Who We Be:
The Musical and Social Aesthetics of Grime in London



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Abstract

This thesis takes as its subject the musical and social aesthetics of grime music in London. Since its genesis in London in the early 2000s, grime has emerged as an important vehicle both for the articulation of minority experience and the formation of identities among marginalised communities. My project seeks to provide a nuanced account of the sound world that grime inhabits, and to understand how the music is not only shaped by wider social and cultural processes, but also its potential to influence social processes as a space in which listeners can model, enact, and experiment with social relations and identities. The two broad objectives of my thesis may be summarised thus: to first construct a coherent reading of grime's musical aesthetics that moves beyond vague descriptions of musical sounds that are common to much writing on rap, and following this to consider grime's social aesthetics in order to evaluate not just how or whether grime is representative of identity or locality, but also to what extent the music is a direct articulation of such issues, and has a direct hand in influencing them.

Despite its cultural importance, grime has remained an under-studied topic in musical scholarship. While several recent studies have attempted to address this critical gap, they exemplify what I perceive as an almost exclusively sociological focus prevalent in rap studies, often situating grime within wider socio-economic considerations; the music itself is often examined as an artefact of specific social formations, and thus secondary to other concerns. Consequently, grime's specific musical aesthetics have been somewhat overlooked, and it is this issue that this thesis seeks to address, working from the intra-musical to the extra-musical.

Introduction

grime *noun*
/ (graɪm) /

1. dirt that forms a layer on the surface of something.
2. a type of electronic dance music that developed from drum 'n' bass, UK garage and other styles.[1]

> Fourteen years ago, from the bowels of Bow E3, the voice of a generation emerged, blinking furiously under the glare of Canary Wharf's aggressively gleaming paean to financial power. It was dark, it was angry, it was loud, it was unapologetic. It was innately provocative, it was fiercely independent. It was the brittle sound of disillusionment, resentment and despair, but also the voice of hope.
>
> It was grime.[2]

Following its release in February 2017, Stormzy's *Gang Signs & Prayer* debuted at number one in the UK Albums Chart, the first grime album in history to do so. Two years later, Stormzy became the first black British solo artist to headline Glastonbury festival. This historic performance, coupled with the chart success of *Gang Signs & Prayer*, in many ways represents the culmination of what Alexis Petridis has termed grime's 'commercial renaissance', and the moment that signified grime's arrival into the British cultural mainstream from underground obscurity. At the time of writing, Dizzee Rascal's *Boy In Da Corner* (2003), arguably grime music's year zero, is celebrating its twentieth anniversary, and Rascal is (re)touring the album to sold-out arenas across the UK. The first time Dizzee toured his Mercury-prize-winning debut, it was as the opening act in the UK leg of Justin Timberlake's *Justified* world tour in 2003. Nine years on from opening for Timberlake, Dizzee Rascal performed his UK number one single 'Bonkers' – a dance-pop collaboration with Calvin Harris – at the 2012 London

[1] Definition of grime noun from the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/grime (accessed 3rd December 2022).
[2] Hattie Collins and Olivia Rose, *This Is Grime* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2016), 9.

Olympic opening ceremony. A year later, a Change.org petition proposed to erect a statue of grime artist Wiley – who 'has undoubtedly inspired a generation' – which drew 4,967 supporters.[3]

The above examples capture, in some sense, grime's brief history. Grime music has grown from a hyper-local underground sound into a legitimate musical genre – 'with related artists, Spotify playlists, devoted fans and a whole set of cultural norms' – and has emerged as an important vehicle for the articulation of black experience in contemporary Britain, performing a crucial role in the formation of identities among marginalised communities.[4] Yet, a cursory listen of Dizzee's *Boy In Da Corner* and Stormzy's *Gang Signs & Prayer* reveals an obvious disparity in their aesthetic character. Reflective of the ever-expanding and eclectic sound world of the UK's rap scene, the Spotify playlist 'Who We Be' (after which this thesis takes its title) included only (what was deemed to be) grime upon its launch in 2016, and now includes 'the UK's biggest rap, grime, R&B, Afrobeat, and dancehall hits'.[5] What, therefore, is grime? Since its genesis in London in the early 2000s, grime has posed questions related to both its ontology and its aesthetic parameters – 'Wot Do U Call It?', as Wiley puts it.[6] This thesis seeks both to provide a nuanced account of the sound world grime inhabits, and to understand how the music is not only shaped by wider social and cultural processes, but also its potential to influence social processes as a space in which listeners can model, enact, and experiment with social relations and identities. The two broad objectives may be summarised as follows: to first construct a coherent reading of grime's musical aesthetics that moves beyond vague descriptions of musical sounds that are common to much writing on rap; and following this to consider grime's social aesthetics in order to evaluate not just how or whether

[3] https://www.change.org/p/tower-hamlets-london-borough-council-erect-a-statue-of-uk-grime-artist-wiley-in-bow (accessed 5th August 2023).
[4] Jeffrey Boakye, *Hold Tight* (Influx Press, 2018), 108.
[5] https://open.spotify.com/playlist/37i9dQZF1DXcDoDDetPsEg?si=3a0b4c2e511a44a1.
[6] See chapter two.

grime is representative of identity or locality, but also the extent to which the music is a direct articulation of such issues, and has a direct hand in influencing them.

Despite its cultural importance, grime has remained an under-studied topic in musical scholarship. While several recent studies have attempted to address this critical gap, they exemplify what I perceive as an almost exclusively sociological focus prevalent in rap studies, often situating grime within wider socio-economic considerations; the music itself is often examined as an artefact of specific social formations, and thus secondary to other concerns. Consequently, grime's specific musical aesthetics have been somewhat overlooked, and it is this issue my thesis seeks to address, working from the intra-musical to the extra-musical. It proposes to address this critical gap, and in response to accounts of grime that exhibit an almost exclusively sociological focus, examines the salient features of grime's musical aesthetics, before using this aesthetic examination to approach questions of audience and the social and cultural environment in which the music was produced.

In addressing this critical gap within hip-hop and rap studies, I aim to propose a novel reading of grime music from a musical aesthetics perspective that includes, but does not reify the music as a solely sociological object. Monographs specifically on grime are relatively scarce. Richard Bramwell's 2015 *UK Hip-Hop, Grime and the City: The Aesthetics and Ethics of London's Rap Scenes* represents possibly the most comprehensive academic book on the subject, and examines the production of rap in the UK and how the musical practices of young people in London contribute to and define a distinctively British rap culture.[7] While providing useful insights into the music's production, largely in the form of interviews with the music's practitioners, Bramwell's study exhibits a strong sociological focus, despite its claim to consider grime aesthetically. Indeed, though an important contribution to the subject,

[7] Richard Bramwell, *UK Hip-Hop, Grime and the City: The Aesthetics and Ethics of London's Rap Scenes* (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2015).

particularly in its focus on grime as a performed oral music and as a powerful *live* genre, Bramwell's book contains little or no aesthetic analysis. *UK Hip-Hop, Grime and the City* is therefore something I have drawn upon for contextual or background reading, offering little methodological insights for my particular focus.

Dan Hancox's 2018 *Inner City Pressure: The Story of Grime* is representative of much non-academic writing on grime, but remains important to my project nonetheless as one of the few monographs on the subject. Self-professed 'native Londoner' Hancox works primarily as a journalist, writing on 'music, politics, gentrification, social exclusion, protest and the margins of urban life' chiefly for *The Guardian* newspaper.[8] *Inner City Pressure* is in many ways a conglomeration of these interests, recounting grime's history while simultaneously noting political, economic, and wider cultural shifts within London, and their relevance to the grime 'scene'. Though journalistic in tone, and not strictly musical in focus, Hancox's book is highly informed and informative with regard to the political and cultural context in which grime has emerged and developed in early twenty-first-century London. The chronological structuring of the book, beginning in 2003 with grime's genesis and closing with a consideration of the scene in late 2017, brings to light the ways in which New Labour and Conservative governments, immigration, law enforcement, gentrification, and music-industry shifts have both affected and are articulated within grime music's history.

Hattie Collins and Olivia Rose's *This Is Grime* (2016) is perhaps the most 'authentic' of all existing accounts dedicated to charting grime's history: 'told by the people who created it, for the people that live it'.[9] That is, Collins and Rose's account is built from quotations from and interviews with the artists most closely associated with the genre, constructing an oral history of the scene's development from its origins in jungle and garage to its new commercial

[8] Dan Hancox, *Inner City Pressure: The Story of Grime* (London: William Collins, 2018).
[9] Collins and Rose, *This Is Grime*, 9.

emergence spearheaded by artists like Stormzy. Appearing in Skepta's performance at the 2017 BRIT Awards, during which he stood atop a platform displaying portraits taken from Collins and Rose's book, *This Is Grime* provides a comprehensive – 'we spent 153 days shooting 171 people!' – 'insider' narrative behind grime's emergence and maturation.[10] The first-hand immediacy of the book, however, naturally renders *This Is Grime* somewhat vulnerable to the self-mythologising tendencies of the artists featured. Further, Collins and Rose's account offers comparatively little to those readers without a basic awareness of the grime scene, in that there is little description of the music itself and many of the insights provided by the myriad interviews relate more to grime's social network than to its musical parameters. *This Is Grime* does, however, offer unique insights helpful both to a general understanding of grime culture and specifically to accounts of grime's sound world (such as this thesis), including accounts of the techniques and processes, and the production tools and hardware, behind the music's creation.

Important also in grime literature is Jeffrey Boakye's 2018 book *Hold Tight*. As will be outlined, this thesis takes an album-by-album approach in its efforts to detail and explore grime's aesthetic parameters. Similarly, Boakye's *Hold Tight* takes a song-by-song approach to provide 'one Grime fan's idiosyncratic take on a genre of black music that has had an indelible impact on black British culture and, by extension, pop culture at large'.[11] Boakye's book begins with 'Amen, Brother' by the Winstons (1969) – which contains the famous 'Amen Break', to which grime, Boakye argues, is 'inextricably linked' – and ends with 'DBT Remix' by Lioness featuring Queenie, Stush, Shystie, Lady Leshurr, and Little Simz (2018), tracing grime's development across more than seventy tracks spanning nearly fifty years.[12] *Hold Tight*

[10] Hattie Collins quoted in Lucy Bourton, 'This Is Grime documents the honesty and energy of a very British music scene', *It's Nice That* https://www.itsnicethat.com/articles/this-is-grime-hattie-collins-olivia-rose-190916 (accessed 18th September 2023).
[11] Boakye, *Hold Tight*, 16.
[12] Ibid., 22.

also features an appendix of essays by Boakye that cover grime's overall history ('Grime: summarised'), masculinity in grime ('Boys to Mandem: Grime and the masculinity barrier'), race in grime music ('"Black mates and white n****s": On whiteness in Grime'), as well as grime's use in education (Boakye is himself an English teacher).[13] Boakye's book offers a highly personal and passionate account of grime's history, traced through songs important to the genre (and to Boakye), and essentially provides an account of grime's development from underground subculture to mainstream artefact, as well as exploring black masculinity, online subcultures, and the UK's shifting socio-political landscape through the lens of grime music's key texts. While non-academic, and as such lacking in methodology or analytic frameworks for the consideration of grime's aesthetic language and stylistic parameters (and reasonably so), Boakye's book nonetheless provides valuable insight on the nuanced relationships between the songs he investigates and the wider developments in both grime's history and the UK's cultural and political climate. *Hold Tight* speaks to the value inherent to personal accounts such as Boakye's, and exemplifies the benefits of structuring an account of grime through the songs and works that comprise it, as well as the obvious relationship between the music and its social, political, and cultural environment.

