. Rather than shying away from violence in their lyrics, Fusion and his crew take on street violence and represent a need to deal with it both physically, politically and artistically. Its significance is developed in the second verse by relating their rapping to economic aspirations. They then connect this with anti-racist political movement. Their lyrics foreground a political commitment against violence and racism. Furthermore, by using this freestyle as promotional material for their internet radio station, it forms part of a concrete strategy of self representation and collective development. The suppression of this aspect of Grime culture in mainstream media, in favour of facile scare stories clearly hampers the efforts of artists such as Afrikan Boy, No. Lay, and the Grime Online crew. The construction of their own media channels, and use of promotional lyrics to develop them, may be an important step in combating the racism in mainstream print and broadcast media.

⁸⁰ <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/justice/1519825/After-12-hours-of-gangsta-rap-I-could-have-knifed-someone.html> [Date accessed 7/1/2010]

Conclusion

I want to conclude this chapter by recalling the complexities presented by the development of economic goals through a cultural politics that draws upon the resources available to this marginalised group. Dizzee Rascal's 'Sirens' troubles the position of the viewer. At the video's climax the camera's frame is identified with the white female gaze. However, despite witnessing the initiation of the white woman into the dominant culture, the viewer is denied the spectacle of the sacrificed black male. This elision is clearly related to the limits of what mainstream society is prepared to accept within a music video. Nevertheless, the rap lyrics present us with the brutal beating of a couple by two black boys. The track demands from its audience a far more sophisticated response than the sort that Adebayo is willing to trade in. It is also important to highlight that bodily responses on the dance-floor are just as important as the apparently rational responses in broadcast or print media. My close examination of lyrics is not intended to diminish the significance of the dance scene. It is necessary to challenge post-colonial scholars' comfortable habituation within literary studies. Disinterested, contemplative discussion of rap lyrics will remain incomplete without engagement with the sites and processes of performance. Similarly, the study of what dancers do on a dance-floor is impoverished by absence of understanding what it is that they are dancing to. My participant observation and cultural critique has attempted to probe the reproduction and representation of London's black culture by combining methodological approaches.

The study of these cultural products and spaces can help us to develop our understanding of the formation of particular modes of subjectivity in the modern world. The means through which rap songs are produced and circulated draws attention to the role of technology in shaping the consciousness of contemporary youth. The collective production and use of rap music is related to the complexities of rap's cultural politics, including the politics of representing black gendered identities. There is an open rejection of the dominant social group's constructions of gender by many black artists, both male and female. The forms of social solidarity constructed through these oppositional representations cannot be overlooked in discussions of race, gender and class, or in studies of sub-cultures. The gendered representations that I have analysed foreground the economic conditions that are faced by blacks and attach the importance of social solidarity to economic development. Roots Manuva, No Lay, Grime Online and Sincere all emphasise an economic interest in rapping and attach this interest to forms of collective well being. Bashy's reference to a 'spitting industry' explicitly links the representation of gendered and racialised identities with the construction of economic relations and exercise of social agency. His cultural production highlights how the black cultural tradition is appropriated in post-colonial London to deal with contemporary social and economic needs. The strategies employed by artists produce a variety of social relations: from the representation of fraternity, or commemoration of slavery to the material affirmation of social being. Bashy, Afrikan Boy and Roots Manuva anticipate particular responses by their audiences in the composition of their lyrics. The circulation of rap songs and

music videos as well as the performances of these artists make a significant contribution to the political economy of the black public sphere.

Chapter 7 From a ‘Junior Spesh’ to the ‘Keys to the Bentley’: The Routes of Grimey London

London’s contemporary rap scenes are more broadly located within the city’s fields of cultural production. Artists seek to distinguish themselves from and position themselves in relation to other artists. Their collective activities produce distinct scenes that are more or less closely positioned to others within the cultural field. Dizzee Rascal’s collaboration with Calvin Harris on ‘Dance Wiv Me’ and his release of, the 70s Dance influenced, ‘Dirty Disco’ are position takings that distinguish him from other Grime MCs as well as from his earlier cultural production. Such releases are part of a process through which a once marginalised cultural scene develops its mainstream audience. Through this process Grime artists modify their relation to other social scenes and explore Grime’s potential for economic growth. Dizzee’s shift from the formal and thematic qualities of *Boy in the Corner* to attract a mainstream audience was criticised by one interviewee, who preferred the ‘tuggy’ style of the earlier album to what he saw as more recent ‘manufactured’ offerings. Dizzee’s statement in an interview with Jonathan Ross revealed his awareness of such critiques and response to them: ‘I’m called a sellout every day, but it’s progress, it’s progress.’¹ Taken together, these comments indicate this artist’s trajectory through the field. They also demonstrate the dynamic tensions that operate between formal innovation, notions of authenticity, economic growth, and proximity to the social world in which one’s skills as a rapper are developed.

¹ *Friday Night with Jonathan Ross*, BBC One, 30/4/2010

All of these factors have some bearing upon MCs' work. They also inform the perspectives that their audiences develop of the scenes in which they participate. In Bourdieu's formulation of the field of cultural production he specifies that:

authors only exist and subsist under the structured constraints of the field (e.g. the objective relations that are established between genres). They affirm the differential deviation which constitutes their position, their point of view - understood as the perspective from a given point in the field - by assuming, actually or virtually, one of the possible aesthetic positions in the field (and thus assuming a position in relation to other positions).²

Dizzee's appearance on the BBC 1 programme is indicative of his participation in the mainstreaming of London's black culture. Bourdieu's analysis of the French literary field is relevant to the opposition constructed through attempts to attract a mainstream audience and accusations of 'selling out' from the values embedded in a 'tuggy' style. He highlights that the relative autonomy of the cultural sphere does not make this field completely independent of other spheres in the social whole:

Thus, the power relationships between the 'conservatives' and 'innovators', the orthodox and heretical, the old and the new, are greatly dependent on the state of external struggles and on the reinforcement that one or another may find from without - for example, for the heretical, in the emergence of new clienteles, whose appearance is often linked to changes in the educational system.³

In London's popular culture, rap is closely connected to working-class and ethnic minority groups. The stakes that are involved in the struggle within the cultural field are closely related to external factors and political interests. These include the support of one's social group as well as the possibilities of acquiring

² Pierre Bourdieu (1993) p. 184

³ Ibid 184-5

economic wealth. Bourdieu emphasises that his theory of the field does not entail a mechanistic determinism, stressing:

[A]gents, writers, artists, intellectuals construct their own creative project according, first of all, to their perception of the available possibilities afforded by the categories of perception and appreciation inscribed in their habitus through a certain trajectory and, secondly, to their predisposition to take advantage of or reject those possibilities in accordance with interests associated with their position in the game.⁴

This principle can be used to inform understanding of how MCs and DJs' representations of their cultural fields reveal their own position and dispositions, and thus their particular perspective of the field.

Recalling the artists that he admires, Alim identified Estelle, Klashnekoff, MFD, Cashmere and H2O. He went on to state that there are other artists that he is aware of but that 'they tend to be more on that Grime scene ... or the music that they write doesn't appeal to me.' As a result of his identification of himself through his interest in UK Hip-Hop, Alim represented his cultural field by positioning artists that he admired within that scene. He then distanced UK Hip-Hop as a whole from the Grime scene. For commercial considerations this distinction may be untenable, and a senior record company executive informed me that as far as he was concerned the two scenes had merged. Nevertheless, like other artists and listeners I interviewed, Alim distinguished between the two scenes even while demonstrating his awareness of artists who incorporate a variety of styles into their repertoire. In particular, he highlighted that Klashnekoff had released a track with 'Grime elements' as one example. In positioning himself within UK Hip-Hop, he associated artists such as Lethal Bizzle, Dizzee Rascal, Kano and Wiley with music that thematised violence and

⁴ Ibid p. 184

other 'negative elements'. As a corollary to this, Grime music was identified by him with such themes as well as with an aesthetic that includes a relatively high tempo and distinct 'sound'.

Alim's acknowledgement of the complexity of representing the different scenes and the artists that operate within them also led him to raise a further layer of complexity involved in the use of music by audiences:

I listen to a lot of music that is not of the most positive element ... so you have American artists like Mobb Deep who talk about beef and war in the most grimmest way. You know the type of things that they go through or the life that they live. And I can listen to it and not be influenced by it. But I can appreciate the creativity that has gone into the production and also the way that they use to describe certain elements in society in a metaphorical way. So how I'm able to listen to that negative element and flip it into a positive I think is something that very few seem to be able to do - or want to do, because everyone can do it. But then it's a case of right, do you then now look at that lifestyle and try to imitate it ... or do you look at it and see if you can flip it into a positive element in what you're doing.

Further to identifying a creativity in the aesthetic nihilism of some artists' work, Alim's comments indicate the development of a sophisticated audience in parts of the scene with which he identifies. Through this he distinguishes himself as a privileged interpreter within the field and indicates some of the skills that are involved in making the forms of judgements his position requires.

Despite Alim's demonstration of sophisticated interpretative skills, his position within the UK Hip-Hop scene obscures the significance of Grime's formal and thematic qualities. This is indicative of the disposition that he has developed through his investments in that social space. The profession of some Grime artists' of their ignorance of US Hip-Hop until late in their cultural development distances their scene from Hip-Hop in a way that Alim, and UK Hip-Hop artists in general, cannot. Furthermore, Grime's relations to Garage, and through that to Jungle and earlier forms of British rap music, identify the

genre as a post Hip-Hop socio-cultural development. Significantly, this youth subculture flourished during a period of stagnation in the UK Hip-Hop scene. The decline and stagnation of UK Hip-Hop is suggestive of a cultural politics from which Grime, with its emphasis on local particularity, has benefited.

In Bourdieu's concern with the French peasantry and the limited options available to them to preserve their identity through the representation of their social world, he specifically denies them the possibility of 'the "black is beautiful" strategy'.⁵ It is clear from this that his interpretative frame acknowledges the cultural politics employed by black Americans to challenge their social and political marginalisation. It is equally clear that the analysis of contemporary rap music must move beyond the limits imposed by the specific conditions that focused Bourdieu's analysis. By contesting (or even ignoring) American Hip-Hop artists, Grime MCs valorise their own work and aesthetically distinct cultural space.⁶ Grime artists position themselves as inheritors of Jungle by employing their rapid tempo and developing a local audience for their cultural production. Alim highlighted the connection that he sees between the aesthetic and the social. But his distance from those American artists makes his strategy of contemplative inversion easier than with tracks such as Dizzee's 'I Luv U', which presents a troubling image of male/female gender relations in London. Alim's willingness to engage with the complexities that artists such as Mobb Deep present but not with those of Dizzee Rascal, who is much closer

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu (1984) p. 384

⁶ 'Cultural production distinguishes itself from the production of the most common object in that it must produce not only the object in its materiality, but also the value of this object, that is, the recognition of artistic legitimacy.'