As the above demonstrate, existing 'full-length' works on grime focus almost exclusively on the music's sociological and, in the case of Hancox's book, political context. Though of course valuable to my project, and worthwhile in the furthering of grime as a subject of importance, these monographs do not offer any methodological tools for the analysis of grime's musical aesthetics. Thus, for the purposes of my project I have drawn from diverse sets of literature to develop the appropriate frameworks and perspectives for the consideration of

[13] On 'n***a': In alignment with the subject position from which I speak and write, as well as its associated politics of citation, I will not speak or write this word in full. For more on the quotation of slurs, see Luvell Anderson and Ernie Lepore, 'Slurring words' *Noûs*, 47, No. 1 (2011) 25–48.

grime's musical and social aesthetics.[14] I highlight some of these in the chapter outline that follows.

Chapter one provides a brief account of grime's aesthetic and cultural genealogy. In tracing a history of the musical developments in black British music and the British underground scene from the rave scenes of the late 1980s onwards, through hardcore rave, jungle, drum 'n' bass, and garage, the chapter gives an idea of the musical and cultural landscape into (or onto) which grime emerged. The chapter explores and interrogates Simon Reynolds' 'hardcore continuum' formulation, a concept to which this thesis continually returns. Reynolds identifies the 'hardcore continuum' as the 'continuum of musical culture that emerged out of the British rave scene – a specific strand of dance music centred in London with outposts in the Midlands, Bristol and various Northern cities with a large black population'.[15] Reynolds' formulation is valuable as a starting point not only because he places grime as the most recent iteration of the continuum, but also in its recognition of black British music making as the central force behind each development. The chapter uses the continuum structurally to trace the musical developments in British underground music from the late 1980s onwards up to an including the point of grime's emergence, while considering the various ideological and rhetorical processes that have informed Reynolds' formulation and render it in some measure problematic. Among these problems is Reynolds' implicit construction of a progress narrative, in which each music is surpassed or usurped by a newer, 'fresher', genre. While the chapter does in many ways support such a narrative, and indeed this thesis is itself structured chronologically, I suggest that the chronologies traced through both

[14] I wish here to highlight the importance of smaller articles to this thesis. While monographs on grime are relatively scarce, the music has been discussed, analysed, appraised, and interrogated by numerous scholars, writers, and journalists. As the thesis that follows will demonstrate, these articles (both academic and journalistic) serve as my secondary sources more than any other form of writing.
[15] Simon Reynolds, 'Simon Reynolds on the hardcore continuum: introduction', *The Wire* (2013) https://www.thewire.co.uk/in-writing/essays/the-wire-300_simon-reynolds-on-the-hardcore-continuum_introduction (accessed 1st September 2021).

the chapter and the whole thesis represent 'temporal succession' as opposed to 'historical supersession'.[16] As the chapter outlines, any chronology of a musical genre (or genres) is not a teleological narrative, but rather an often-messy series of reinventions, borrowings, experimentations, rebirths, and revivals.

The second chapter takes as its focus Wiley's 2004 album *Treddin' On Thin Ice* – widely regarded to have provided a grime 'blueprint' – and examines the album's musical material in relation to grime's emergence, and the ways in which Wiley defined the genre against preceding musical trends. The chapter examines the album's first single 'Wot Do U Call It?' and presents an analysis that focuses on a listener's experience of the track, outlining some of ways in which Wiley highlights the aesthetic disparities between grime and garage in order to underline the musical characteristics of the former. That a new sound is emerging is the central conceit of 'Wot Do U Call It?', and the song effects almost in real time grime's delineation and separation from garage and other prevailing musical trends. Effecting a comparison between his own sound and what came before, Wiley constructs a musical meta-commentary on the evolution of grime from garage, and is able to validate the former by means of a musical dialogue with the latter. Further, the chapter illustrates some of the ways in which sonic cues throughout 'Wot Do U Call It?' inform a listener of the details of its production and the cultural setting from which it emerged. Following this, the chapter delves into an examination of the three instrumental interludes featured on *Treddin' On Thin Ice*: 'Eskimo', 'Avalanche', and 'Icerink'. Framing each of these instrumentals as instances of autonomous electronic music facilitates both an investigation of grime's sonic qualities, and a consideration of the extent to which the music presents a legitimate aesthetic of 'coldness', in response to claims made by both critics and Wiley himself. Such an analysis, in many ways, is significant

[16] Emily Cousens, 'Corporeal Vulnerability and the Temporality of Feminist Theory', *Studies in Social & Political Thought*, 27 (2017), 40-56, here 48.

not only for Wiley's *Treddin'* but, given the album's seminal status and prototypical quality, for a consideration of grime music as a whole. As the chapters that follow demonstrate, the album's prototypical qualities have been historically proven: grime's key sonic elements as present on *Treddin'* continue to appear throughout the genre's history, and it is in this chapter that I give them some historical and scholarly grounding.

Chapter three takes as its subject Kano's 2005 debut *Home Sweet Home*, an album that appears to broaden, augment, and even elude the musical language associated with grime music, particularly when compared to Wiley's *Treddin'* or to Dizzee Rascal's *Boy In Da Corner*. While *Home Sweet Home* effects an expansion of grime's sound world and musical vocabulary, it is the ways in which Kano ties the album's disparate sonic influences together though lyrical and vocal craftsmanship that lends the work its significance. The album can be conceived as a kind of *tour de force* in grime MCing, and in examining several tracks from *Home Sweet Home* and the range of vocal flows they contain, the chapter considers the ways in which it contributes to an early blueprint for authentic grime MCing from which future artists draw. The chapter also examines the ways in which grime artists in the scene's early years lean on and call upon practices from the genre's lineage (as explored in chapter one) in order to craft their own musical identities, a practice which this project's later chapters outlines as important to grime music's revival in the mid 2010s (chapters seven and nine). Further, the MC's ability to operate across diverse musical styles has been foundational to the coherence and ongoing development of grime as a genre, and an examination of Kano's *Home Sweet Home* facilitates a consideration of MC culture. As the chapter argues, the MC is tied not to genre distinctions nor confined to limiting formulations such as the hardcore continuum, but is connected to broader oral and performance traditions in a way that allows for more fluid conceptions of influence and identity and interrogates the limitations of genre categories.

Chapter four considers two Dizzee Rascal albums released six years apart: *Boy In Da Corner* (2003) and *Tongue n' Cheek* (2009). Alongside Wiley's *Treddin' On Thin Ice*, *Boy In Da Corner* is considered by many to represent a blueprint for grime music. Winner of the 2003 Mercury Prize, *Boy* helped to pioneer and establish grime's sound world, and to distinguish the genre from UK garage, which to Rascal was 'all too nice sounding'.[17] Given the avant-garde and visionary qualities widely attributed to the album, and Rascal's own aversions to music 'too nice sounding', Dizzee's 2009 album *Tongue n' Cheek* seems incongruous. Featuring tracks produced by DJs Calvin Harris and Armand Van Helden, *Tongue* is replete with house-inspired sound and highly danceable four-to-the-floor that are a far cry from the envelope-pushing music present on Rascal's debut. A cursory listening to *Boy In Da Corner* and *Tongue n' Cheek* highlights the sharp contrast between the two albums, both musical and lyrical. The chapter examines the musical and stylistic differences between them, and considers the consequences of Dizzee's apparent departure from grime both for his image and for the grime genre: the two albums' release years, 2003 and 2009, bookend what can be called grime's first 'era', from the pioneering albums of the early 2000s (including *Boy*) to what was felt to be its temporary 'expiry' by 2010. An examination of *Boy* and *Tongue* thus traces not only Dizzee Rascal's musical trajectory through the decade but, given Dizzee's stature within the genre, the development of grime as a music. A consideration of the stylistic differences between the two albums also facilitates further interrogation both of grime's complex relationship with the mainstream, of Reynolds' hardcore continuum formation and the often arbitrary distinctions drawn between 'hardcore' and 'softcore' music, as well as the limitations of the conception of MCs as non-genre-bound actors. Given that Dizzee Rascal cannot operate within genres or across traditions outside of grime's direct lineage without accusations of 'selling out', there

[17] Dizzee Rascal quoted in Hancox, *Inner City Pressure*, 76.

seems to be a limit to the diversity of musical styles across which an MC may operate before their authenticity and cultural belonging are called into question.

Chapter five considers more carefully grime's position after its first 'era', its relationship to the mainstream, and the ways in which the genre sought to develop and re-emerge after a perceived creative and commercial slump circa 2010. Dizzee Rascal's rise to the top of the UK charts marked in many ways the end of grime's first wave, or 'era'. Dizzee's perceived movement into the mainstream was followed by a string of chart entries from grime MCs Chipmunk, Skepta, Tinie Tempah, and Tinchy Stryder, but with music that was felt to barely resemble grime. Logan Sama proclaimed grime 'dead' in 2007, and his statement captures the mood of frustration and dissatisfaction surrounding the music's first flirtation with mainstream success, reflecting the growing separation between grime's mainstream and its underground in the late 2000s, and speaking for a purist community within the grime scene to whom albums like *Tongue n' Cheek* represented an almost total abandonment of the music's key artistic and aesthetic principles.[18] The chapter notes the ways in which the grime scene sought to recover from this perceived creative slump, most notably through grime's wholesale migration online. Increased access to the internet afforded artists total control over the distribution and marketing of their work. This agency over distribution and marketing, alongside the availability of DAWs (whether legally purchased or illegally torrented), offered practitioners autonomy from record-label involvement, and provided an alternative and self-sustaining eco-system for the production and consumption of grime culture. YouTube and other online visual media platforms offered an alternative space where grime's established promotional practices could thrive, free of the limitations and illegality of pirate radio as well as the cultural disempowerment and creative stagnation brought on by industry involvement. The chapter notes that grime's online migration not only kept the genre intact during its

[18] Logan Sama, https://www.grimeforum.com/threads/19547-Grime-is-dead (accessed 21st February 2022).

perceived creative slump, but facilitated its rise to legitimate mainstream acceptance in the 2010s.

Chapter six looks at Little Simz's 2015 release *A Curious Tale of Trials + Persons* to explore both the initial development of grime's sonic palette after its first wave, and the relationship between grime and gender. Though not strictly 'a grime MC', Little Simz has credited the music as a powerful influence on her musical development, and the sound world she occupies undoubtedly ties Simz and her music to the same musical lineage as the other artists explored in this study. The chapter considers the ways in which Simz is tied both aesthetically and culturally to grime's stylistic traditions, and introduces Bakhtinian dialogism as a productive framework for understanding questions of influence, lineage, and stylistic belonging in grime music post-2010. As British MCs began to reach audiences outside of the UK, most notably in the U.S., and as they began to collaborate with artists outside the 'scene' (a trend arguably initiated by Dizzee Rascal, and one which will be explored further in relation to Skepta's *Konnichiwa*), the sound of the music accordingly and expectedly altered. Though artists such as Simz began to break with the 'traditional' aesthetics of grime's first wave, this chapter offers an understanding of how these artists remain inextricably tied to grime's 'ongoing historical conversation'.[19] Little Simz is, notably, the only female voice in this project. Her position as one of only a few female British rappers in the public eye is significant, and *A Curious Tale* provides an opportunity to consider the potential consequences, significance, and implications of this. Dialogism performs an important role also in tying Simz to a broader network of black women rappers, who are themselves 'in dialogue with one another, with male rappers, with other popular musicians (through sampling and other revisionary practices), with black women fans, and with [...] fans in general'.[20] The chapter

[19] George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 99.
[20] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise* (Wesleyan University Press, 1994) ,148.

considers the extent to which *A Curious Tale* demands an expansion of the frameworks within which grime music, and indeed gendered expression within grime music itself, are considered. *A Curious Tale* is an act of both self-representation and self-definition, one that interrogates the validity of the masculine/feminine dichotomies of sound forwarded by formulations such as the hardcore continuum, and points to a critical gap in rap studies literature.

Chapter seven examines Skepta's fourth studio album *Konnichiwa* (2016). Released thirteen years after Rascal's genre-defining Boy, the critical and commercial success of the north-London rapper's fourth studio album represents an important milestone both for Skepta and grime music in general. Grime's development is characterised by an often-messy series of reinventions, borrowings, experimentations, rebirths, and revivals, and *Konnichiwa* is a productive case study with which to consider the ways in which this works in practice. *Konnichiwa* marks an important landmark in grime's history, and the moment of grime's legitimate mainstream arrival. It is an album that at once connects grime to its turn-of-the-century sonic roots, and anticipates the scene's trajectory into the British and global cultural mainstream. The chapter once again employs Bakhtinian dialogism in order to examine how Skepta consciously connects *Konnichiwa* to grime's perceived golden era through the musical and cultural evocation of the genre's early practices and sound palette and, in tying himself musically and lyrically to grime's golden era, authenticates himself as a legitimate grime artist. *Konnichiwa* also effects an expansion of grime's sound world, and the chapter considers the ways in which Skepta weaves grime's burgeoning transatlantic relationship with North American Hip Hop into the album's musical material in a way that maintains grime's cultural and musical dominance throughout. The chapter examines the ways in which Skepta can point to grime's growing global presence, and is able to explore other sonic possibilities, without sacrificing or diluting grime's key tenets.

Chapter eight centres upon Dave's 2019 album *PSYCHODRAMA*. The chapter considers the extent to which the album, through Dave's recounting of his experiences, may be said to express location - that is, the ways in which *PSYCHODRAMA* musically and lyrically embodies and reflects upon the environment of its genesis. Two musically similar songs, 'Environment' and 'Black', are examined to explore how they experiment with and challenge aesthetic expectations in a way that intensifies and amplifies Dave's articulation of his social and geographical environment. The chapter first investigates 'Environment' in relation to Allan Moore's writing on style and timbre, and the ways in which the song draws upon timbral techniques from genres far removed from grime in order to musically enhance Dave's lyrical sincerity and heighten the track's possibility for audience engagement. The discussion of 'Black' examines more closely questions of listener engagement in a broad sense, and considers the interaction between environment, aesthetics, and ideology that it can provoke. The chapter considers the significance of 'Black' in the context of grime music and its relation to the black British experience, and the ways in which aesthetic judgments of 'Black', or the song's critical and public reception, tie it more closely to its social, political, and geographic context.

Chapter nine charts the career of Stormzy. Stormzy's breakout year in 2015 coincided with Skepta's back-to-basics grime revival, and his strict adherence to golden-era principles allowed the South-London rapper to position himself as a key proponent of grime's commercial renaissance. Two years later Stormzy's debut album *Gang Signs & Prayer* entered the UK Albums Chart at number one; four years later Stormzy became the first black British performer to headline Glastonbury festival. Remarkably, Stormzy achieved this fame and commercial success (entering the UK Top 50 Singles on four separate occasions in 2015 alone) while maintaining an authenticity ascribed to him by critics and grime purists alike. Yet Stormzy's latest offering at the time of writing, *This Is What I Mean* (2022), sees the rapper's sound depart

almost entirely from the grime genre. The album replaces the in-your-face attitude and back-to-basics sound palette that characterised Stormzy's early rise with a deeply introspective sound world heavily influenced by RnB, gospel, Afropop, and soul. As a pivotal figure in grime's cultural renaissance circa 2015, and as an artist whose meteoric rise was so tied to grime's core values, Stormzy's later departure from the genre's sound world is significant. Indeed, the difference in sound between Stormzy's early releases and his latest (No. 1) album is comparable in many ways to the contrasts between Dizzee Rascal's *Boy In Da Corner* and *Tongue n' Cheek* (chapter four), and in the same way is representative of more than simply the trajectory of one artist. The chapter traces Stormzy's breakout years and the commercial mainstream success he has gone on to enjoy in order to facilitate a consideration of the complex interplay of musical style, genre, authenticity, and cultural identity at stake within the grime community.

In taking the album-by-album approach outlined above, my thesis explores grime's aesthetic parameters, as well as the extent to which the music articulates and embodies both identity and locality as they are present in some of the genre's key texts. As I discuss in my conclusion, such an approach has its merits as well as its drawbacks. With little in the way of existing grime scholarship, I argue that the structure of this project allows it to tackle questions of grime's musical aesthetics. A genre that is both relatively young and already demonstrably nostalgic, and that cannot be defined even by the artists who claim to work within its stylistic traditions, grime is difficult to pin down; as a consequence, it is hard to separate rhetoric from aesthetic practice. In taking artists and albums from grime's nearly twenty-year history that are significant both 'objectively' (chart performance, awards, etc.) and subjectively (what I argue to be important texts in grime's history), this project presents an organised collection of diverse texts through which grime's key musical developments may be traced.

"This ain't a culture, it's my religion"

Let me clarify here my use of the terms 'genre', 'scene', and '(sub)culture'. These terms are loaded, and rich with meanings and connotations beyond what I wish to invoke. Grime can be understood as both 'subculture' and 'scene', and exemplifies the complex interplay between these concepts that David Hesmondhalgh describes.[21] Grime's early years are characterised by the local and highly collaborative production of music by a distinct social group with shared values, norms, and lifestyles – as this thesis proposes, it is often through this sociological lens that a connection between many of grime's first-wave artists can be seen most clearly. Grime's early 'subculture' contributed to a 'scene', or a space for subcultural expression and development. Further, grime is a music whose development encompasses (especially in its later years) multiple subcultures, and whose sites of production, consumption, and dissemination remain (to a large extent) dynamic and localised hubs of musical activity. Also relevant here is the related concept of counter-publics, in which grime is framed as a sphere of discourse and communication created by marginalised and dissenting groups in response to their exclusion from dominant public spheres. Yet, as Hesmondhalgh suggests, 'scene' is a polysemic word and a 'fruitfully muddled concept', and terms such as 'scene', 'subculture', and 'counter-public' share a complex and dynamic history in wider scholarship, musical and otherwise.[22] Given that this thesis focuses primarily on grime's aesthetics, this is not a history with which I wrestle. I use 'scene' in this thesis largely as a vernacular term, one that appears in much journalism on grime, and that many of the artists featured in the project use themselves – Wiley, for example, credits himself with having "made a scene".[23]

[21] David Hesmondhalgh, 'Subcultures, Scenes or Tribes? None of the Above', *Journal of Youth Studies* 8, No.1 (2007) 21-40.
[22] Ibid., 27-29.
[23] Wiley's 'Bring Them All/Holy Grime' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HuwIOC5Nqts (accessed 19th September 2023).

Similarly, while my use of 'genre' throughout the project does appeal in some ways to the substantial existing body of literature on the term, the investigation of genre *itself* is not the goal of this thesis. Genre distinctions are drawn throughout the thesis to aid in both the illustration and consideration of musical influence and in comparative analyses between artists, albums, eras, and scenes, and the genre distinctions made are often those that have been constructed or claimed by the artists themselves. Indeed, while the work of authors such as David Brackett, who interrogates the social and cultural functions of genre in relation to 'black popular music', represent fertile ground for any consideration of grime music, it is not the express intention of this thesis to do so.[24]

While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to investigate these terms and discourses as they relate to grime music, any discussion of a scene, (sub)culture, or genre will naturally interact with the wider meanings and arguments associated with them. Though these terms carry with them their complex, disputed, and rich histories, they are employed here in a non-prescriptive way, and I wish to recognise this here. Given that the primary aim of this thesis is the elucidation and examination of grime's stylistic parameters and ontology as a genre, scene, and culture, an investigation and interrogation of these concepts would serve only to muddy the already-murky (#Merky) waters.

"How could a man with a uni degree be bussing up mic and chatting this greaze?"

Jme immediately answers his own question: "'Cause the music originated and will always remain in the streets".[25] Jme's lyrics are self-reflective, and imply an element of surprise (on the part of his audience) at the fact that he has retained his grime credentials despite obtaining a university degree (in 3D Digital Design from the University of Greenwich). For my own case,

[24] David Brackett, 'Questions of Genre in Black Popular Music', *Black Music Research Journal* 25, No. ½ (2005), 73-92.
[25] 'Man Don't Care' by Jme featuring Giggs can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rivFCwwvoh8 (accessed 18th September 2023).

however, I feel it relevant to express why I, 'a man with a uni degree', am writing about grime music in the first place, in response to repeated questions from colleagues and friends. The purpose of this thesis is to explore the musical and social aesthetics of a music of which I have been a fan for roughly fifteen years. I am, like Dan Hancox, a native Londoner. As grime music made its online migration (explored in chapter five), many of my friends and I began to engage with (what at the time was felt to be) a burgeoning and emerging music culture, native to our city. London is, however, a big place. Hancox's claim must be qualified by the fact that he is, like me, both white and male. As Boakye notes, 'grime's relationship with whiteness is complicated', and both Hancox and I form part of an outsider audience 'that grime has courted since it earliest days', an audience that is 'invited to buy into grime'.[26] Boakye compellingly highlights the tensions that arise from the mainstream's 'growing interest in a culture that inherently explores the frustrations of black marginalisation'.[27] Any account of grime music, 'an increasingly commodifiable artefact of black coolness', must demonstrate an awareness of this tension.[28]

In writing about grime, specifically as the subject of a doctoral thesis, I recognise that I am contributing to grime's growing institutionalisation. As a white and middle-class man, I recognise that I am doing so from a cultural and social position that is outside of grime's inner circle and the black British heritage out of which grime has grown. The social, cultural, and environmental contexts that I argue grime music articulates and embodies are not those that I have experienced first-hand, and I am not a subject for whom grime speaks. I am, however, part of an audience *to* whom grime speaks, as indeed is anyone who listens to it. This project captures, in many ways, this act of listening. I present this thesis not as an insider who carries a deep connection to grime culture and the sociocultural sphere that it articulates, but as an

[26] Boakye, *Hold Tight*, 364.
[27] Ibid., 365.
[28] Ibid., 364.

invested and relatively encultured listener. To write hermeneutically from an objective position is impossible, especially on the subject of a music to which I cannot claim cultural belonging. Instead, this project takes broadly the ecological theory of affordance to highlight opportunities that are available in the musical environment presented by the texts.[29] 'I, and any other writer, can only write from my/our own individual perspective; a perspectiveless perspective is impossible'.[30]

This thesis is descriptive and exploratory rather than prescriptive. The aim of this project is not to provide an academic definition of grime, but to consider what some of the defining features of the music might be by mapping iterations of 'grime' throughout an assemblage of texts. Despite its obvious subcultural nature, grime has since its emergence participated in some way in British cultural institutions: four of the artists featured in the project (Dizzee Rascal, Skepta, Dave, and Little Simz) have won the Mercury Prize (the panel of which was until recently chaired by Professor Simon Frith OBE) and, as many of my references show, grime's history has been consistently documented through album reviews, artist interviews, and columns in *Pitchfork*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent,* and *The Telegraph*, among others. Further, grime has already been the subject of academic debate and the focus of numerous studies (such as those outlined earlier in this introduction). This thesis seeks to provide a nuanced account of a music that has, in many ways, been canonised since its emergence. In doing so, I assert no claim to an authoritative definition of what grime *is*, or what it means in a broad sense.

While grime's genesis can be traced roughly to the early 2000s, it remains a live subject. As my conclusion indicates, whether or not grime music is extant is a subject of debate – while such a question offers fertile ground for debate, it is not one that can be definitively answered,

[29] Allan Moore, *Song Means*: *Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song* (Routledge, 2016), 330.
[30] Ibid..

and certainly not by me. What follows is not the 'story' of grime, or a history of the genre. This thesis outlines a number of ways in which to hear, analyse, examine, and understand some of grime's key texts, as selected by its author. It ventures an approach to the academic study of grime music in the hope of expanding the methods and perspectives from which the topic can be considered – not to cauterise, but to capture.