Pierre Bourdieu (1993) p. 164

socially, suggests another issue concerning the interpretative practices of agents in the city's rap scenes. His comments do not address the challenge of coming to terms with the social, political and economic conditions that artists and their communities find themselves in. Nor do they probe the relation between these conditions and the cultural production of those who dwell in them.

Ty was critical of Grime artists from another perspective. In his discussion of the position of UK Hip-Hop artists, he stated:

We're treated like boys. If I come with a new record and I go to Radio 1, the same box I'm in is the same box Tinchy Stryder is in, the same box Dizzee Rascal's in, the same box Kano is in. But we don't make the same music. But that's how they view us. We're just a bunch of black boys trying to get on their play list. That's it.

His desire to be treated differently to Grime artists connects aesthetic distinctions with the difference in biological age between himself and Grime artists in the construction of social age. This distinction between positions within the field of cultural production is the opposite side of Ty's recognition that he did not possess the same standing as 'a doctor or a lawyer' in wider society. Through oppositions such as these, artists attempt to construct their position within the cultural field. Bourdieu states:

the invention of the writer, in the modern sense of the term, is inseparable from the progressive invention of a particular social game, which I term the *literary field* and which is constituted as it establishes its autonomy, that is to say, its specific laws of functioning, within the field of power.⁷

It is necessary to bear in mind that to understand these social individuals, is first of all to understand what the status of rapper consists of at this particular historical moment. This requires that we attend to the economic, social and political stakes at play in this field.

⁷ Ibid p. 163 (emphasis in text)

In this chapter I aim to examine the social position of the rapper in contemporary London, beginning with a discussion of the representation of everyday life in London through rap music. I connect the particularity of experience represented in lyrics to the city's history of black labour migration, racist social and economic marginalisation, and the ongoing inner-city poverty in which working class blacks dwell. I then discuss the significance of black youth's linguistic resistance to their marginalisation and the participation of white working class youths in London's black cultural scenes. Through an examination of 'hustling' by working class artists, both black and white, I investigate the post-colonial character of the city. I consider the role of rapper in the development of social consciousness in the capital. Following this, I analyse the strategies employed by rap artists in the representation of urban poverty and the difficulties that they face in their engagement with social malaise and political disconnection in their local communities.

In connection with these difficulties I undertake an examination of competing representations of life in London by UK Hip-Hop and Grime artists. These representations participate in the construction of social identity in the capital and are bound up in the struggle of social agents to accommodate themselves to the conditions they inhabit. These representation also participate in urban youth's challenges to their marginalisation and rappers' attempts to make a living for themselves. I then move on to an examination of the strategies employed by artists in the pursuit of economic autonomy, and of the ethical values invoked in the construction of the identities of the MC and DJ. These identities are constituted through a negotiation with artists' interpretative

communities. I analyse the negotiation the relationship between artist and audience and of the terms through which rap music is values. I then discuss the significance of the distinct social and aesthetic positions adopted by artists to the ongoing social construction of the black public sphere. Through attending to a range of strategies employed by artists, in interviews, rap lyrics and music videos, I attempt to engage with the social political and cultural significance of contemporary London's rappers and of the city's rap music scenes.

Particularity and Self Representation

In tracks such as 'Junior Spesh' and 'Lidl', Red Hot and Afrikan Boy represent their everyday experiences and circumstances. Rather than adopting a generic blackness from globalised US Hip-Hop culture, these artists use their work to express themselves and their local particularity. Klayze recalled how his crew made 'Junior Spesh':

It kind of started off as a joke. The studio was at Jaxor's house and just across the road from Jaxor's house was this chicken and chip shop that everyone just used to go to before we go there, or after we go there, or whilst we're there, and get on with it - just go to the chicken and chip shop. Get a Junior Spesh, its like £1;50, and its just its like a quick meal and everyone would like do that while they were hungry. And people would make up silly rhymes about it but nothing serious. Then X-Ray got the beat, we found a beat for it, then certain people came up with little verses, rhymes and stuff, and we just put it together and that's what happened.

Using jokes and observations about aspects of their everyday lives and their local area is part of the process through which emerging artists position themselves in this field, distinguishing themselves from others. In a similar manner Afrikan Boy takes particular issues from the world around him and presents these to his public. Rejecting a generic blackness he speaks the truth of his experience. In 'Lidl' he expresses his consciousness of his particular position in society and his attempts to accommodate himself to it. While in these songs

Red Hot and Afrikan Boy deal with their conditions of urban dwelling through humour, Ty identifies how inner city poverty affected social life in South London:

South London is pocketed. So it's like, it depends on who you are with, who you know, and who you associate with, as in regards to the danger aspects. But you can see piranhas walking the pavement, but you pretty much can avoid them. That's south London for me. You can avoid piranhas if you so wish. There's a - also there's a sense of history in South. I come from Brixton so, there's just a sense - I was there when the Brixton riots was happening - when I say I was there, I was being looked after, being baby sat in someone's house - I remember watching it on TV. And south London - Brixton's tough, if you grew up in Brixton in the last 20 years it's tough, because it's not - it's full on. It's erm. You're gonna get into scrapes eventually.

Ty's perspective of his social world foregrounds the harshness of contemporary life on Brixton's streets and historically connects this to the rebellions of the 1980s. Having grown up in the Myatts Field Estate, he observed a 'toughness' in the 'spirit' of his local area. In order to characterise life in his city he compared having to tell 'some yardie guy' to 'back off' with the hustle of using the London Underground: 'It's like the tube, sometimes you're gonna get pushed and pulled around. ... Brixton's like that all the time. But not - But its like that spiritually.'

In connection with the social dissonance that Ty described, Hall et al. discuss the effects of the racial division of labour and wagelessness on young black men during the 1970s in *Policing the Crisis*. Arguing that this marginalised group cannot be considered part of the lumpenproletariat in the classic Marxist sense,⁸ Hall highlights the necessity of looking at the historical development of this class fraction in the Caribbean, and later in the UK, as part of a reserve army of labour. In this text, Darcus Howe describes how in the

⁸ Stuart Hall, et al. (1978) p. 375

Caribbean this section of the class survives by “eking out” a survival in a wageless world, *not*, usually, by resorting to crime’:⁹

What normally happens in those days would be somehow your whole personality develops skills by which you get portions of the wage. Either by using your physical strength as a gang leader, or your cunning - so that section of the working class is disciplined by that general term and form called “hustling”.¹⁰

Without suggesting any simple political parallels, *Policing the Crisis* uses the way in which this section of the population were incorporated into the metropolitan economy as a vulnerable class fraction, in order to explain the response of young men to the social and economic pressures that acted upon them. What is of importance to the present study is how the continued vulnerability of this section of the working class affects the production of contemporary rap. Howe states that ‘the unemployed I talk about in the Caribbean, that has not got a wage, an official wage of any kind, no wealth, is a vibrant powerful section of society. It has always been that. Culturally, steel band, Calypso, reggae come from that section of the population.’¹¹ Through rap a marginalised group of people pronounce upon their experience and conditions with the cultural resources at their disposal. It is clear from Ty’s remarks above that the working class environment in which he grew up was ‘tough’. His sense of history draws on the rebellious response in Brixton to the metropolitan police’s institutional racism in order to convey the spirit of toughness in the area. Red Hot’s jokes about purchasing cheap food and Afrikan Boy’s comic portrayal of being pushed into shop lifting because of student poverty, ‘EMA

⁹ Ibid p. 373 (emphasis in text)

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid.

didn't pay me', depict the experience of a younger generation in the city and how they deal with the pressures that come to bear upon them. These rappers draw attention to contemporary issues of social marginalisation and economic deprivation through resources that have been cultivated within the black public sphere.

Elijah Anderson's seminal study of Philadelphia and his concept of a 'code of the street' may be usefully compared to contemporary London and the conditions that Ty describes. Anderson places this 'code of the streets' within the socio-economic conditions of Philadelphia's inner-city poor:

The inclination to violence springs from the circumstances of life among the ghetto poor - the lack of jobs that pay a living wage, limited basic public services ..., the stigma of race, the fallout of rampant drug use and drug trafficking, and the resulting alienation and absence of hope for the future. Simply living in such an environment places young people at special risk of falling victim to aggressive behaviour. ... Above all, this environment means that even youngsters whose home lives reflect mainstream values - and most of the homes in the community do - must be able to handle themselves in a street-oriented environment.¹²

Ty's recollection of his local area relates social tensions to limited opportunities and the risks of urban dwelling that resemble the conditions that Anderson describes:

It was tense, you know, everyone was doing what they were doing, you kind of learned not to look at people in the face for too long, but you learned to look at people in their eye long enough to make them realise that you're not scared of them. ... Coming out of my house you put a mask on, and you go about your business. ... There were people that were loafing, there were people that were studying, there were people that were working, there were people that were becoming parents, and then there was crack. ... I've had multiple scenario's where crack - where I'm actually seeing people that I know, that I've grown up with or people that I used to look up to, people that I used to buy records from when I first started sampling, my first love interest, er, some kids I used to look after, I saw on the street the other day and I was like "she's a crack-head and a prostitute, wow! How did that happen?" Do you know what I mean? That's my area.

¹² Elijah Anderson (2000) p. 32

Although Anderson raises the issue of providing a 'structural' context, his own analysis tends to place the 'code' within the immediate cultural context rather than to relate it to structural changes in society. Statements such as, 'The code of the streets and the world it reflects have taken shape in the context of the existing structures and traditions in the black community in the United States',¹³ place the discursive layer of the code within the context of a black tradition. The layers of signification at times eclipse the material position of the people that Anderson observes. Similarly Ty's comments deal with the immediacy of his lived experience and the accumulation of his direct observations over time. However, it is necessary to go further than Anderson's minimal effort to bear in mind the economic shifts 'from manufacturing to a service and high-tech economy in which the well being of workers, particularly those with low skills and little education, is subordinated to the bottom line'.¹⁴ The position of blacks must be placed within the context of structural subordination and their cultural production understood as a response to their socio-economic subordination.

Hall notes that Britain's black settler population 'provides the sector of labour subject to the *highest* rate of exploitation'.¹⁵ In the economic crisis of the 1970s 'as employment deepens, those heading for the bottom end of the labouring pile become the unemployed reserve army of labour'.¹⁶ The vulnerability of blacks within the global labour market led to the conditions of poverty and worklessness witnessed by Ty and experienced in his community.