> I think it's still a baby […] there's so much to be done, there's so much to be said, there's so many barriers to be kicked down. I don't even think it's gone a hint of where it could go yet. […] I don't think it's down to a label, I don't think it's down to one individual. I think it's just kids having something to say and experimenting. That's it, it's the UK perspective and it's the UK voice and that's something that's always gonna need to be heard.
>
> It's evolving, so don't be a dinosaur, don't be in the cage. Move with the chaos.[31]

[31] DJ Semtex and Terror Danjah quoted in Collins and Rose, *This Is Grime*, 317-8.

Chapter One – Genesis

Grime music, upon its arrival in early-2000s London, is said to have 'sounded as though it crash-landed in the present with no past, and no future'.[1] Indeed, grime's originality, or 'freshness', was and continues to be advanced in music journalism as one of the music's salient features. Hua Hsu's 2018 (quasi-) retrospective on grime in the *New York Times* recognises the music's aesthetic as 'fresh and bizarre, as if [the artists] were tiptoeing through an alien invasion', before going on to use the same phrase from Dan Hancox quoted above.[2] Grime's sound world in many ways redefined the UK's underground music scene, and offered a novel aesthetic blueprint that has served as the basis for much British music, both popular and experimental, over the past couple of decades. Like any music, however 'fresh' or radical, grime's aesthetic features and cultural functions can nonetheless be shown to have their roots in earlier styles. In exploring these earlier styles, this chapter gives an account of grime's aesthetic genealogy, and details the musical and cultural environment that provided the bedrock for the genre's genesis.

A number of first-rate accounts of both black British music and the British underground music scene already exist; *Black Popular Music in Britain Since 1945*, a collection of essays edited by Jon Stratton and Nabeel Zuberi, and Lloyd Bradley's *Sounds Like London: 100 Years of Black Music in the Capital* are two examples of insightful, comprehensive, and engaging accounts of the myriad musical and cultural movements in (black) British music through the 20th century that, through aesthetic innovation and social interaction (i.e. between practitioners

[1] Dan Hancox, 'A history of grime, by the people who created it', *The Guardian* https://www.theguardian.com/music/2012/dec/06/a-history-of-grime#:~:text=Grime%20sounded%20as%20if%20it,supposed%20to%20be%20about%20nostalgia. (accessed 3rd September 2021).
[2] Hua Hsu, 'The Surprising Survival of Grime', *The New York Times* https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/10/01/the-surprising-survival-of-grime (accessed 1st September 2021).

of these various scenes), eventually led to the formation of a distinctive cultural scene in the late '90s from which, or indeed against which, grime emerged and developed.[3] It is not the intention of this chapter, therefore, to simply recount or regurgitate the material found in the above literature, but to draw on this literature in order to give an account of only those musical developments that are significant *aesthetically* to grime's emergence. That is, this chapter does not reiterate the important work of the aforementioned authors by reaffirming grime's position *historically*, or chronologically, as a recent iteration of a lineage of black British music-making, encompassing everything from jazz to lovers rock (though of course this historical significance must not be understated). Rather, this introduction embellishes and concentrates the work of these authors in order to assess specifically grime's position *aesthetically*.

Bradley's *Sounds Like London* tracks the development of British black music from 1919 onwards. Bradley's account opens its narrative with an account of the black jazz and swing bands in London in the early 20th century, as well as the arrival of the SS *Empire Windrush* at London's Tilbury Docks in June 1948 marking the start of a 'mass influx of black people to [the capital]' (among them calypso artist Lord Kitchener who, for Bradley, represents a 'specifically musical immigration').[4] Similarly, the three essays that open Stratton and Zuberi's collection focus upon black jazz musicians in Britain from 1941 onwards, the impact of 'the presence of West African, Afro-Caribbean and African-American artists in Britain during the 1950s and 1960s', and the 'circulation of artist and influences between West Africa and Britain', in particular the influence of calypso and jazz.[5] As Bradley states, it is 'impossible to separate […] social transition from the development of the music'; the increasing integration of black people into British society cannot be separated from the emergence and development

[3] Jon Stratton and Nabeel Zuberi (eds.) *Black Popular Music in Britain Since 1945* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016); Lloyd Bradley, *Sounds Like London: 100 Years of Black Music in the Capital* (Serpent's Tail, 2013).
[4] Bradley, *Sounds Like London*, 13-20.
[5] Stratton and Zuberi, *Black Popular Music in Britain Since 1945*, 6-7.

of black British music.[6] As I have indicated, however, recounting this intricate history in its complex entirety is both outside the focus and beyond the scope of this chapter. While these earlier instances of black British music making undoubtedly form the environment in which all that followed, including grime music, they are aesthetically so far-removed from grime that to begin this chapter with an account of the jazz and swing bands of the '40s would be unproductive. Rather, given grime's essentially electronic character, I begin with the emergence of what Simon Reynolds has called 'the hardcore continuum'.[7]

"When I started MCing on jungle, it was proper hardcore"[8]

The hardcore continuum is the phrase Reynolds gives to the 'continuum of musical culture that emerged out of the British rave scene – a specific strand of dance music centred in London with outposts in the Midlands, Bristol and various Northern cities with a large black population'.[9] Reynold's formulation is valuable as a starting point not only because he places grime as the most recent iteration of the continuum, but also in its recognition of black British music making as the central force behind each development. The term itself derives from the music's origins in the 'Hardcore' rave scenes of the late '80s and '90s. As Reynolds writes:

> the tradition started to take shape circa 1990 with what people called Hardcore Techno or Hardcore Rave, or sometimes simply Ardkore. These early sounds – bleep tunes from the North East, breakbeat house and ragga techno from London – were the first time that the UK came up with its own unique mutant versions of House and Techno (ironically by adding elements from dub reggae, dancehall, and hiphop (*sic*) that weren't British in origin, but equally would never have been let into the mix back in Chicago and Detroit).[10]

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[6] Bradley, *Sounds Like London*, 13.
[7] Simon Reynolds, 'Simon Reynolds on the hardcore continuum: introduction', *The Wire* (2013) https://www.thewire.co.uk/in-writing/essays/the-wire-300_simon-reynolds-on-the-hardcore-continuum_introduction (accessed 1st September 2021).
[8] D Double E quoted in Hattie Collins and Olivia Rose, *This is Grime* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2016), 30.
[9] Reynolds, 'Simon Reynolds on the hardcore continuum'.
[10] Ibid..

From its origins in ‘Ardkore’, Reynolds traces the development of the continuum throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s via jungle, drum ‘n’ bass, UK garage (including the subgenres ‘speed garage’ and 2-step garage), bassline, dubstep, and grime. Although the ‘relative balance of various sources (including reggae and rap, among others) has shifted, and the beats-per-minute rate has fluctuated wildly’, Reynolds argues that the basic parameters of the music have stayed the same, and that ‘in a profound sense, underneath two decades of relentless sonic mutation, this is the same music, the same culture’.[11] These parameters or ‘core elements’ are identified as: ‘beat-science seeking the intersection between “fucked up” and “groovy”; dark bass pressure; MCs chatting fast over live-mixed DJ sets; samples and arrangement ideas inspired by pulp soundtracks and orchestrated pop’.[12] As the chapters that follow demonstrate, these parameters certainly apply to grime music, in a broad sense at least. Reynolds’ analysis, however, is as much cultural and sociological as it is aesthetic, and the core elements identified above are perhaps deliberately vague, wide-ranging, and imperfect. Indeed, in many ways, Reynolds’ series of articles read as personal odes to rave culture, as his research approach perhaps betrays:

> I realised that I’d been operating a little like an ethnomusicologist, someone who gets involved in the tribe and joins in the rituals, and in the process has their objectivity compromised more than a little. I’ve been what anthropologists call a ‘participant-observer’. A critic-fanatic. Hands down, this Hardcore Continuum thing is the most remarkable popcult phenomenon I’ve witnessed with my own eyes and ears. For me it’s been the most exciting music of our time; the most thrilling but also the most thought-provoking.[13]

[11] Ibid..
[12] Ibid..
[13] Ibid..

Reynolds is, perhaps, more concerned with documenting a broad cultural movement rather than musical-aesthetic developments across the continuum. An important facet to his accounts of the various musics that make up the 'subcultural tribe', for example, are the drugs associated with them, or the 'drugs/music nexus'.[14] Though perhaps of personal and arguably journalistic interest, such details make little contribution to an understanding of the continuum's artistic and aesthetic developments.

More generally, it is Reynolds' highly personal approach that often laces his formulation with inconsistency and a sense of social and cultural bias. Jeremy Gilbert has highlighted that Reynolds' abstraction of this set of styles from the 'broader matrix of black Atlantic culture' amounts to an 'arbitrary gesture' with little empirical validity, though he does go on to suggest that the case of jungle (for example), whose formal and affective differences from immediate musical antecedents justifies Reynolds' demarcation in some way.[15] Zuberi has also underlined that while some aesthetic and cultural elements are common to each of the genres outlined by Reynolds, the continuum formulation is historically short-sighted, closing these genres off from music before hardcore rave which share both production and aesthetic values, and distribution networks (e.g. pirate radio stations, dubplates and white labels, independent record shops, etc.).[16] Further, the 'hardcore' aspect of Reynolds' continuum 'maintains a gendered and class-based division' between what is deemed 'hardcore' and what is 'softcore'; 'the latter is presumed to be feminine, more mass cultural as opposed to subcultural, but also more aspirational and suburban, rather than working-class and located in the inner city'.[17] Indeed, the extent to which Reynolds' own taste influences his formulation

[14] Ibid..
[15] Jeremy Gilbert, , 'Break/Flow/Escape/Capture: The Energy and Impotence of the Hardcore Continuum', in Jon Stratton and Nabeel Zuberi (eds.) *Black Popular Music in Britain Since 1945* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016) 169-184, here 170.
[16] Nabeel Zuberi, 'New Throat Fe Chat: The Voices and Media of MC Culture', in Jon Stratton and Nabeel Zuberi (eds.) *Black Popular Music in Britain Since 1945* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016) 187-201, here 190.
[17] Ibid..

should not be underestimated, and it is often machinic, electronic music that is favoured over the 'soul humanism' of (for example) Britfunk and jazz-funk.[18]

That is not to say, however, that Reynolds' concept is crucially flawed; his 'participant-observer' or 'critic-fanatic' approach lends his writing a certain authenticity and authority. Further, he identifies important extra-musical features of the continuum that became and remain important specifically to the (aesthetic) development of grime, such as the scene's economic infrastructure: 'pirate radio stations, independent record shops (often in out-of-the-way urban areas), white labels and dubplates, specific rave promoters and clubs (again often in the less glitzy, non-central areas of cities)'.[19] Like the musics that preceded it, grime's early dissemination relied heavily on independent record shops and club nights (the music video for Wiley's 'Wot Do U Call It?' features both locations), and much of the scene's early development was facilitated by pirate radio which, as the chapters that follow demonstrate, in turn shaped both the expectations attached to grime's performance practice and aesthetic language.[20] While Reynolds' conception of the 'Hardcore Continuum', therefore, is not entirely effective or informative with regard to grime's *aesthetic* genealogy, it nonetheless offers a valuable point of departure for exploration. Though more concerned with sketching musical subcultures or 'scenes' in quite a broad and impressionistic fashion, the series of seven articles written for *The Wire* that constitute Reynolds' writing on the continuum provide valuable signposts for tracing grime's aesthetic 'origins'.

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[18] Ibid..
[19] Reynolds, 'Simon Reynolds on the hardcore continuum'.
[20] 'Wot Do U Call It?' may be heard here, accompanied by its music video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e1YKFV45M18 (accessed 28th May 2020); For more on grime's relationship with pirate radio, and the role of pirate radio as an oppositional channel and site of creative practice, see Alex de Lacey, 'Pirate mentality: How London radio has shaped creative practice in grime music', *Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media*, 19 No. 1 (2021) 197-215, https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/30491/23/RJ_19_1_art_DeLaceyAAM.pdf (accessed 10th January 2024); see also Alex de Lacey, '"Let us know you're locked": Pirate radio broadcasts as historical and musical artefact', *Popular music history*, 12 No. 2 (2019), 194-214.