¹³ Ibid p. 179

¹⁴ Ibid p. 110

¹⁵ Stuart Hall et al. (1978) p. 344

¹⁶ Ibid p. 356

In addition to considering how the shift in the global economy comes to bear upon urban youth, Ty's comments also should be placed within the context of structural racism. Hall observed that in 'relation to black youth, the education system has served effectively to depress the opportunities for employment and education advancement, and has therefore resulted in "reproducing" the young black worker as labour at the lower end of employment, production and skill.'¹⁷ The shortage of school places in Lambeth during the period Ty was growing up, along with the selling off of local schools by the council in order to allow property developers to build luxury apartments in the borough would have formed part of the background to the social tensions he witnessed. The underinvestment in local education facilities along with the structural unemployment of blacks were part of the socio-economic and political context that would have come to bear upon him and others in his area. Following the financial crisis in 2008, Lambeth's Labour run council plan to dispose of educational buildings even as they recognise the lack of sufficient primary school places for children in the borough.¹⁸ The Labour MP, Kate Hoey, condemned the plan as 'short-sighted' and argued that 'Lambeth should not revisit its mistakes of the past by selling off educational buildings only to discover later the need for more school places.'¹⁹

In contrast to the black ghettos that Anderson focused on in Philadelphia, the estates that Ty described and the areas in which Red Hot and

¹⁷ Ibid p. 340

¹⁸ <http://www.lambeth.gov.uk/Services/EducationLearning/SchoolsColleges/RunningOutOfSpaceWillYourChildHaveSchoolPlace2015.htm> [Date Accessed 31/05/2011]

¹⁹ <http://www.southlondonpress.co.uk/news.cfm?id=13561> [Date Accessed 31/05/2011]

Afrikan Boy live are ethnically diverse. The participation of artists such as Scratchy and Devlin in the Grime scene is brought about by the close proximity of working and underclass blacks and whites to one another. Farmer, of the UK Hip-Hop crew Taskforce, recalled his interest in black culture while growing up in the 1980s. He described how he got involved in rapping and the way that the culture relieved the pressures of chronic poverty:

Farmer: The street culture is mixed, always. ... The crew we rolled with was always mixed. ... Highbury is a very mixed, kind of diverse area of cultures - as is London. ... From my own personal point of view I had a hangup about class. ... Being from very low class family, not even working class, *lower* class. I used to rob people who I knew were of a different class to me. I didn't, I didn't socialise with people from a different class. ... I was one of those people who was always a victim, but at the same time always er - what do you call it - an aggressor. Because of what I was and what I did, in secondary school, I was like "I wanna be down". So I had to go through so much shit. It was militant back then. ... The black kids were militant. ... I was a white guy, I was trying to do my rapping, and people didn't like me, a lot of the black guys didn't like me ... So they'd beat me up. They'd rob me, they'd make me do shit ... Prove myself. ... I know we all went through it, I'm sure Skinny went through it 'cause we all come from those kind of areas ...

Me: So, why did you want to hang around with them?

Farmer: The funk man, there was something musically. ... It was probably the culture of music, and the dancing, and the weed, and just the whole - there was something that drew me to it.

Growing up in chronic poverty Farmer observed and participated in robbery and violence with other, white and black, youths. He also recalled alienated white youths stealing buses and diggers to display them, driving around the estate. His characterisation of the people that made up his area conveys a need for recognition expressed in these acts of criminality. Farmer's description suggests that despite the aggressive manner of those he socialised with, certain elements in the black culture offered some relief from the boredom, poverty, and alienation from society he and others experienced: 'I was just attracted to it.

I don't know why. Rather than me be like one of the, attracted to the white kind of - the white kids in my school were fucking nuts.'

Farmer and his friends in the Bury crew and Mud Family used rap to develop supportive relations with other youths and the skills to express themselves. Their participation in this culture also provided them with the resources to begin to deal with their structural economic position. Farmer recalled how he and his brother, Chester P, funded the production and distribution of their album:

We didn't really fund it to be honest. We just adopted [sic] all of our - street knowledge - knowing how to sell and make a profit. Knowing how to buy something, chop it into little bits, sell it for more. All that kind of knowledge that enables you to have half of a business mind. ...We met up with Joe Christie, Braintax, I met him in the old Mr. Bongos, in West End. And I had a chat with him, got on very well, and I propositioned him with an idea, that I wanna put out a series of CDs called music from the corner. We're gonna record them at home, there'll be no recording costs. We'll bring it to you on a CD. ... I said to him how much is it gonna cost for 5000 CDs. He said its gonna cost this much. I said well you front the money, we'll make the money back, we'll give you that much, and we'll give you 50 pence, £1, per CD off the sales. So we'd sell that 5000, he'd make himself £5000 for manufacturing CDs and lending us the money. So it worked for all of us.

London's economic condition has considerably developed in the decades since Farmer first began to rap. Significantly, along with the increasing economic inequality there remain substantial pockets of poverty, worklessness, and alienation, which contributes to the drug use and social malaise that Ty described in contemporary Brixton. Aspects of these conditions are depicted in songs by Red Hot, Afrikan Boy, and in Devlin's social commentary in 'Community Outcast'. Devlin's offering depicts a young father 'signing on and the government says that his family are spongers' while presenting an economic context in which 'he got taken off site because its cheaper to pay Europeans to labour in numbers.' The images of white families and black children

foregrounds the plight of marginalised working class communities. The reference to Europeans in this representation of solidarity between England's working class blacks and whites, identifies the new patterns of labour migration and conveys a sense of the changed value of whiteness in contemporary London.

UK Hip-Hop and Grime: Linguistic Resistance Then and Now

It is important to recall Hall's analysis in *Policing the Crisis* in the consideration of the potential political significance of investing one's self in becoming an MC or DJ in contemporary London. Schools' failures during the 1970s to reflect pupils' cultural backgrounds in their teaching, even where the children attending were predominantly black, has had a substantial bearing upon London's character. Hall observed that black school-children's '*resistance through language* marks out the school as, quite literally, a cultural battleground.'²⁰ When rapping takes place in schools today, teachers' responses can differ considerably. In his description of teachers' attempts to restructure the organisation of MCing in the playground, Klayze contrasts a certainty of feeling and being, in the circle, with the unreliable (and unknowing but nevertheless controlling) view of teachers outside the circle:

Klayze: It was all really friendly, like competitive kind of thing. It was a main attraction kind of thing. ... There would be a big group of them in the playground, just like in a huddle, and I'd be the Year 7 just trying to get in and push through the crowd and see what's going on. And it was always a really lively kind of thing. But it wasn't really, erm, the teachers weren't fond of it cause it seemed like - I don't know what it was that they didn't like about it. I didn't know if it was the fact that it just looked like trouble - and then obviously when certain MCs get the hype, and everyone's kind of shouting and making noise, its kind of - I don't know what it was.

Me: Did they take any active steps to stop it?

Klayze: They kind of said "Oh, you can't do that" or "You can't stand around in groups", but people still found ways to do it.

²⁰ Stuart Hall et al. (1978) p. 341 (emphasis in text)

Teacher's actions had an impact on the feeling that was produced through their activity. Rather than being immersed in what Klayze described as 'the passion of it', participants became concerned with whether teachers would come and break them up. It also had the effect of distancing the culture of the pupils from that of the school. In contrast, Afrikan Boy describes the incorporation of Grime into his school's teaching:

For me the most memorable moment was when I did Music Tech and I made this beat, it was Grime with oriental influenced music, and then I spat lyrics over it. And up to this day the music teacher still plays it as an example ... it's nice to know that I left a mark on my old school.

These teachers' contrary responses to rapping may suggest ways in which social and educational policy could be developed. Hall identifies an inherent cultural bias in the formal education system, in which 'the reproduction of educational disadvantage for blacks is accomplished, in part, through a variety of racially specific mechanisms. The "cultural capital" of this sector is constantly expropriated, often unwittingly, through its practical devaluation.'²¹ Clearly, educational institutions have not yet found effective strategies through which these common cultural practices may be systematically converted into educational capital. However, for the present study it is more important to note that regardless of the response of the institution, the activity of rapping endured within it and outside it. The substantial difference to the participants is that in one school their passion was allowed to leave its mark, in order to further motivate others in their educational and cultural development.

The phenomenon of young white working-class men such as Farmer, and later Scratchy and Devlin, participating in the black cultural tradition is

²¹ Ibid pp. 340

testimony to the longevity of this strategy of linguistic resistance. It is just as significant that in the historical moment in which Hall wrote, he also observed that there ‘are specific mechanisms which serve to reproduce what almost appears to be a “racial division of labour” within, and as a structural feature of, the general division of labour.’²² It is possible that alongside the increased ‘numbers in the “colony” living off hustling [which had] increased steadily with the rising curve of black unemployment’²³ that Hall observes in his analysis, young working-class white men saw something within black culture that enabled them to deal with their own position. In Farmer’s case black culture offered relief from the pressures of chronic poverty and social marginalisation. Hall goes on to state: ‘Another class of person drawn into hustling are those who simply cannot or will not subject themselves to steady, routine kinds of labouring for “the Man”. They prefer to risk their fortunes working the street than take in the white Man’s “shit-work”, or sit it out in his dole queues.’²⁴ Farmer’s comments above reveal how the street culture of the 1980s provided the occasion for alienated young men of various ethnic backgrounds to come into contact with one another, and in his experience class antagonisms took precedence over any difference in ‘race’. Furthermore, black culture provided means through which he, his brother, and their black and Asian friends took their hustling into the sphere of art.

In contemporary London’s Grime scene, it is possible to trace an ethic of self sufficiency and a resistance to accepting a position of alienated

²² Ibid p. 345

²³ Ibid p. 353

²⁴ Ibid.

subordination. However, the aesthetic and economic dynamism of Grime contrasts with the UK Hip-Hop scene, which Farmer now dismisses as ‘niche’, ‘contrived’, ‘small minded’ and ‘regulated’. His characterisation of UK Hip-Hop may be usefully compared to Fanon’s description of national culture under colonisation: ‘There is merely a clinging to a nucleus which is increasingly shrivelled, increasingly inert, and increasingly hollow.’²⁵ This husk of a culture signals the lack of vitality in the generic forms of blackness represented through the commercialised US Hip-Hop culture. In contrast to the Grime scene, UK Hip-Hop’s strong identification with American culture has, consequently, contributed to its own decline. Gilroy’s argument that ‘Market-driven black popular culture is making politics aesthetic usually as a precondition for marketing hollow defiance’²⁶ is related to Farmer’s concern that UK Hip-Hop is now no longer ‘rebellious.’ He observes that ‘the Hip-Hop music that we listen to and that we make and the crowds and the fans that go to the concerts all regulate themselves within what is considered the rules.’ This ossification within generic forms of blackness generated by US Hip-Hop’s conservatism contrasts with Grime’s fluidity and range of exploration.

Hustling: Social Enterprise and black Political Culture

Farmer and Ty’s comments regarding growing up in Highbury and Brixton depict social marginalisation, poverty, and a toughness that characterised the culture of their local communities. In particular, Farmer recalled being subject to beatings by older boys, black and white, in order to be accepted by them: ‘it

²⁵ Frantz Fanon (2004) p. 172

²⁶ Paul Gilroy (1994) p. 76

was like a like a test and I got through it.' There are similarities between the toughness that they experienced and the 'code of the streets' that Andersen discusses. However, in order to deal with the potential political significance of the activities of these cultural entrepreneurs, and those who followed them, it is necessary to draw attention to some of the weaknesses in Anderson's study. By focussing almost exclusively on cultural problems and their relation to violence, Anderson down plays how this street culture manifests the adaptation of this marginalised social group to the economic conditions that they are forced to inhabit. By opposing this code to the 'decent' people who maintain black traditions, he obscures how the actions of young men and women constitute adaptations of this very tradition to their present conditions. Furthermore, he overlooks the collective failure of the 'decent' people to come to terms with the conditions that the whole community face.

Anderson frequently elides acts that impact negatively on other members of the black community when they are committed by those who represent themselves (or that he wants to represent) as decent. The use of the term 'decent' constructs a privileged position through its moral valuation. That moral dimension problematises his attempts to draw attention to wider socio-economic structures in order to provide an explanatory context. His use of the term also compromises his analysis of the social barriers constructed by 'decent' blacks in order to protect their economic interests.²⁷ Anderson fails to make explicit, in his case study of John Turner, the existence of a generational division of labour that relegated young black men to life on the streets and

²⁷ Ibid p. 281

without access to the jobs through which they might gain the social respect given to 'decent' members of the community. Anderson's maintenance of the 'street'/'decent' binary and his oversight of the counter-productive acts of 'decent' people, is connected to his more blatant avoidance of the impact of racism on the communities that he focuses on and his erasure of class differences. The institutionally racist arrangements that consign blacks to the worst jobs (when any are available) placed some older black men in the position in which they were able to police those who had access to even the most menial work. Finally, Anderson seems to identify the middle classes only through a value system that is adopted by 'decent' people, rather than with a socio-economic position that is denied blacks in the impoverished community that he studies. He does not even account for this in his conclusion (in which he does give some consideration to the economic context) but instead calls for more jobs for blacks without dealing with how they are denied them in the first instance.

Hall's analysis of social and economic conditions in which blacks dwell contrasts with Anderson's emphasis on a cultural code. Hall observed that as a result of the way particular structures work together, race becomes the 'principle modality in which black members of that class "live", experience, make sense of and thus *come to a consciousness* of their structured subordination.'²⁸ This allows us to see how the adaptation of street knowledge by Farmer to more legitimate pursuits represents not merely a cultural conflict but political struggle: 'It is through the modality of race that blacks comprehend, handle and then begin to resist the exploitation which is an

²⁸ Stuart Hall et al. (1978) p. 347 [emphasis in text]

objective feature of their class situation.²⁹ Farmer and Devlin's appropriation of black culture complicates the scheme that I am trying to outline here, but I want to make that complication apparent from the outset. Farmer did not simply use rap to express the problems that he faced. He developed his awareness of his position in a multicultural environment and rap was one of the means through which his consciousness of subordination was developed. Hall identified 'hustling' as a response to the structural forces that relegated blacks to a reserve army of labour and assigned them to the most insecure and lowest paid work. What is important to the present study is Hall's analysis of the significance of 'the growing "refusal to work".' This refusal is of 'one of the principal defining structures of the system - its productive relations, which have systematically assigned the black worker to the ranks of the deskilled labourer.'³⁰ I will consider below how UK Hip-Hop and Grime artists put this refusal into practice in contemporary London. However, prior to engaging with this economic strategy it is worthwhile considering the possibilities and limitations of attempts to mobilise rap in order to effect social change at the cultural level.

Fx, like other DJs and Producers such as Slik D and D'Explicit, also engaged with schools and other statutory organisations. In one case he and Rainman worked 'with Waltham Forest council ... going around to various youth clubs, I was giving them like, kids that come to the youth clubs, advice on how to get into the music game.' MCs and DJs' social and cultural capital is used by local authorities to engage with the children that they have a duty of care for.

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid p. 391

Alim Kamara discussed how, through his creative writing classes for Haringey council, he attempted to reshape the consciousness of these children:

We used to do classes, creative writing classes and MC classes, and one of the things we had was a strictly positive lyric [rule]. And the young people we had, sometimes we had 20 young people around one mic, and they would struggle. Because the lyrics that they had written was all about baseball bats and protecting my area and my post code, don't come to my ends and - so the lyrics weren't, weren't appropriate. And we had an event where we encourage these young people to write positive lyrics and we'd then explain to them "well since you've got those positive lyrics now you can actually perform on stage. Because the people you're gonna be performing for - there's gonna be children there, there's gonna be adults there." And if you can look at an artist and say "Right, are these lyrics that you're gonna be able to rap in front of your parents, would you rap these in front of your mum?" And they'd say "No." "So then why would you write something like that?" So they would say that's actually the fashion trend. I would say "I write how I feel". I don't want to say "Write what's real" because for some of the young people those are the lives that they live ... in a violent sense.

Although Alim's methods imposed particular constraints on those he worked with in exchange for offering them a platform, he recognised the problems of using rap as a form of expression where this produced lyrics that were 'not appropriate' to be presented to their wider community. Working over the short term at the level of cultural output could do nothing to change the underlying conditions that produced such lyrics. Nevertheless, within the aims of this project the young people, with some assistance, eventually performed 'positive' lyrics in front of their local community. Through this they also developed their awareness of their artistic potential and creative range.

Alim's work on getting young people to write positive lyrics is developed through his own creative output. He challenges perceptions of what a man can say, and how young people may express themselves. He describes his rap song 'Mama' as an apology and thank you to his mother 'for the pain and - you know - but also for still believing in me regardless of what's happened.' After performing this song at a school he noticed a 14 year old girl crying who, he

found, had been arrested a few days earlier following a fight. The girl told him that she was going to go home and apologise to her mother. But when he saw her again, outside, he noticed a ‘front’ that the girl was still trying to maintain.

Her eyes were still glazing and she was like “I don’t want people to see me like this”. It just makes you realise how much front needs to be put by the young people. So that self image that they have of themselves, or want to show, they feel they can’t really show that, so up comes a barrier. So going into schools and trying to break down that barrier - it’s hard. But its about, I think, building up relationships, and when you’re getting the young people to express themselves, sometimes the things they come out with, it lets you know how much they have bottled inside.

I suggest that the construction of this ‘front’ is an important part of the development of an adult identity as well as a response to the social pressures Alim’s ‘young people’ face. His work attempts to reconstruct the way in which they relate to themselves through their cultural production. He attempts to ‘break down’ the ‘barriers’ that these children construct in response to the conditions in which they live. This is coupled with the idealism of his aim of encouraging these urban youths to write ‘positive’ lyrics even where he recognises the links between ‘negative’ lyrics and lived experience. In spite of his admirable aims, working at this level does not engage with the socio-economic conditions in which these young people find themselves, or ‘what’s real’ to them. Indeed, while he may direct them away from the absurd reification of postcode identities, his work also has a role in distracting marginalised youths from the socio-economic forces that act upon them and the conditions in which they dwell. Nevertheless, the response of these children to his efforts demonstrates that, by working at the level of cultural production, he is able to engage them on their terms and begin to broaden their categories of perception and appreciation.

In spite of Alim's success in producing positive performances by young people in front of their parents and local community, he still faced opposition in his attempt to develop his community politics:

Even for years we were fighting to get a studio. But strangely enough it was the local residents who didn't want it. Simply because they felt that you were gonna have your typical group of young people, in hoods, gathered around, up to no good. And we were trying to say "Well, no. What we want to do is give young people a chance to express themselves, to be creative, in the elements that they love."

This resulted in some people, who he believed could have been engaged earlier, becoming uninterested in working with him. Instead they were now 'hanging out on the streets' while 'pursuing careers of becoming artists, some of them, but not the most positive of artists.' Alim's objectives, like Anderson's, are focused at the cultural level, rather than the underlying conditions. However, he identifies the effect of the community's actions in marginalising young people's cultural production to the streets. An important gain for him in what he referred to as this 'struggle' was obtaining funding for recording equipment for the community centre that he runs. Although those resources fell far short of a studio, he was able to teach young people how to use the equipment. They also gained the opportunity to record some of their creative output without paying upwards of £15 per hour at a commercial studio.

It is important to acknowledge Alim's contribution in supporting young people to develop their creative output and teaching them how to use advanced technologies. Through this social and cultural engagement they acquired skills that may be of use in London's high-tech economy. This work is consistent with his role as a 'conscious rapper.' His efforts to organise and represent his community is connected to his insistence that 'I don't want to write music just

for it to sell'. They are directed to social and cultural, rather than economic, aspirations. Nevertheless, a focus on 'positive' lyrics cannot tackle the underlying conditions that give rise to 'inappropriate' lyrics. I maintain that Alim's aversion to Grime, coupled with his focus on Hip-Hop and being 'positive', cannot engage with the problematics posed by Grime and confronted in the social world from which it springs. His admirable efforts to broaden the categories of perception and range of content that young people employ, does not engage the economic challenges that Fx and JJ's modes of cultural production set out to deal with. Tackling the underlying causes of 'negative' lyrics and changing the way marginalised people express themselves, requires long term engagement with the 'negative' social and economic forces that come to bear upon these aspiring artists.

Shrinking Identities and the Search for Authenticity

For JJ a 'Grimey lifestyle' is 'typical East London, even London life depending where abouts in London you're from. Fast paced kind of lifestyle, cheap kind of lifestyle ... its a hustle, its not easy. A majority of people who do this music have to put in a lot before they get anything out.' He goes on to say that 'its a 140bpm kind of lifestyle which is the tempo of the music.' The intensity of experience to which JJ refers suggests the presence of a refusal, that Gilroy states is 'often described as nihilism.'³¹ In the critical engagement that I undertake below, I aim to connect these cultural products with the social and economic conditions of their production. In doing so I will pursue an interpretative agenda that is sensitive to the complexities and ambivalences of these cultural works. The

³¹ Ibid p. 60

opposition from residents that Alim confronted when attempting to obtain equipment to provide a studio for young people reveals how difficult articulating the issues that they face can be in his position. Nevertheless I argue that engagement with young people's cultural production needs to go deeper than producing 'positive' lyrics. It needs to engage with 'what's real' to them, the predispositions that make up their habitus, and how they may develop their cultural production in a manner that works through the problematic conditions that they face.

As I listened to the Grimey Breakfast show on the pirate radio station Rinse FM one morning, Scratcha asked his listeners 'do you think the Queen wipes her own bum?' His decision to broadcast this vulgar question followed the release on YouTube of 'Jerusalem' by MC Nobody (known more widely as Sway). The video shows the MC, whose face is concealed by a black balaclava, kidnap the monarch from a school assembly in which a black boy sings William Blake's hymn, 'Jerusalem'. Scenes of the Queen being taken through supermarkets, council estates, pubs, streets and in various domestic settings, including on the toilet, are accompanied by MC Nobody's social commentary on the state of the nation. He tells his audience 'I can take you where the Queen ain't never been, and Gordon B ain't never seen.' The Queen's position is lowered by placing her in everyday situations and the incongruous image gives force to the rapper's criticisms. The video places into question the relation between the nation's elite and people's everyday lives. His criticism of the news media's coverage of inner city social malaise challenges the role that adults have to play in producing a better society: 'Kids have kids, kids kill kids, they're just

kids, use your head. If you wanna start saving them, and you wanna see a change in them, then you need to stop blaming them and start raising them.' Through the grotesque aesthetic that lowers the Queen, placing her on a toilet instead of a throne, Nobody draws attention to the condition of England. His rap attempts to challenge racism and xenophobia while rehabilitating ideas of political accountability and leadership, social and economic responsibility, and communal life.