As mentioned above, Reynolds' continuum begins with Hardcore Rave. A 'fast, linear style deploying abrasive timbres, mainly "dark" minor tonalities and four-to-the-floor house rhythms', Hardcore Rave emerged in London in the late 1980s as a 'distinctly northern European interpretation' of techno originating mainly from Detroit.[21] The UK's 'unique mutant version' of this originally American music aesthetically differs most significantly in its deployment of breakbeats – which Reynolds describes as 'short, relatively complex and staccato percussive figures, traditionally sampled from drum breaks on old funk and soul records' (the percussion-only section, or peak of a funk or disco track 'at which dancers cut loose') - as the fundamental structure upon which tracks were built.[22] The use of breakbeats as rhythmic 'building blocks', looping breaks into a 'continuous, hypnotic groove', derives most obviously from hip hop production, and is illustrative of what Reynolds observes as the influence of 'elements from dub reggae, [Jamaican] dancehall, and hip hop' on the continuum.[23] As Jeremy Gilbert observes, a number of other factors had a significant influence on Hardcore:

> What [UK producers] brought from dancehall was a tendency to speed up these basic units to generate a distinctively insistent soundtrack which, by literally shortening the space between beats, compressing their rhythmic complexity into intense machinic bursts, seemed to phallicise or simply de-eroticise their effects, producing a highly aggressive, deliberately rough and ragged soundscape […] The resultant style was referred to simply as 'hardcore' […].[24]

While the influence of hip hop and dancehall – as well as, by extension, funk and soul – is indicative of the hardcore continuum's historical short-sightedness, hardcore rave/techno remains nonetheless a justifiable starting point for Reynolds, and indeed for an examination of

[21] Gilbert, 'Break/Flow/Escape/Capture: The Energy and Impotence of the Hardcore Continuum', 169.
[22] Reynolds, 'the hardcore continuum'; Simon Reynolds, *Energy Flash: A Journey Through Rave Music and Dance Culture* (London: Picador, 1998), 239; Gilbert, 'Break/Flow/Escape/Capture', 169.
[23] Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 240; Reynolds, 'the hardcore continuum'.
[24] Gilbert, 'Break/Flow/Escape/Capture', 169-170.

grime's aesthetic genealogy. As Gilbert's account indicates, it is with hardcore that producers began to transform those rhythmic elements derived from funk, soul, hip hop, and dancehall in a meaningful way, or began to explore 'the intersection between "fucked up" and "groovy"'.[25] Indeed, the rhythmic complexity of hardcore foreshadowed – or 'matured into' – the 'breakbeat science' and 'rhythmic psychedelia' that would become jungle music.[26]

"Wicked, Wicked, Junglist Massive" (Jungle is Massive) [27]

Taking the rhythmic developments of hardcore to their logical conclusion, producers began layering multiple breakbeats to form 'an exhilarating bedlam of clashing and meshing polyrhythms', a dense 'percussive web' that destabilised the relatively steady metronomic four-to-the-floor kick drums found in hardcore.[28] Taking its name from a London nightclub, jungle is perhaps the most formally innovative of the musics that make up Reynolds' continuum, or made the cleanest break with what preceded it. Indeed, Gilbert has noted the emergence of jungle 'as marking a significant event in popular musical culture', as well as its 'distinctiveness of […] style, its formal and affective differences from its immediate antecedents exceeding what would normally be expected from incremental processes of musical evolution and synthesis'.[29] Reynolds has stated that jungle's radicalism resides in the way it 'upturns Western music's hierarchy of melody/harmony over rhythm/timbre'.[30] The textural and compositional privilege afforded to rhythm in jungle music is characteristic also of its separation from hip hop and dancehall, in which percussive elements provide background support for a predominantly vocal foreground (rapping/MCing). This 'rhythm-as-melody aesthetic' is for Reynolds not only

[25] Reynolds, 'the hardcore continuum'.
[26] Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 241.
[27] M-Beat feat. General Levy 'Incredible' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mL2Bgj-za5k (accessed 2nd September 2023).
[28] Ibid., 240-1.
[29] Gilbert, 'Break/Flow/Escape/Capture', 170.
[30] Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 242.

evocative of West African music, illustrating further the influence of diasporic aesthetics on the hardcore continuum, but parallels the 'preoccupations of avant-garde classical composers like John Cage and Steve Reich'.[31] While perhaps rather approximate and sweeping, the link Reynolds makes between jungle music and twentieth-century classical avant-gardism is nonetheless illustrative of the genre's aesthetic experimentalism. This experimentalism/avant-gardism was in many ways, as Gilbert points out, 'deliberate' or 'self-conscious': as the genre's musical innovations developed, producers and DJs began to describe their sonic practice as a kind of 'science'.[32] Reynolds gives an engaging account of what this 'science' consisted of:

> Effects like time-stretching/compression, pitch shifting, ghosting and psychedelia-style reverse gave the percussion an eerie chromatic quality that blurred the line between rhythm, melody and timbre. Separate drum 'hits' within a single breakbeat could be subjected to different degrees of echo and reverb, so that each percussive accent seems to occur in a different space.[33]

Important to jungle's aesthetic, as well as the rhythmic developments described above, was the greater importance afforded to the MC. Both '[riding] the rhythm confidently' and 'conducting the choir', or moving the crowd 'to respond vocally and in dance' to the music, the role of the MC in jungle has its roots dancehall, where vocalists would guide audiences during a dance, 'champion […] the sound system', and instruct those assembled 'both in the immediacy of the event and […] on the subjects of the day'.[34] Demonstrating further the influence of dancehall, and arguably hip hop, on the continuum, MC culture within jungle offers perhaps the clearest antecedent to grime music. Indeed, numerous grime MCs started in the jungle scene, including Wiley, who states he 'did jungle for years':

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[31] Ibid..
[32] Gilbert, 'Break/Flow/Escape/Capture', 171.
[33] Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 241.
[34] Zuberi, 'New Throat Fe Chat: The Voices and Media of MC Culture', 185.

> Jungle was big. I started listening to jungle in school, when I was a second year, 1992-93. It was hardcore really but it elevated to that. [grime artist] Slimzee bought me into that. I loved the breakbeats with the reggae, soul or rare groove samples.[35]

Further interview and anecdotal evidence from other now-prominent grime artists, including D Double E, Slimzee, and DJ Target, illustrates the huge impact of jungle on grime, both in the early development of the latter's artists, and on grime's sound itself. As will be shown, grime music, especially in its early stages, exhibits the same breakbeat-based, hardcore-influenced, MC-driven characteristics present in jungle. Further, the street-level reportage that occupies much of grime's subject matter also finds its antecedent in jungle, where the 'subjects of the day' covered by MCs would encompass mostly the urban environment that they experienced. As Gilbert notes, 'junglists were explicit in their assertions that their music (like gangsta rap) was in some sense 'real', an authentic expression of the late twentieth-century metropolitan experience [or the concrete jungle?]'.[36] Gilbert's mention of gangsta rap is poignant in light of Reynolds' writing, in which he frames jungle as 'a speedfreak (*sic*) cousin of old skool hip hop', and Britain's 'own equivalent to (as opposed to imitation of) US hip hop'.[37] The distinction made between equivalent to/imitation of is significant; while MC culture in British music was undoubtedly heavily influenced by important earlier innovations in US hip hop (as Reynolds' and Gilbert's writings both illustrate), the differing cultural settings effected a separation between the two, both with regard to subject matter and aesthetic sensibility.

The hardcore continuum's rapid rate of innovation, and the (assumed) short attention spans of the UK's clubbing masses, meant ultimately that jungle's rhythmic psychedelia would

[35] Martin Clark, 'Eski Beat: An interview with Wiley – Part 2' *HyperDub* (2003) https://www.fabriclondon.com/blog/view/hyperdub-archive-eski-beat-an-interview-with-wiley-part-2 (accessed 3rd September 2021).
[36] Gilbert, 'Break/Flow/Escape/Capture', 174.
[37] Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 245.

soon metamorphose into the moodier and more minimal sounds of drum 'n' bass.[38] As Gilbert notes: 'the thrill – but also the sense of disorienting impotence – which characterised participation in these scenes derived from the sense that the core audience became bored with given genres long before those musical styles had had time to express even a fraction of their immanent potential'.[39] Indeed, Roni Size & Reprazent's 1997 Mercury Prize win (and platinum certification) for *New Forms* consolidated drum 'n' bass' commercial and critical succession over its predecessor. While crowds and critics naturally moved on from jungle's kinetic polyrhythms, however, it is arguable that the music's influence on the UK's underground music scene remains unparalleled. Jungle's stature as a truly innovative musical form is widely accepted. Though later genres (including UK garage and grime) may have prospered in mainstream appeal and engagement, jungle's apparent aesthetic radicalism and ability to communicate real subcultural authenticity to its audience makes it the most significant and foundational of all the musics contained within Reynolds' continuum.

Moving Too Fast

Reynolds' highly personal history of 90s 'bass culture' fails to account for the fact that, throughout the decade, the musics of the hardcore continuum could not compete with the popularity (in terms both of sales and dance events attended) of, for example, commercial house music.[40] Gilbert notes that the continuum's core audience was always:

> a combination of young working-class dancers from ethnically mixed but predominantly black neighbourhoods, and smaller contingents of middle-class students and bohemians (of whom Reynolds became the totemic representative)

[38] Goldie's 1995 debut album *Timeless* is widely accepted as a ground-breaking release in the history of drum 'n' bass music, and in many ways encapsulates the crossover between drum 'n' bass and jungle: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Usqwy2-E4SE (accessed 21st August 2023).
[39] Gilbert, 'Break/Flow/Escape/Capture', 177.
[40] Ibid., 176.

> drawn in part by the music's urban glamour but also by the sheer attractive force of its formal inventiveness.[41]

It is because the musics associated with the hardcore continuum, or bass culture, have never relied on mainstream or mass-cultural popularity that they have continued to flourish well beyond their perceived commercial sell-by date. Both drum 'n' bass and jungle have survived and prospered as international music genres well into the twenty-first century long after journalistic interest in them peaked in the mid-90s. This ability to survive despite mainstream lack of interest became central to grime's development and success following its own early flirtations with commercial and industry interest. While drum 'n' bass remains a key iteration of bass culture that certainly influenced grime, I focus instead on the music that displaced it as the vernacular soundtrack of London nightlife, defied the hardcore continuum's lack of commercial success, and came to represent the prevailing musical trend against which grime would define itself: garage.

Drum 'n' bass sought to deploy the basic rhythmic characteristics of jungle in more expressive, melodic, and less abrasive ways while nonetheless remaining relatively rough, ragged, and 'hardcore'– a kind of middle-class oriented digital jazz as opposed to jungle's more proletarian sonic sadism.[42]. Garage, however, used elements of jungle's rhythmic and timbral innovations to create a rather different sound characterised by its strong melodic sense and complex yet highly danceable rhythms. Imported from New York, garage (also known as 'New York House') in its original form derived much of its sound from R&B and gospel music to create a highly soulful and melodic form of House music. This soundscape was radically intensified in its British iteration, at first by simply increasing the BPM, thus creating 'speed garage'. For Simon Reynolds, UK garage represents the marriage of the original American

[41] Ibid..
[42] Ibid., 175.

genre with the 'rude bwoy spirit and rhythmic science' of jungle.[43] Indeed, the transformation of 'speed garage' to 'two-step (or 2-step) garage' was realised mainly by the addition of more jungle-influenced elements, namely rhythmic complexity. As Reynolds details:

> Two-step transforms Garage into a kind of slow motion Jungle – a languorous frenzy of micro-breakbeats, hesitations and hyper-syncopations; moments when the beat seems to pause, poised, and hold its breath. In its simplest form, it does this by removing every second and fourth kick from the 4-to-the-floor pulse, creating a lurching, falter-funk feel. More adventurous two-step producers program irregular kick-drum patterns which syncopate with the bassline […] Two-step has actually taken the 'speed' out of Speed Garage, or at least the sensation of velocity, because removing two out of every four kicks subtracts that steady-pulsing energy. […] tactile timbres combine with the twitchy triplets and syncopations to create weird cross-rhythm effects – nicks and barbs that seem to snag your flesh and tug your body every-which-way.[44]

While Reynolds does well to capture the sensations of garage's rhythmic innovation from his critic-fanatic, first-hand perspective, his account of the scene does not make clear the very apparent sonic differences between garage and jungle. Reynolds does go some way to illustrating the cultural contrasts between the two scenes, noting the shift from the 'anhedonic severity' of jungle and drum 'n' bass to garage's 'relentless emphasis on pleasure'.[45] Indeed, the drugs/music nexus that characterises much of Reynolds' continuum writing is helpful here, as he documents the shift from ecstasy to cocaine (or the 'fall from paradise'), as rave's 'androgynous asexuality' was displaced by 'repolarised gender roles and rapacious sexuality'.[46] For Reynolds, cocaine is 'the perfect signifier for Garage's ambivalent politics': 'not only

[43] Simon Reynolds, 'Simon Reynolds on the hardcore continuum series #6: Two-Step garage (1999)', *The Wire* (2013) https://www.thewire.co.uk/in-writing/essays/the-wire-300_simon-reynolds-on-the-hardcore-continuum-series_6_two-step-garage_1999 (accessed 22nd August 2023).
[44] Ibid..
[45] Ibid..
[46] Ibid..

because of its associations with prestige, but because it's a drug that stimulates the appetite for all pleasures, and because the dynamics of its use (insatiability, basically) offer a kind of parody of consumerism'.[47] Reynolds even theorises a 'cocaine ear', which favours 'bright, toppy sounds – hence Garage's harsh glare of crisp hi-hats, shrill brass, glossy synths, and trebly vocals'.[48]

While evidence for a 'cocaine ear' is perhaps limited, Reynolds does inadvertently touch upon a key aesthetic trait found in garage that separated it from both jungle and drum 'n' bass – the return of the privilege of the voice. Jungle's radical rejection of melody and harmony over rhythm and timbre was reversed by garage's soulful and often tuneful soundscape; as garage music developed, the percussive elements described by Reynolds increasingly became background support for a predominantly vocal foreground. Artists like Craig David and Daniel Bedingfield paired two-step garage with overtly R&B vocals, and in doing so pushed garage to levels of commercial success that were unprecedented for musics in Reynolds' continuum – David's 2000 debut album *Born to Do It* debuted at number one on the UK Albums Chart and became the fastest-selling debut album ever by a British male solo act.[49] Music such as David's exemplifies what Gilbert identifies as garage's 'remarkable assemblage of "hard" elements into a "feminine" sound'.[50] Indeed, *Born to Do It*'s soulful meditations on romance, relationships, and clubbing are far removed from the street-level reportage that characterised jungle's (and to an extent drum 'n' bass') MC culture both lyrically and sonically.

A year on from Craig David's debut, however, and two-step garage was topping the UK charts with a much darker, more MC-oriented sound – a sound that arguably marks the beginning of grime's emergence. So Solid Crew's '21 Seconds', a 'crucial evolutionary step in

[47] Ibid..
[48] Ibid..
[49] *Born to Do It*'s lead single 'Fill Me In' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3imO7PFU5cI (accessed 20th July 2023).
[50] Gilbert, 'Break/Flow/Escape/Capture', 177.

the prehistory of [the] grime scene', captures in many ways the dynamics and energy of pirate radio stations, functioning primarily as a vehicle through which each crew member can exhibit their mic skills.[51] As with all musics in Reynolds' continuum, where each genre's connection to previous trends is largely one of insistent rejection, So Solid Crew's brand of UK garage sets itself against the high-end sheen of albums like *Born to Do It*. So Solid also exhibit the importance of crews to the transitional period between garage and the emergence of grime: grime pioneers Wiley, Dizzee Rascal, Skepta, etc., all began their careers as members of various garage and grime crews (Pay As You Go, Roll Deep, etc.).

This thesis takes as its starting point the emergence of grime music, at a time when UK garage became relatively unfashionable. The hardcore continuum's relentless experimentalism meant that two-step garage's popularity declined before producers had extensively explored its aesthetic possibilities. This is one reason, perhaps, why many of the musics included in the hardcore continuum model have either experienced a resurgence or revival (as with garage throughout the 2010s through younger artists like AJ Tracey, comebacks from 'legends' of the scene like Craig David, and the extremely popular TV series *People Just Do Nothing* which followed members of the fictional garage crew KURUPT), or have enjoyed sustained prosperity and popularity outside the cultural mainstream (like jungle and drum 'n' bass). Despite each genre's short-lived commercial, cultural, and journalistic popularity, producers of these musics decline to move on from them, as – particularly in the case of music scenes that have survived and thrived before, after, and (in some cases) without mainstream interest – a lack of profitability does not preclude a wealth of creative productivity.

Indeed, the ongoing successes enjoyed by these genres indicate another issue with Reynolds' continuum formulation, namely its implicit construction of a progress narrative in

[51] Zoe Adams, '"I don't know why man's calling me family all of a sudden": Address and reference terms in grime music', *Language & Communication* 60 (2018), 11-27, here 12; '21 Seconds' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g7VhofoV3qs (accessed 20th July 2023).

which each music is surpassed or usurped by a newer, 'fresher', genre. Clare Hemmings' writing on 'storytelling' in relation to the history of Western feminist theory highlights the dangers of histories that are 'consistently told as a series of interlocking narratives of progress, loss, and return' that oversimplify their subjects as 'needing to inhabit a theoretical and political cutting edge in the present'.[52] While this chapter has in many ways supported Reynolds' narrative in its chronological telling of grime's musical and cultural antecedents, I do not wish in any way to historicise them or to suggest a Hegelian logic that 'situates the past as merely instrumental' to what followed.[53] The chronology of musics traced in this chapter is one of 'temporal succession' as opposed to 'historical supersession'.[54] As will be shown in the chapters that follow, the genres covered in this chapter continued to have an influence on grime music as it developed as well as continuing lives of their own, and grime itself experienced the same commercial and creative slumps as these genres, and was thought at times to be 'dead' or to have been superseded by later developments in the British music scene. As grime's specific history shows, however, any chronology of a musical genre (or genres) is not a teleological narrative, but rather an often-messy series of reinventions, borrowings, experimentations, rebirths, and revivals.

What I hope to have offered in this chapter is not a history of grime's inevitable emergence, but an overview of some of the music scenes in grime's immediate prehistory; namely the genres from which grime took inspiration and the aesthetic developments to which it reacted. As the following chapter on Wiley will show, grime in its early years preoccupied itself with musical and cultural delineation. That is, grime artists wished to separate themselves and their music, or 'sound', from the prevailing musical trends at the turn of the century (i.e.

[52] Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*, (London: Duke University Press, 2011), 3.
[53] Emily Cousens, 'Corporeal Vulnerability and the Temporality of Feminist Theory', *Studies in Social & Political Thought*, 27 (2017), 40-56, here 48.
[54] Ibid..

garage music) – as Wiley states, he's got "his own sound, it's not garage". Such claims to independence and difference are, however, largely rhetorical and whether by design or not artists continue to spin the aesthetic and cultural characteristics of grime's musical antecedents into its musical fabric. As Jeffrey Boakye notes, grime artists recognise and craft their identity by 'empowering themselves through a musical-cultural heritage'.[55]

[55] Jeffrey Boakye, *Hold Tight* (London: Influx Press, 2018), 46-7.

Chapter Two – Wiley *Treddin' On Thin Ice* (2004)[1]

Wiley's debut album *Treddin' On Thin Ice*, released in April of 2004, is widely regarded to have provided a grime 'blueprint', introducing musical and stylistic concepts that still hold influence in contemporary grime and UK rap in what Boakye describes as 'a moment of self-promotion and self-realisation for Wiley that transcends the individual and begins to raise a culture'.[2] Delivering what was considered at the time to be 'the most envelope pushing-music in Britain', Wiley's 'defiantly low-rent mass of jabbing rhythms, crude samples and rumbling bass frequencies' helped to define grime against preceding UK musical trends, and established a powerful aesthetic model for future practitioners of the genre.[3] Wiley's first full-length project after years of releasing now-classic dubplate and white-label releases and performing at garage raves and on pirate radio both as a solo artist and a member of his Roll Deep crew, *Treddin' On Thin Ice* represents Wiley's attempt to establish a sustained and coherent grime, or (as Wiley calls it) 'Eskibeat', aesthetic.

As *Treddin'*s first single 'Wot Do U Call It?' demonstrates, taxonomy and definition are important issues for Wiley. In the context of *Treddin'*, 'the Eskimo sound' and 'grime' are essentially interchangeable, and their meanings have now become coterminous. 'The Eskimo sound' or 'Eskibeat' are simply Wiley's own terms for his early sound, and allude to the 'coldness' or 'coolness' he feels is expressed in his work. This 'cold' aesthetic has come to define much of grime's sound since, and it is in Wiley's early work that the origins of this association are found.

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[1] This chapter is developed from a dissertation submitted for an Mst degree: John Pierce O'Reilly, '"Listen to this it don't sound like garage": Constructing Grime's musical and social aesthetics in Wiley's *Treddin' On Thin Ice.*

[2] Son Raw, '*Treddin' On Thin Ice*: Wiley's Blueprint', *Complex UK* https://www.complex.com/music/2016/04/wiley-treddin-on-thin-ice-revisited (accessed 4th June 2020); Jeffrey Boakye, *Hold Tight* (London: Influx Press, 2018), 111.

[3] Alexis Petridis, 'Wiley, Treddin' On Thin Ice', *The Guardian* https://www.theguardian.com/music/2004/apr/23/popandrock.shopping4 (accessed 2nd May 2020).

Wiley himself has come to be known as the 'Godfather' of grime, and has been credited for discovering, promoting, collaborating with and opening doors for many of the scene's future stars (e.g. Dizzee Rascal, Skepta, Jme, Stormzy); his status as a grime-scene legend alone arguably warrants Wiley a place in this project (a 2013 Change.org petition to erect a statue of Wiley – who 'has undoubtedly inspired a generation' – drew 4,967 supporters).[4] It is, however, *Treddin' On Thin Ice*'s 'blueprint' or prototype quality that positions the album as a productive and obvious starting point for this project. *Treddin'* presents many of grime's key musical components in their original form, and many elements of Wiley's 'Eskibeat' have come to form a central part of grime's classic sound palette. In order to explore some of these elements, this chapter examines the album's first single 'Wot Do U Call It?' in relation to grime's emergence and the ways in which Wiley defined and delineated the genre from preceding musical trends. Presenting an analysis that focuses on a listener's experience of the track, the chapter outlines some of the ways in which Wiley highlights the aesthetic disparities between grime and garage in order to underline the musical characteristics of the former. Further, the chapter illustrates some of the ways in which sonic cues throughout 'Wot Do U Call It?' inform a listener of the details of its production and the cultural setting from which it emerged. Following this, the chapter examines the three instrumental interludes on *Treddin'* – 'Eskimo', 'Avalanche', and 'Icerink'. Framing each of these instrumentals as instances of autonomous electronic music, the chapter primarily considers the extent to which the music may be said to present a legitimate aesthetic of 'coldness', in response to claims made by both critics and Wiley himself. Such an analysis, in many ways, is relevant not only to Wiley's *Treddin'* but, given the album's seminal status and prototypical quality, to grime music as a whole. Indeed, as the chapters that follow demonstrate, the album's prototypical qualities have

[4] https://www.change.org/p/tower-hamlets-london-borough-council-erect-a-statue-of-uk-grime-artist-wiley-in-bow (accessed 5th August 2023).

been historically proven. Grime's key sonic elements as present on *Treddin'* continue to appear throughout the genre's history, and it is this chapter that gives them some historical and scholarly grounding.