Sway's use of this vernacular art form in his critique of the state of the nation should be distinguished from other vernacular developments. One of the significant trends within the Grime scene is an emphasis placed on a far more restricted political identity: the postcode. The opening of the Southside Allstars' track, 'Southside Riddim', features a succession of MCs stating their names and the area that they are representing, along with the corresponding postcode. Given the decline in letter writing in British culture and the rise in the use of electronic communication, the take up of this protocol of identification is somewhat difficult to understand. It is perhaps too easy to identify American Hip-Hop songs such as Ludacris's 'Area Codes' as contributing to this development. That would overlook Grime's distinctive characteristics. It would also obscure the possibility that the use of 'road' as an alternative vernacular expression to 'street' did more than distinguish the local Grime scene from globalised Hip-Hop. The presence of postcodes on road signs may have been one way in which groups of marginalised youths sought to define themselves against others. It also highlights Grime's relation to a social world in which value is placed on the connection between locality and identity. This trend is

reinforced in a city that discourages children from use of the underground tube network and in which young people find themselves ghettoised in small areas of poverty. The Southside Allstars' track, possibly, responds to the identification of the Grime scene with East London. The presence of Asher D, formerly of the Solid Crew, in the video allows those dwelling in south London (and represented through the video) some claim to having 'started the flow', or cultural tributary, to the Grime aesthetic employed in the soundtrack.

The connection of Grime to local schools, youth centres, and resulting friendships did not ensure the development towards postcode particularism. However, the limited opportunities available to young people to participate in the life of the city as a whole may have increased its likelihood. Although free bus passes make travel in the city more accessible, the high prices demanded by many attractions and the denial of access to areas in which adults associate limit the value this particular privilege. Ty's comments about his area are relevant to this issue, as is Hall's analysis of the 'colony' area in Britain. I suggest that the economic and social barriers that face marginalised youths has contributed to the limited movement of these young people in the city and, consequently, the narrowing of the social and geographical space with which they identify. Grime expresses the fast paced hustling lifestyle of those who dwell within London's colony areas. However, this lifestyle is itself a response to the narrow economic opportunities faced by young working class people and the contracted forms of sociality that racism produces. The historical causes of this shrinking of political identity are complex and the issue goes beyond the scope of this study. However, its development signals the limited value of any argument about the

state of the nation in relation to contemporary rap music cultures. The participation of blacks and whites in this video emphasises that these contracted identities prioritise locality over nation or race.

One of Alim's criticisms of Grime associates the genre with violent crime and the 'effect of music on young people.' He did not identify Grime in its totality with violence, but pointed out a number of Grime artists whose music dealt with violence. Directing children to 'positive' lyrics or prohibiting them from writing 'negative' lyrics in the space that he provides is the strategy that he employs to deal with 'violence' in lyrical content, rather than the underlying issues. This does not directly equate to censorship. However, it can be compared with the actions of the metropolitan police, in discouraging particular types of music in London, that does amount to informal state censorship. In an interview with NME, and then posted on DJ Semtex's blog, Giggs discussed the effect of having been convicted for possession of a firearm on his attempt to use a career in music to begin anew:

"... when labels were looking to sign me," Giggs tells us, "and before XL signed me, everyone wanted to have a go. Trident rang up every single one of them telling them about my past, and how they shouldn't have anything to do with me. They shut down my shows. Every single thing I do that's supposed to be positive they fuck up for me. It's as if they don't want me to make legal money. It's as if they want me to end up back on streets or something! Why wouldn't you want someone to do something positive? I've learnt my lesson and done my time in Jail." Giggs frustrations were capped when the intervention of Trident last year meant a Lil Wayne support slot had to be aborted.³²

This intervention by the police raises important issues about how people are reintegrated into society after they are punished. It also indicates the suppression of marginalised people's freedom to represent their experiences.

³² <http://www.djsemtex.com/blog/2010/01/08/giggs-nme-interview/> [Date Accessed 23/6/2010]

These issues need to be looked at critically, along with how the regime of risk assessments limits who may perform at events in the capital. The development of that extra-legal measure after Grime's emergence, and its refinement during the financial crisis, has significantly impacted upon black artists. A disproportionate number of events were cancelled in the boroughs of Newham and Lambeth following assessment by the police. Giggs' rap lyrics depict a mode of life, in Peckham, in which possession of a weapon is not uncommon. However, the suppression of music that deals with these issues does not address the underlying causes of social violence, possession of weapons, or other issues faced by those who dwell in areas of deprivation. Instead it suppresses engagement with the social and economic issues that confront marginalised groups.

Following widespread outcry about the murder of teenagers in London, a number of artists, including Sway and Sincere released songs that dealt with the issue of knife violence in London. Importantly the emphasis of these songs was on violence in life rather than on representations of violence in music. Those critiques of social violence also challenged racism, unjust policing and government indifference to the plight of the people. Giggs, Sincere, and Sway's representations form part of an ongoing process in which this sector of the working class recognises and reconstructs its position within the wider social whole. It is clear from Giggs' interview that his attempt at developing a music career was directed towards making money legitimately. Given the limited economic opportunities for marginalised blacks during periods of high unemployment, the police's repression of black popular culture raises urgent

questions about how marginalised groups are enabled to support themselves economically and how free they are to represent or contest their marginality.

The work of people such as Fx, D'Explicit, and Alim must be supported, but not uncritically. Their efforts help young people develop the cultural resources they use to deal with the conditions in which they live. However, despite Alim's acknowledgement of the socio-economic problems underlying some of the content of young artists' rap lyrics, his work is principally focused on the cultural level. Given the opposition that he faced in his attempt to build a studio, obtaining the additional resources needed to tackle the economic and social issues to which his cultural work is related requires informed critical analysis of the role of rap music in urban life. The difficulty of winning local support for community projects is exacerbated by a substantial gap between the common cultural level that Alim is engaged in and the world of the policy makers who create the administrative and funding arrangements within which he must work.

It is worth briefly considering the relation of these policy makers to marginalised young people. Alim described an event in which he and other artists performed for the Office of Deputy Prime Minister, after receiving an award for work funded through the Single Regeneration Budget scheme.

Here you had a group of black children in front of suits and it was like spot the black, seriously. They loved it, you know. So we were coming with a Hip-Hop element. Now a lot of these people, you could tell were used to seeing just the negative - fingers being pointed towards black children. By the way they approached us afterwards, it was with this shocking, you know, expression and surprise - that we were positive in our elements, so well mannered.

He was pleased with the response of the 'suits' but noticed their lack of ease when talking with him and his associates:

It was beautiful to have them come up to us, congratulate us. And actually observing them almost building up a sort of means of how to approach us. They didn't know how to actually, you know, if they could just come over and talk to us. ... I've even been in a situation where it's like "it's very rare to see, you know, coloured people..." and it was just like "pardon?" and I started laughing and she was, she felt a bit uncomfortable, because she could see she used a term that wasn't common. And I just comforted her and said "you know don't worry, its cool." So it definitely can educate people if they're willing to listen.

The social and cultural distance that Alim observed between himself and those present at the performance for John Prescott's Office indicates the substantial disconnect between policy makers and the young people that Alim works with. This highlights that effective engagement is unlikely to take place through the policies of this disconnected political class. Far closer attention needs to be paid to the efforts of committed cultural practitioners and community activists in dealing with the social and economic conditions expressed through black culture. This needs to be followed by effective engagement from policy makers with young people's needs.

Changing Ideals within the black Public Sphere

In contrast to Devlin's critique of government neglect and Afrikan Boy's description of shoplifting in response to his experience of poverty, the video for Wiley's 2004 single 'What Do You Call It?' depicts an alternative mode of economic subsistence that avoids the stigma associated with claiming benefits. In order to deal with their marginal social and economic position, Wiley and the motley Roll Deep crew turn to making music. The video shows him bringing a box into a record shop before shifting to a scene in which he raps into a microphone in a studio. This is followed by a series of scenes in a record press. Significantly, after Wiley is shown shaking hands with the manager who gives him a box of records that have, presumably, been paid for, the video shows one

of the members of the crew steal another box as they walk out of the press. The scene foregrounds the crew's opportunistic activities and their position in the margin of the legitimate economy. Wiley's rap emphasises the distinction of what he does from other musical genres and social scenes, specifically Garage:

.../Here in London there's a sound called Garage/ But my sound it sure ain't Garage/ I heard they don't like me in Garage/ 'cause I use their scene to make my own sound/ The Eskimo sound is mine, recognise its mine/ You can't claim what's mine, it's my time/ To bait you up I don't hate you but some of you have got a problem/ I'm puttin' you out of business, why is that a problem?/...³³

Closing with scenes of him celebrating in a club after a performance, the video represents Wiley as a successful cultural entrepreneur. The rap song and its accompanying video foreground the specificity of Wiley's social world and his cultural and economic production. Far from representing rapping in a idealist or Romantic sense, it is portrayed in the context of a number of businesses and as an economic activity in itself. The hustling that is represented by the theft of the records, draws the legitimate economic production of music closer to the illegitimate economic activity of 'street culture'. That culture is also represented through scenes of motorbikes racing down a public road. The video thematises the distinctions produced through the position that Wiley takes in his cultural production: his relation to other music scenes, a social world in which being quick witted and opportunistic is valued, and the economic value of his rapping.

This representation of the Grime scene's development may be compared with Wiley's 'Cash In My Pocket', released in 2008. The video opens with a scene of two men, in business suits, driving through the Bishopsgate area of London. Set mainly in an office, the song describes how Wiley has found that

³³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e1YKFV45M18> [Date Accessed: 14/6/2010]

‘music is paying me well’ and his determination to secure his income: ‘when I get one I’m gonna put away half.’ The wealth that he boasts he is able to maintain into the ‘next year, next year, next year, next year and the year after’ contrasts with the fortunes of the financial sector. The video closes with an image of a falling stock market ticker and a red chart. The release of this track during the global financial crisis is significant. It may be usefully connected to Fanon’s identification that the emergence of tensions in colonial systems are registered within colonised cultures. ‘Once a pale imitation of the colonizer’s literature, indigenous production now shows greater diversity and a will to particularize.’³⁴ Not only does Wiley show the tensions within the wider economy, he represents his hustle as affording him protection from those forces. The emphasis on cash in his pocket (and therefore not in the bank) highlights the distance between these spheres within the field of power. This signals a movement beyond the cathartic expressions of frustration and anger, or tragic images of urban dwelling constructed by Dizzee Rascal or Devlin. Wiley’s celebration of hustling foregrounds its political character through its juxtaposition with the financial collapse that struck the City of London.

The changed aesthetic of Wiley’s later track can be seen as part of Grime artists’ exploration of the possibilities available to them in the cultural field. The rising popularity of Funky House and other genres indicates a reconfiguration of London’s black public sphere. This refashioning does not, necessarily, indicate the diminished significance of postcodes in young people’s political identities. However, tracks such as ‘The Swine Flu Skank’ or Lethal Bizzle’s ‘Keys to the

³⁴ Frantz Fanon (2004) pp. 172-3

Bentley' do not employ Grime's 'dark' aesthetic. This suggests a changed approach to the issues confronted in black popular culture. Nevertheless, to assume the hyperbolic materialism of songs such as 'Keys to the Bentley' to be positive, as opposed to Grime's apparent 'negativity', would be mistaken. Such songs build upon the same cultural tradition even though they may attempt to fashion a different set of responses to urban life. The thematisation of status conferring possessions such as Bentley cars and Rolex watches produces new criteria of judgement. However, the ability of such representations to satisfy their audiences' needs remains questionable. In an interview with Fx, Skepta recalled:

I didn't even have a Rolex before I made "Rolex Sweep" ... But after this hype I'm gonna sell the Rolex you get what I'm saying 'cause I'm not a Rolex person. But obviously when I was doing the tune everyone was like "Eh, you got a tune called Rolex Sweep and you ain't got a Rolex" and I went out and bought a wicked man one. ... but I don't floss man, I don't floss.³⁵

His statement identifies an expectation that he ought to act in life in the manner that he represents himself through rap. This in turn demonstrates how the offering of such representations to his public is part of an ongoing negotiation between the artist and his audience.

Skepta's ambivalent relation to his status purchase suggests that the aspirational values that this luxury item conveys are not only unattainable to his interpretative community but also unsustainable by himself. Nevertheless, Lethal Bizzle's 'Keys to the Bentley', in which the MC invokes an image of the attraction of female desire through the possession of a set of car keys, follows and positions itself in relation to this aspect of Skepta's earlier offering. It is

³⁵ <http://urbanworld.co.uk/podcasts/> [Release Date: 1/7/2010]

significant that the car itself is not the subject of Bizzle's track but, rather the *keys* to what this status item represents. Alongside Tinie Tempah's proud declaration, in 'Pass Out' that he can now 'drive past the bus he used to run for', Bizzle's references to this luxury English brand conjures ideas of achievement, freedom and belonging. In both tracks cars are valued for their ability to attract women and as fantasies of celebrity. These representations of the consumption of luxury objects respond to the 'American automotive utopianism'³⁶ that has been 'exported to black communities in other areas of the world, along with the generic versions of political culture that followed the demise of Black Power.'³⁷ Possession of a Bentley, or the social position it connotes, may be even more out of reach to Lethal B's audience than the Rolex that Skepta intended to sell after the hype surrounding his track died down. But the idea conveyed by the poetry of a moving icon of English luxury and wealth reflects a turn from gritty representations of urban life towards consumer culture in order to explore questions about self worth and social belonging.

The exaggerated 'celebration' through reference to luxury goods is not merely a response to and movement away from the 'dark' sounds of Grime. These lyrics also attempt to reshape and reposition the figure of the MC. Distancing themselves from gritty representations of hustling and urban life, these artists use tracks such as 'Keys to the Bentley' and 'Rolex Sweep' to confer upon themselves some of the qualities that those products carry. In the Choong Family's interview on the Urban World podcast, two years prior to Skepta's

³⁶ Paul Gilroy (2010) p. 16

³⁷ Ibid p. 17

interview with Fx, the group discussed the impact of ‘downloading’ on the scene.

Nutz argued:

I ain’t saying I ain’t downloaded before, yeah. But the problem is, yeah, if you download, the mans next door’s music and you know that he’s struggling he’s not gonna be able to move, you understand. So if you invest and go and buy that, even if you don’t like man that much, but you like him enough. We helping you out basically. ’Cause its opening up the flood doors. ...If you wanna make money go invest in someone else that you like, you understand.³⁸

Afix makes clear that what they are concerned with is ‘helping our economy grow’ and producing a ‘movement’. The advocation of this strategy suggests the attempt to build something akin to a pyramid scheme. Somewhat undercutting his position, Nutz admitted that he previously downloaded music without paying for it. His admission betrayed the limited potential for artists to make substantial amounts of money in a cultural scene where music is freely distributed. His argument that buying music is an investment identifies the structural limitations to economic development. It also attempts to restructure the relation between artists and their listeners. In this new arrangement the free distribution of music within the black public sphere would give way in order for producers to better benefit economically from the newly fashioned black investor/consumers. The ‘Rolex Sweep’ represents the advancement of an alternative strategy to Nutz’s appeal. By purchasing the track consumers are able to construct a relation to the luxury goods bearing MC.

The reference to a luxury product in ‘Rolex Sweep’ was not the only aspect of the song’s popularity. The accompanying dance allowed a relation to the art work that earlier Grime offerings did not facilitate. Through the movement of the body, as well as the purchase of the track, dancers were able to

³⁸ <http://urbanworld.co.uk/podcasts/> [Release Date: 1/7/2010]

explore the aspirational identifications conjured by the MC. The ‘Swine Flu Skank’ contrasts with Lethal Bizzle’s offering, and indicates a distinct line of exploration that builds on the ‘Rolex Sweep’s dance orientation. It does not pursue the commodity driven utopianism that the earlier track solicited. Instead it explores an alternative trajectory through the cultural field. In contrast to the pyramid-like scheme advocated by the Choong Family, more egalitarian possibilities may be cultivated through the appropriation of the Department of Health’s ‘catch it, bin it, kill it’ slogan. The Swine Flu and Migraine skanks use issues of public or private health and well being to connect dancing bodies to practices of social being. The circulation of ideas concerning the health of the nation within the black public sphere may allow the cultivation of alternative forms of vernacular identity.

I am not suggesting that public health as collective wealth will become a dominant theme within London’s black cultural production. However, I wish to draw out the various strategies through which artists explore the concerns of their interpretative communities and through which identification is solicited and produced. I discussed in the previous chapter Afrikan Boy’s appropriation and reconfiguration of material from the Migraine skank in the exploration of slave memory. It is also worth considering that his announcement, ‘I don’t have a hummer, but I get many whips from my old slave master’, suggests a more cautious approach to the construction of identity through status commodities. It also constructs a distinctive relation between the MC and his audience. Although Ty recognised that he did not have the same standing as a doctor or lawyer in the wider society, rappers’ shamanic performances play an important

role in the organisation of a collective consciousness of social malaise and solicit responses to these complex issues. It is also necessary to consider how MCs' status in the wider society is, in part, constituted through a negotiation between themselves and their audiences.

Refusing Structural Subordination: Cultural Entrepreneurism and the Pursuit of Economic Autonomy

In Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', he directs his attention to 'the developmental tendencies of art under present conditions of production.'³⁹ Film was of special interest to him because of the possibility that it had transformed the entire nature of art. Amongst other things, Benjamin noted that the medium 'enforces distribution because the production of a film is so expensive that an individual who for instance, might afford to buy a painting no longer can afford to buy a film.'⁴⁰ The relation of the art work to the socio-economic conditions of its production were very much the focus of this essay. With the effect of growing global economic inequalities on social relations in post-colonial London, rappers' efforts can be seen to be directed to reinventing artistic production with an aura that is dependant upon the transformation of their relation to the public. This process entails a transformation of themselves as economic agents. Benjamin notes that by reducing the actor to a prop, stripped of his aura, 'Nothing more strikingly shows that art has left the realm of the "beautiful semblance" which, so far, had been taken to be the only sphere where art could thrive.'⁴¹ I argue that by taking

³⁹ Walter Benjamin (2007) p. 218

⁴⁰ Ibid p. 244, note 7

⁴¹ Ibid p.230

responsibility for their cultural production MCs and DJs attempt to reinvest in their work an aura that is diminished by the relations inscribed in the capitalist mode of production. In so doing these artists resist the erosion of people's freedom to take responsibility for and control of their own lives in postcolonial London.

In considering his future JJ informed me that he intended to establish a rave. His plans were ambitious and, even though he was aware that he could get reduced rates from his friends, he expected that he would need to invest about £3000 to promote the sort of event he was interested in. In preparation for this he intended to go to a variety of existing nightclub events to see how they were organised and would discuss how he might run his own night with club owners and other promoters. Importantly, he told me 'I'm looking to get involved with someone else first before I step into my own thing', in order to develop awareness of the intricacies of club promotion. Although he saw this step as unnecessary to his ultimate goal of DJing on 'mainstream legal radio, pushing a sound that I like', he stated that 'for what I want to build as a brand it is very relevant.' He linked the decision to build a brand through night club events to a sense of self worth: 'the money is a factor but only because I don't think its right if someone's capable of something and if they're gonna share that with other people and put a lot of work in - like: pay a man what he's worth innit.' JJ identified that he had developed his self-worth through his expertise as a DJ and radio show host. His decision to build a brand was a shift towards developing economic autonomy as a cultural entrepreneur.

The plan to promote his own events held the prospect that JJ would be free to decide the clubs in which they would be held, the other DJs that would play on the night and how the events would be promoted. It also contained the promise of financial responsibility. ‘If that’s all in my own hands the only person I can complain to is myself.’ The ethic of self-reliance that underlies this reasoning functions as part of a self-fashioning through which he could build upon his cultural inheritance. Having ended his formal education at 16 his work as a DJ provided the means of avoiding ‘shit work’ in a wider society that he experiences as racist each time he is stopped by the police. Building a brand through which he is identified is also a method through which he could increase the possibility of acquiring economic wealth. This strategy aimed to convert more of the cultural capital that he possesses as a DJ into economic capital. Importantly it incorporates an ethics of self-worth with the objective of escaping the alienation of the dominant economic relations.