"WileyKat's got his own sound, it's not garage"

'Wot Do U Call It?', *Treddin' On Thin Ice*'s third track, offers a valuable entry point into the sound world that the album inhabits.[5] The first single released from *Treddin' On Thin Ice*, and one of only two tracks from the album to have an accompanying music video, 'Wot Do U Call It?' was seemingly felt to be important by its author. The track represents in many ways a manifesto for *Treddin'*, as Wiley looks to delineate and establish 'the Eskimo sound' from other contemporaneous genres (namely garage). As one contemporary reviewer, who notably dubs Wiley a 'garage rapper', remarks: '"Wot Do U Call It?" plays with academics' endless game of one-upmanship over what to call his sound'.[6] While the song does occupy itself for the most part with issues of genre and taxonomy, to frame 'Wot Do U Call It?' as an entirely tongue-in-cheek engagement with academic discourse is to ignore its perhaps more serious and sincere intentions. Indeed, later reviews have been keen to reposition the track as more prophetic than playful; a 2016 review sees 'Wot Do U Call It?' as 'definitively cleaving grime from garage over a bizarre mixture of digital tuba and caustic bass'.[7] As is common in retrospective reviews, however, Wiley is all too easily labelled a visionary. While *Treddin' On Thin Ice* is of course a forward-looking album, it is all too convenient to label the music as genre-defining over a decade after its release, at a time when grime has been fully established.

[5] 'Wot Do U Call It?' may be heard here, accompanied by its music video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e1YKFV45M18 (accessed 28th May 2020).
[6] John Bush, 'Wiley *Treddin' On Thin Ice*', *allmusic.com* https://www.allmusic.com/album/treddin-on-thin-ice-mw0000383404 (accessed 4th June 2020).
[7] Raw, '*Treddin' On Thin Ice*: Wiley's Blueprint'.

What is clear is the importance of 'Wot Do U Call it?' to early-era grime, as it announced the arrival of a novel musical genre, and delineated itself from previous musics.

Lyrically, 'Wot Do U Call It?' stakes its own claim to innovation; the track's rapped verses in particular demonstrate an eagerness to distance his sound from other 'scenes' ("Listen to this, it don't sound like garage/Who told you that I make garage/WileyKat's got his own sound it's not garage"). Supporting Wiley's own claim, Nabeel Zuberi states that 'Wot Do U Call It?' 'heralded the arrival of a new sound (grime) and its distinctiveness from garage'.[8] In support of Zuberi, Richard Bramwell suggests 'Wot Do U Call It?' 'celebrates [Wiley's] success in producing a distinctive sound which distinguishes his work from other musical genres', outlining his 'relation to other music scenes'.[9] Zuberi and Bramwell, however, ground their analyses of the track almost exclusively in its music video, which for both authors depicts the cultural and economic environment in which Wiley's music exists, and even for Zuberi 'gives a good sense of how this music […] is produced'.[10] This is certainly a legitimate route for discussion, taking a holistic approach to the song and exploring to some degree what Nicholas Cook has termed music's 'multimedia' quality.[11] It does, however, leave unexplored the question of how exactly the music asserts itself as distinctive from other genres, and how it may in and of itself provide information on its production.

Indeed, Bramwell and Zuberi, and both reviews quoted above, all appear to take Wiley at face value, at least lyrically. While 'Wot Do U Call It?' may have paved the way for a new sound world that "sure ain't garage", it is unwise simply to take Wiley's word for it. Analyses such as Bramwell and Zuberi's appear to believe Wiley when he states he "don't care about

[8] Nabeel Zuberi, 'New Throat Fe Chat: The Voices and Media of MC Culture', in Jon Stratton and Nabeel Zuberi (eds.) *Black Popular Music in Britain Since 1945* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016) 187-201, here 197.
[9] Richard Bramwell *UK Hip-Hop, Grime and the City: The Aesthetics and Ethics of London's Rap Scenes* (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2015), 129.
[10] Bramwell, *The Aesthetic and Ethics of London's Rap Scenes*, 129; Zuberi, 'New Throat Fe Chat', 197.
[11] See Nicholas Cook *Analysing Musical Multimedia* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1998), & Nicholas Cook, 'Theorizing Musical Meaning', *Music Theory Spectrum* 23, No. 2 (2001), 170-195.

garage", yet fail to take him up on the invitation that follows: "Listen to this, it don't sound like garage". Listening to the track itself as it appears on *Treddin' On Thin Ice*, rather than the 'multimedia' experience of a music video, or even a live performance, facilitates an analysis that considers how definitive Wiley's musical departure from contemporaneous styles was.

'Wot Do U Call It?'

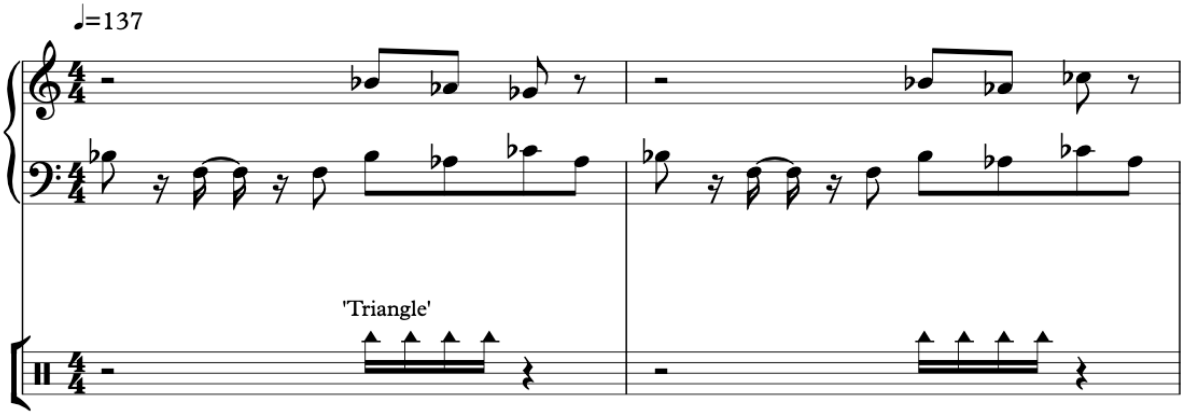

Figure 1 - Two-bar cell for 'Wot Do U Call It?' (opening fourteen seconds).[12]

Figure 1 shows the basic two-bar musical structure for the track's opening fourteen seconds; the song's bass ostinato is first heard as a sampled string sound, and is coupled with another melodic figure (of rather indeterminate timbre) to form a basic call and response texture that foreshadows the lyrical structure of the track's chorus. This repeating two-bar cell is accompanied by a number of voices, all 'played' by Wiley, that direct questions ("Do you do garage music mate?", "You got any of that urban?") towards an unspecified listener. Although these questions are presumably from Wiley *to* Wiley in tongue-in-cheek fashion, the absence of any response equally identifies the listener as the presumed addressee. As well as eliciting

[12] It is important here to note those parameters of music excluded by the transcriptions that feature throughout this thesis (e.g. accent, texture, timbre, etc.). While these elements are of course essential in the makeup of grime's sound world, and are at times discussed in this thesis as they are incumbent, a full appraisal of these parameters in relation to grime music is beyond the scope of the project. It is the author's hope that they will form the subject of future publications.

from listeners a perhaps more involved engagement with the track, the locale implied by these voices serves to specify Wiley's assumed audience; though caricatured, the accents heard in this opening verbal ensemble unmistakably specify East/South-East London.

These voices are gradually formalised, as the free-time questions ("You got any of that urban?") are replaced with the rhythmically repeating question "What d'you call it?" to form the song's hook. This gradual vocal shift is matched by the introduction (at 0:14) of a cabasa sound, as illustrated in Figure 2. The addition of the cabasa is significant not only for its rhythmic interest (though for many this may be the point in the track when their head begins to nod along), but also for its timbral qualities. While ostensibly a minor detail, well attuned listeners may more readily associate this sound with garage than grime. As a writer for *Attack Magazine* has pointed out, 'rather than use an open [hi-]hat sample', garage producers often opt for a cabasa, as they 'tend to be very bright but not as harsh […] as open hats can be'.[13] The inclusion of a cabasa in 'Wot Do U Call It?' is therefore more than a point of rhythmic interest, and in fact represents Wiley musically referencing those musics that his lyrics cite.

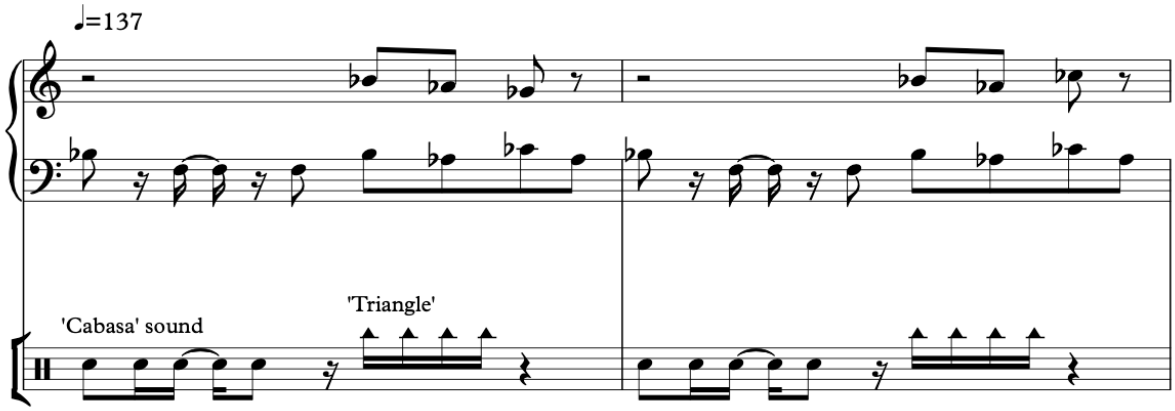

Figure 2 - Basic two-bar cell with addition of 'cabasa' sound.

[13] *attackmagazine.com*, 'UK Garage', https://www.attackmagazine.com/technique/beatdissected/uk-garage/ (accessed 3rd May 2020).

This notion of musical reference is emphasised by the entrance of the song's first verse (at 0:28), an emphasis achieved through musical contrast. The bass figure heard at the opening remains melodically unchanged, but is now heard in a new synthesised bass sound, and is met by the introduction of a more complex rhythmic pattern, shown in Figure 3. The contrast established here between the song's opening and this new texture is in many ways illustrative of what Son Raw believes the track's purpose to be: 'to deliver a meta-commentary on the nature of the UK underground, garage/grime scene politics and the evolution of music itself'.[14] The entrance of the verse indicates not only a shift in intensity, from digital strings to edgier synths, but also a shift in sound worlds, from garage to grime.