Reain and Rhyme Asylum also made a case for artists being appropriately financially rewarded. Possessed explicitly rejected some Hip-Hop fans’ Romantic conception of their work: ‘I don’t want bling bling and all that, I want what I deserve. And if they like it ... they should give me some money. Because it’s work, it’s still work. Like people think “Ah man, you should do it just for the love man.”’ Their rejection of this idealist notion was coupled with resistance to the idea that rapping is all about money, ‘if artists are shit, fuck them, they shouldn’t get any money ... if they are just out for the money, then I agree. Fuck them, they shouldn’t get any money.’ Reain opposed simplistic views of what it is to be a rapper: ‘people are so ignorant to that, they think instantly like Hip-

Hop or rapping “bling bling”, “where’s your chains?” and all that shit, and I’m like “It doesn’t work like that, it’s not that simple”. The group placed an emphasis upon doing a good job and working over the long term and rejected any notion of gaining instant success. In order to justify the value of their work, and their entitlement to expect people to pay for it, if they liked it, Possessed highlighted the work that had been put into their cultural production: ‘all they’re seeing is the track. They don’t know that I’ve done some shit job for a year just to pay for studio time and beats or whatever. Or the time I’ve sat down to get the verse ready. And lets say I wrote a verse in an hour, what about the nine years its taken me just to get to that level that people actually enjoy it and it’s worth listening to.’ He also emphasised an emotional investment in the work that highlights an ethical relation to his rapping and through this to his public: ‘It’s so much going into it and it’s your heart and your soul, its more than money.’ His discussion combines an ethics of play and love with a cultural entrepreneurship that places an economic value on the time and care they have invested. These are opposed to the dispiriting relations he and his associates are subject to in the mainstream economy.

Although Possessed and Reain’s comments focus on the value of a product in contrast to JJ’s emphasis on building a brand, they all emphasise the investments that they have made and the importance of being paid what one is worth. JJ’s experience contrasts with Possessed in that all of his work is related to music. He also teaches music, works in a record shop, and at 18 was able to pay rent and bills at the parental home. Reain and the members of Rhyme Asylum had jobs unrelated to music, through which they funded the production

of albums, attendance at shows abroad and developed the group. JJ's brand building plans draw attention to his relationship with his work: 'It does take time to build a brand, because as a DJ you are a brand.' After describing a brand as something that is built over time, he identifies himself with this construction through his work as a DJ. His reasons for wanting to become a promoter in addition to being a DJ do not only hold the prospect of greater control over his work together with the goal of receiving just financial remuneration. By identifying himself with a brand he adopts modes of commercial practice in order to enhance his self and its worth. Possessed explicitly justified the commercial value of Rhyme Asylum's products through emphasis on the time, labour, and emotional commitment involved in their cultural production. For these artists the investment of money earned from 'shitty' jobs into a product, does not merely compensate them for the socio-economic position that they occupy. It holds out the possibility of a substantially different relation with their work. By drawing upon their years of practice, or the money that has been spent on equipment, studio time, the experience of DJing to thousands of people, and other achievements, JJ, Reain and Rhyme Asylum reinvest into their MCing and DJing an aura of human labour. Moving beyond representing their cultural production as a labour of love, the rapper's commercial products and JJ's representation of the DJ as a brand function as a means through which this labour attempts to receive just financial remuneration.

In contrast to JJ, who did not attend University, Fx recalled 'juggling' higher education with DJing on pirate radio. He, along with later artists like Chipmunk, negotiated a balancing act between the formal education system and

the informal structures of the ‘colony’, in which pirate radio stations are important cultural institutions. Fx’s strategy of negotiation between these worlds has developed into a career in IT that still allowed him to ‘do music every single day.’ Contrasting this arrangement with his earlier period of negotiation, he recalled: ‘the only thing I done with music back then was play out, buy records and do the radio show. Now there’s so much more involved man, so much more. Like preparation for a radio show, interviews in the week, podcasts, mix-tapes, other activities we do, you know what I mean, like working with artists in the studio.’ The development of his range of involvement in the music scene is a source of pride for him, but also affords him resilience to changes in the market. During a period in which the performance of Grime music in London’s night clubs had been suppressed, Fx was still able to earn as much money through music as through his work in IT: ‘I consciously took a decision to step away from the club circuit. A lot of DJs are defined and financed solely from playing out. I stepped away from that and I’m cool. A lot of DJs ask me, “Wow, you’re doing your thing and I like what you’re doing but how do you make money?” I’m like: “I’m making money man.”’ He sees music as his primary mode of employment, and the ability for his cultural production to fund itself and pay bills is a substantial source of pride.

The SK Vibemakers brand is an important part of how Fx identified and financed himself. When his partner, Rainman, decided to focus on his ‘day job’, this provided Fx with the challenge of continuing his work as a DJ and host, along with maintaining the SK Vibemakers brand: ‘I’m all about challenges, I’ve never backed down from a challenge.’ In particular Fx considered that having

two DJs gave humour to the SK Vibemakers' broadcasts, 'its good to have that in your show, but I think in the long term my show is not about that anyway. I mean its not about jokes, its not about comedy. And I think sometimes me and Rainman we'd have a little joke with each other, we'd bounce off each other.' The change signals a shift in the organisation and tone of the show, but also provides the opportunity for Fx to distinguish himself:

My show man, its about a person like myself that knows a lot about music and brings that music to the masses, with a lot of information. I keep it quite informative, and I know my music man. A lot of people say they know their music but I do know the music that I'm playing. ... I think what I'm doing is quite a bit different, and I think a lot of people, will sort of, if they're not doing it now they'll probably be doing it in the future, serious kind of Hip-Hop DJs. Because I play Hip-Hop *and* Grime. Even though I see Grime as the little brother of Hip-Hop. I play it - Hip-Hop and Grime man - not many DJs do.

By positioning the SK Vibemakers brand as innovative and informative, Fx also fashioned himself as a self-sufficient cultural entrepreneur able to offer serious, well informed, commentary on rap music. He considered this work to be more important than his part time employment in the IT industry. This indicates how this mode of work provided him with something more satisfying than labouring for a salary, regardless of how well qualified his degree made him for that career. His negotiation of these different modes of economic activity enabled him to support his family, and provided the option of falling back on his formal qualifications: 'if this music thing doesn't earn me enough money in the next couple of years you best just believe that I'm gonna work in an office maybe and just get mash - some nice money.' Fx's continued perseverance in the music industry suggests that the alternative possibility of leaving his office work is more attractive to him. I argue that rather than accepting the sort of job that his status as a graduate opens to him, he maintains the SK Vibemaker brand and

his entrepreneurial activities in order to maintain the possibility of living a life that brings his social, cultural and economic interests together: 'I live this man'.

Artists' investment in their cultural production is part of a process through which they develop a degree of autonomy from the dominant, capitalist, productive relations. This can be seen most acutely in Fx's case where he has access to well paid, skilled work in the mainstream economy. JJ in some ways represents the opposite pole of this trend and is more completely immersed in this counter culture. It is significant that his immersion does not require him to become violent (as Anderson's formulation of a 'code of the streets' would have it) because the development of the colony society⁴² enables him to earn a stable income, contribute to household bills, and work in a manner consistent with his own interests. His role in the reproduction of colony culture provides some insulation from the socio-economic structures of the mainstream, comparable to that represented in Wiley's 'Cash in my Pocket'.

In a movement that opposes the tendency that Benjamin identified, in which the actor 'offers not only his labour but also his whole self, his heart and soul'⁴³ to a market beyond his reach, MCs and DJs transform themselves into brands and personae that are able to reach out to the market, influence it, and receive economic remuneration directly from it. This strategy draws upon the social, cultural, and technological resources of the black public sphere in a refusal of the dominant economic relations. By investing their own money, whether from 'shit' jobs or their cultural production, these artists attempt to

⁴² Stuart Hall et al. (1978) p. 351

⁴³ Walter Benjamin (2007) p. 230

rehabilitate the aura of their collective labour. In doing so they adopt some practices from the dominant productive mode, sometimes thinking about themselves in terms that would be applied to commercial organisations. This enables them to direct their labour towards producing art that they love and to gain a return that they see as justifiable in the light of that labour.

Conclusion

Under particular historical conditions, certain social, economic, political and aesthetic factors may come together. The moment in which 'Grime' became an appreciative term and was, subsequently, attached to an emerging musical genre was one such conjuncture. From the embattled position that this subaltern sphere occupies in postcolonial London, it continues to offer resources through which young people come to a consciousness of their relation to the wider society. JJ's comments identify a relation between Grime's formal qualities and a 'fast', 'cheap' mode of life. Attempts by he, Fx, Wiley and others to develop autonomy from the exploitative structures of capitalist production may be related to the Grime's fast tempo, its percussive rhythms and the MC's rapid lyrical delivery. The hustling represented and practiced in this scene is part of a struggle in which this marginalised, multiracial group negotiates its subordinate position in London's social and economic structure.

Anderson's 'code of the street' can be related to Alim's observation that some of the 'inappropriate' lyrics produced by young people represent the conditions in which they live. However, it is important to note that the urban violence represented in some rap lyrics is neither peculiar to Grime or a recent development in London. In a city marred by an immense social and economic

chasm, experiences of poverty and the lack of decent public services may be more significant causal factors of the violent protection of access to scarce resources and social capital. When considering ‘inappropriate’ or ‘negative’ lyrics it is important to bear in mind that this cultural form is rooted in the lives of London’s young people and that the forces that come to bear upon their everyday lives also affect their modes of expression. Depictions of hustling and local particularism represent strategies adopted by urban youths in response to the conditions in which they dwell. The production of these cultural representations for sale is a politically significant means of escaping poverty and reliance on the state.

Despite the potential pitfalls of some of the strategies employed by London’s marginalised youths, they need to be placed in the context of growing social and economic inequalities. Rhyme Asylum, Reain, Fx and JJ’s activities represent developments of the street culture strategy of adopting a ‘business mind’ to which Farmer refers. Even Alim’s opposition to writing lyrics principally for sale, which is linked to his position as a ‘conscious’ rapper, is made possible by the alternate means of making money available to him, through local government. These artists’ collective efforts reconfigure the position of the MC and DJ in contemporary London. They are also part of a struggle over the economic character of the black public sphere. The construction of identity through aspirations of possessing status objects differs from the investment of the aura of human labour in one’s work. Although both strategies highlight the incorporation of mainstream values and practices into contemporary black culture, they construct distinct relations between the artist

and audience through that work. Nevertheless, the responses of listeners and dancers to artists' representations of themselves demonstrate how what it means to be an MC or DJ is negotiated with listeners and dancers. It is through the interaction between the MC, DJ and their audience that relations within the black public sphere are reworked and the shape and meaning of life in London is produced.

Conclusion: Post Grime London

By concluding this thesis with a discussion of post Grime London I want to emphasise a concern with the specificity of vernacular cultures. Globalised US Hip-Hop's generic representations continue to be played on music television channels throughout the capital and there is certainly a sense in which London is also post Hip-Hop. The ossified remnants of the UK Hip-Hop scene and the frustrations of the artists within it make that evident. But London also has a burgeoning vernacular culture. Grime's expansion in a variety of directions, including into Funky and Tribal House, or its working out of forms of socio-economic organisation that resist the modes of exploitation found in the mainstream economy are part of that flourishing cultural scene. The working through of local issues has contributed useful resources to the position of young blacks and their relation to metropolitan authorities. These have been employed in protests against the oppressive policing of black culture, the development of new communicative networks, and the expansion of entrepreneurial strategies. Not all such developments are politically progressive. Against critical statements about and representations of national and metropolitan authorities in this culture, it is necessary to note that social alienation and the use of postcode identities continues to form part of the problematics of post Grime London.

To dwell in post Grime London does not therefore mean that the issues confronted through Grime culture have disappeared. It also does not mean that the cultural resources inherited by Grime artists have been discarded. Indeed, the cultural material and practices employed by slaves and colonised Africans,

handed down by artists like U Roy, Prince Jazzbo, Bovell and Johnson, and adapted by Dizzee Rascal, Afrikan Boy and others have invigorated London's vernacular cultures. By inhabiting this space we acknowledge the reworking of these resources and the changing forces that act upon this social sphere.

I have tried to show how, in the process of appropriating the black cultural tradition, children and young adults give shape and meaning to their lives. One of the important ways in which they adapt the tradition is through the process of combining the oral practice of rapping with the technological resources that are available to them in the city. The adjustments that are made by friends or within other social groups to this tradition respond to the everyday experiences of urban life. As the Grime aesthetic was produced through the convergence of social, technological, economic and political factors, it came to express a fast, cheap and confined lifestyle. While some of the factors, that contributed to the conditions in which this *habitus* was produced, have been adapted, changed or intensified, it is not possible to identify a representative post Grime aesthetic. This is in part because of the variety of directions in which Grime itself has expanded. It is also a result of the distinct contributions that genres, not derived from Grime, have made to the vernacular culture of London. Nevertheless, the persistence of the conditions that Grime responds to continue to impact the lives of young Londoners, even while some of the factors that shape their lives may have changed.

Wiley's 'Cash in my Pocket' shows one way in which prominent artists in the Grime scene have registered and responded to the context of post Grime London. The growing inequalities between the financially irresponsible super

rich of the Square Mile and the majority of Londoners is expressed in his collaboration with Daniel Merriweather and a soundtrack that departs from Wiley's 'cold' or Grime's 'dark' aesthetics. The track scorns the hubris of the banking sector while celebrating the success of London's vernacular culture. However, the schadenfreude of this track preceded the formation of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government and their regime of deep public service cuts. Although Wiley's economic prudence and organic connections with the wider city may shield him from the worst effects of the banking crisis and its impact on the broader economy, marginalised groups across the capital pay the price of the bank bailout through increased VAT and substantial reductions in their local services. By dwelling within the space of post Grime London it may be possible to detect how the resources employed within Grime culture are adapted to this new socio-economic and political context.

My study of UK Hip-Hop and Grime has investigated the connections between the historical development of the black cultural tradition and its adaptation to the needs of those dwelling in post-colonial London. I have focused on how the cultural resources that this tradition provides are employed in the construction of vernacular identities and identifications. This has involved engaging with the use of technology in the construction of the communicative networks of the black public sphere. Through the organisational work undertaken by MCs and DJs in the construction of their scenes and the cultivation of a collective consciousness, the subjective feelings produced through music are given shape and meaning. These organic intellectuals also

attempt to shape the social and political awareness of their publics. The use of DVDs, the internet, podcasts and music is an important part of the production of a public sphere in which the interests and identities of young Londoners may be shared, negotiated and promoted. The skills through which these products are crafted are also a valuable contribution to the cultural economy of the capital. It is likely that knowledge developed in building the Grime scene will contribute to the development of new communicative techniques in a reconfigured public space. It is also possible that those resources could contribute to democratic progress in the capital and enable an expansion of dialogue between its citizens.

My study of the public transport system examined how, in addition to providing resources through which subjectivities are developed, rap music enables young people to claim space in the city as their own. By appropriating local services in this way junior citizens also express alternative values and challenge the anti-social orientation adopted by other bus users. Their playing does not only enable them to exercise their right to take a position in public, it highlights the degree to which black culture now forms part of mainstream London's culture. The use of black popular music in the representation of the capital to the world affirms this shift. In this post Grime moment practices of sharing and reciprocal recognition continue to be enacted throughout the city. The transformation of public transport to facilitate the production of social space also indicates the lack of substance in narrowly political constructions of citizenship. The actions of young men and women on the bus do more than oppose the dominant representations of masculinity and femininity. The

playing of black music gives meaning and content to the vacuum produced by the Greater London Authority's overemphasis on the economic role of public transport and inattention to its social value. Local buses become sites in which the impoverished notion of ridership is practically contested, and substantive citizenship is exercised. Given the burden placed on ordinary people to prop up the most privileged in the city, the GLA have a moral responsibility for ensuring that the views and values of the least privileged are heard.

Before they can be heard, however, it is necessary for young people to learn how to speak for themselves. The organisational work done by artists such as Alim, Afrikan Boy and Roots Manuva is an important part of this process. The enunciative position that their audiences adopt in relation to their performances, enables young Londoners to develop their ability to dramatise confrontations with unjust and oppressive forces, to manifest what is true to themselves and to speak collectively. The anticipation of the audiences' responses in rap lyrics and the MC's orchestration of collective performances are part of the production of forms of total communication. As well as using both speech and bodily movement in their responses, the audience produce the substantive meaning of these performances. The circles in which everyone shouts to everyone or in which familiar bodily contact takes place are material manifestations of social being in contemporary London. The practices of soliciting identification from dancers contributes to the production of interpretative communities. Through their collective work these communities allow ordinary people dwelling within post Grime London, to come to a consciousness of their position. The collective exploration of time, space, raced

and gendered identities through dance is one of the ways in which rap music facilitates the practical exploration of shared interests and identification. The resources that post Grime cultures provide may be employed by young Londoners to accommodate themselves to a position of structured subordination, or to resist it.

The playing of tracks such as Pow during student protests against increased tuition fees highlights how this music continues to provide valuable resources to call upon authority to legitimate itself. Students' challenges to Liberal Democrat MPs, who reneged on pre-election pledges, are significant markers in the post Grime political landscape. This vernacular culture may also provide the resources through which young citizens sustain the social and economic injustices committed by the coalition government against them. The failure of elected representatives to honour public commitments highlights the urgency of developing non-statist, participatory, democratic progress.

The negotiation that takes place between MCs, DJs and the audience may yet provide valuable resources for the strengthening of public culture. The collaborative work undertaken to produce black cultural scenes within post-colonial London offers citizens the opportunity to participate in democratic spaces in which horizons of understanding are wrought together. The representations of the city in rap lyrics, music and videos are significant aspects of the collective construction of vernacular London. Descriptions of urban poverty, class antagonisms or racial oppression contribute to the ongoing social process of taking on the conditions of urban dwelling as well as challenging hegemonic representations. Users of these representations adapt them to their

own specific needs. Their appropriation of artists' works may significantly reshape the form and meaning of the product. The use of music on the bus, for example during the act of taking responsibility for how its social space is conducted, may produce significant changes in its formal characteristics as well as its subjective meaning to the players. Furthermore, the representation of urban dwelling in rap songs may help to connect the everyday experiences of young Londoners to wider social and political issues in the production of collective movements.

The work done by artists, such as the Choong Family to build the economy of the scene or Skepta to articulate aspirational values, compete with other views of what rap music is for. These may include an emphasis on the social value of rap for local communities and constructing positive responses to the challenges of life in London. The production and distribution of music for free is also a significant movement within the city's vernacular culture. In the process of exchanging perspectives of what rap music is meant for, the character of the black public sphere is negotiated. This process takes place through a combination of rational critical discussion, taking aesthetic positions in the production of songs, selecting particular modes of dissemination, payment or non payment for use, dancing to and playing with rap music. It is through artists' organisational work and their audiences' practical use of their art works that the vernacular character of London is constructed. For working-class youths dwelling within post Grime London, rap culture has provided valuable resources through which they exercise their right to be heard and through which they shape the meanings of their own lives.

Appendix

Artists Interviewed

Afrikan Boy
Alim Kamara
D'Explicit
Excalibah
Farmer (Taskforce)
Fx
Formula (Red Hot)
Jaxor (Red Hot)
Jeff Bacon
JJ
Klayze (Red Hot)
Pariz 1
Possessed (Rhyme Asylum)
Reain
Skirmish (Rhyme Asylum)
Slik D
Sukina (Poetic Pilgrimage)
Terra (Red Hot)
Temptastic
Ty
Muneera (Poetic Pilgrimage)
X-Ray (Red Hot)
Yeshua

Recorded Events

Rebel Muzik, 3rd July 2008, The Inn on the Green
iTunes Festival, 5th July 2008, Koko
Fresh off the Page, 10th July 2008, Southbank Centre
Afrikan Boy/ Game Girl, 26th July 2008, Last days of Decadence
London Mela, 10th August 2008
Rebel Muzik, 21st August 2008, The Inn on the Green
MySpace Carnival After Party, 25th August 2008, Ministry of Sound
BiggaFest, 30th August 2008, London Astoria 2,
Ty, 6th September 2008, The Westbury
Return of the Big Money Sound Launch Party, 3rd October 2008, Proud Gallery
I Luv Live, 17th November 2008, Cargo
Milkshake, 26th November 2008, Ministry of Sound
Milkshake, 3rd December 2008, Ministry of Sound
Milkshake, 9th December 2008, Ministry of Sound
Artist Avenue, 31st January 2009, Fairfield Halls
Sidewinder, 2nd March 2009, O2 Academy, Bristol
DMZ, 7th March 2009, Mass
I Luv Live, 9th March 2009, Cargo

DMZ, 2nd May 2009, Mass
Why Not?, 12th June 2009, The Arches
Where to?, 12th July 2009, Southbank Centre
Fwd vs Rinse, 31st July 2009, Matter
Afrikan Boy, 30th August 2009, Notting Hill arts Centre
Delloite Ignite, 5th September 2009, Royal Opera House
Taskforce, 23rd September 2009, Hootanany
Dusk and Blackdown, 5th June 2010, The Albany

Albums

Braintax, *Panorama*
Dizzee Rascal, *Boy in the Corner*
_____, *Maths + English*
Durrty Goodz, *Axiom*
Ghetto, *Freedom of Speech*
J2K, *Wake Up*
Jehst, *The Return of the Drifter*
Kano, *48 Bars Vol. 1*
_____, *London Town*
_____, *Home Sweet Home*
_____, *MC No. 1*
Klashnekoff, *Tussle with the Beast*
No. Lay, *No Comparisons*
Poetic Pilgrimage, *Freedom Times*
Roll Deep, *The Creeper Mixtape Vol. 1*
_____, *In at the Deep End*
_____, *Return of the Big Money Sound*
Roots Manuva, *Alternatively Deep*,
_____, *Awfully Deep*
_____, *Run Come Save Me*
_____, *Slime and Reason*
_____, *Brand New Second Hand*
Skepta, *The Debut Album - Greatest Hits*
Skinny Man, *Council Estate of Mind*
Sway, *This is My Demo*
Tinchy Stryder, *Star in the Hood*
Ty, *Upwards*
Wiley, *Race Against Time*

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