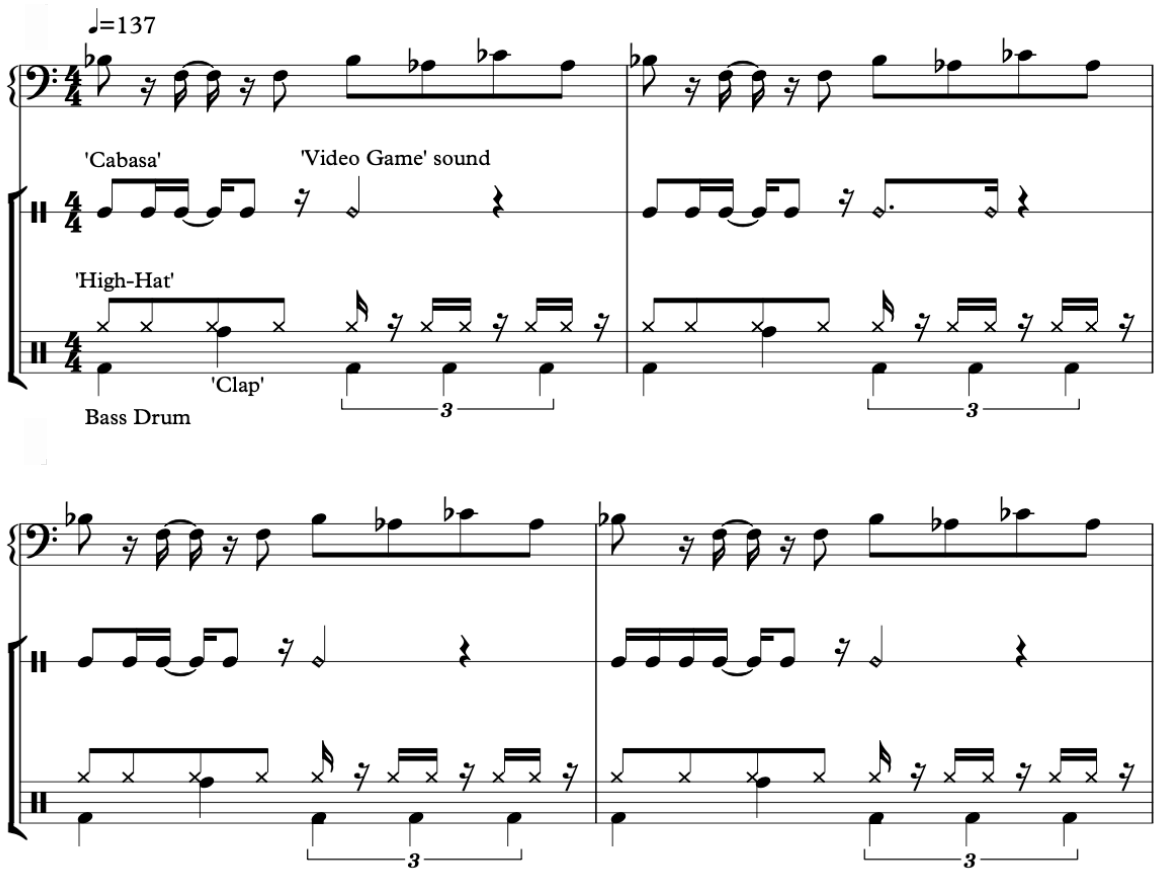

Figure 3 - Four-bar cell that forms the foundation for much of 'Wot Do U Call It?'.

[14] Son Raw, 'A Journey Through Wiley's Eskibeat', *Complex UK* https://www.complex.com/music/2019/08/a-journey-through-wiley-eskibeat/ (accessed 5th May 2020).

Significantly, as Figures 2 and 3 show, Wiley is able to effect this shift in tone while maintaining much of the opening's melodic and rhythmic structure. In the process, the contrasts between the two sections become more pronounced, as recognisable material is transformed timbrally and texturally. I propose that it is primarily through this device that Wiley 'definitively cleav[es] grime from garage'; by constructing a basic cell that demonstrably exhibits elements of garage, Wiley is able to delineate 'the Eskimo sound' by transforming those elements into his own aesthetic. [15] This can be further illustrated by reference to an example of garage contemporary to 'Wot Do U Call It?'.

Figure 4 shows the basic four-bar rhythmic and melodic cell for 'All I Want' by London-based group Mis-Teeq. [16] Released on the group's 2001 album *Lickin' On Both Sides*, 'All I Want' is representative of early 2000s mainstream UK garage, having charted in the UK Top 10, and as such exemplifies the music 'Wot Do U Call It?' distinguishes itself from. 'All I Want' is illustrative of Jeremy Gilbert's description of two-step garage, which for him is 'characterised by surprising but easily danceable rhythms', as well as a 'strong melodic sense'.[17] Although Gilbert does not indicate how these qualities are generated musically, the 'danceable' quality he identifies can be traced to what is often termed the 'shuffle' rhythm that falls on the final two beats of a bar, as indicated in Figure 4 by the 'anticipatory' semiquavers tied to each bar's third beat. The music's 'danceability', therefore, may stem from the perceived musical motion that this rhythm generates, as the final two beats of each bar are audibly 'shuffled' towards the next downbeat. Indeed, that the term 'shuffle' can be used both in

[15] Raw, '*Treddin' On Thin Ice*: Wiley's Blueprint'.
[16] 'All I Want' may be heard here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sEecGdMpcoU (accessed 28th May 2020).
[17] Jeremy Gilbert, 'Break/Flow/Escape/Capture: The Energy and Impotence of the Hardcore Continuum', in Jon Stratton and Nabeel Zuberi (eds.) *Black Popular Music in Britain Since 1945* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016) 169-184, here 176.

reference to a specific form of dancing *and* as a descriptor for a rhythm's motion character speaks to the potential psychological influence of this rhythmic motif.[18]

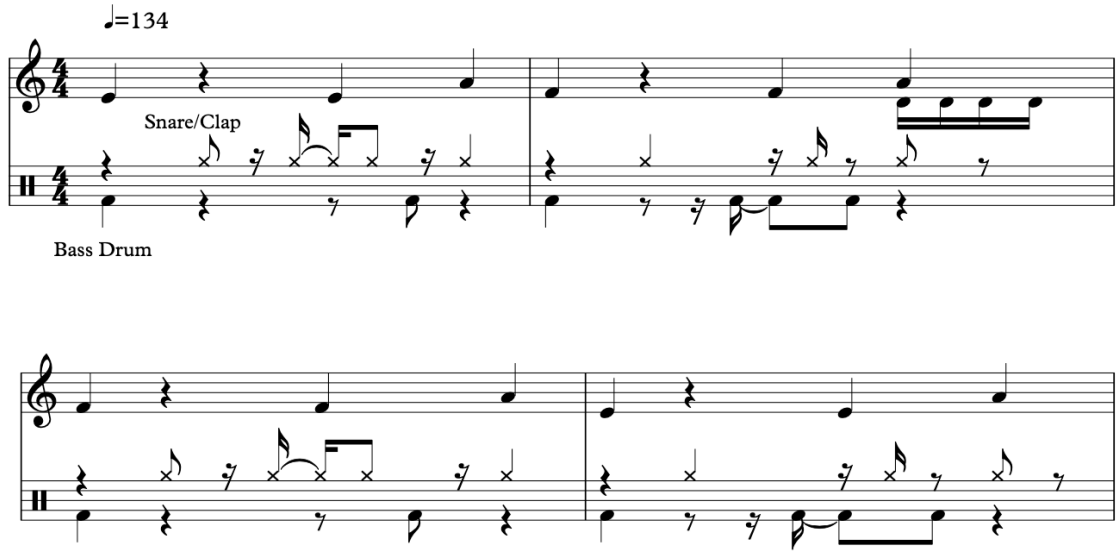

Figure 4 - Mis-Teeq, 'All I want' - four-bar rhythmic and melodic cell.

As Figures 2 and 3 show, this 'shuffle' rhythm is present in 'Wot Do U Call It?', though in the hands of Wiley it is displaced and transformed. In the cabasa part the anticipatory semiquaver is now tied to each bar's second beat, displaced from its regular position in garage (see Figure 4), which disrupts the auditory motion it usually provides. In place of this 'shuffle' rhythm on beat 3, throughout his verses, Wiley introduces a much more laboured kick-drum rhythm (illustrated in Figure 3 as a triplet), giving each bar a heavier, more dense rhythmic character. By developing and transforming recognisable rhythmic patterns associated with garage, Wiley continues to deliver his 'meta-commentary' on the UK's underground music scenes.

Discussing pastiche pieces within works of art (and citing the newsreel footage in *Citizen Kane* and the "Murder of Gonzago" play in *Hamlet*), Richard Dyer suggests that the 'effect of the inner pastiche is to authenticate the outer form', and it is this effect that Wiley

[18] For more on music and motion, see Eric Clarke, *Ways of Listening: An Ecological Approach to the Perception of Musical Meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), in particular pp. 62-90.

seems to aim at in 'Wot Do U Call It?'.[19] Indeed, what I have termed musical reference above may be alternatively termed pastiche, the purpose of which is to authenticate grime as a new genre via musical contrast.[20] The track's structure, therefore, is in many ways motivated by juxtaposition; each shift in tone, from chorus to verse, emerges as an opportunity for Wiley to validate 'the Eskimo sound' against preceding musical trends. Notably, these shifts are emphasised lyrically, as the playful and arguably authorless hook ("What d'you call it? garage?" etc.) is interrupted by the clear and direct tone of Wiley himself ("I don't care about garage").

Wiley's departure from garage and other contemporaneous styles, therefore, is documented in real time as the song unfolds. Rather than merely symbolising or denoting a break from preceding musical trends, as critics suggest, 'Wot Do U Call It?' effects this break within its own musical structure. Through the employment of musical reference and pastiche, Wiley is able to present the musics against which he wishes to delineate his 'Eskimo sound', and then engineers that separation. With all of this reference material and pastiche, however, it is important to note that 'Wot Do U Call It?' still "don't sound like garage". That Wiley is able to generate and sustain a wholly original sound world that includes within it elements of already established genres, speaks to grime's aesthetic solidity and potency.

As the above analysis demonstrates, and as Zuberi states 'Wot Do U Call It?' heralded 'the arrival of a new sound' and, through pastiche and musical reference, established grime's 'distinctiveness from garage'. [21] As I have indicated, however, Zuberi's analysis is grounded in the track's music video, and the 'distinctiveness from garage' he identifies appears to be more socio-economic than aesthetic, citing the spaces which appear in the video (e.g. 'the

[19] Richard Dyer, *Pastiche*. (London: Routledge, 2006) quoted in Justin Williams, '"Cars with the Boom": Music, Automobility, and Hip-hop "Sub" Cultures', in *The Oxford Handbook of Mobile Music Studies, Vol. 2*, eds. Sumanth Gopinath and Jason Stanyek (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 109-135, here 131.
[20] I am indebted here to Justin Williams, who applies Dyer's theory in this same way to Dr Dre's G-Funk. See Williams, '"Cars With Boom"', 131.
[21] Zuberi, 'New Throat Fe Chat', 197.

record store […], outside a block of flats') as indicative of grime's cultural distinctiveness. While grime's socio-economic environment is indeed an important part of what distinguished it from other contemporaneous underground music scenes (for example from garage's associations with champagne glitz), the music's geographic and social origins are entirely bound up in its musical aesthetics, removing to some extent the need to look for such information in the visual media tied to the genre. Cues for what Bramwell terms 'the MC's social world and his cultural production' can be found within the music itself.[22]

Elements in the track's music video emphasised by Zuberi and Bramwell, such as the locality of a record shop or a block of flats, which for Bramwell 'foreground the specificity of [Wiley's] social world', are arguably specified within the song itself.[23] The accents in the voices heard at the beginning of 'Wot Do U Call It?' (0:00-0:14), for example, may specify not only a record shop (as voices inquire as to a shop's selection - "you got any of that urban?"), but a record shop in East London. While perhaps a minor detail, this nonetheless exemplifies how information relating to an MC's social environment may be coded into a track's musical structure, rather than simply depicted visually in an accompanying music video.

More significant are what I have called the 'video game' sounds in Figure 4 that run throughout 'Wot Do U Call It?', that Son Raw more suitably terms 'eski-clicks' – a 'ping-ponging sound effect straight out of an 8-Bit Nintendo game'.[24] While Bramwell points to scenes from the track's music video (such as those set in a recording studio) as indicative of Wiley's 'cultural production', these 'eski-clicks' betray far more accurately the methods behind the music's genesis and the ways in which it was produced.[25] As Fatsis has noted, grime was 'initially made using basic music software (e.g. Fruity Loops) or game consoles (e.g.

[22] Bramwell, *UK Hip-Hop, Grime and the City*, 129.
[23] Ibid..
[24] Raw, 'A Journey Through Wiley's Eskibeat'.
[25] Bramwell, *UK Hip-Hop, Grime and the City*, 129.

Music 2000 on the Playstation, Mario Paint on the Super NES)'.[26] While 'Wot Do U Call It?' was not made on a game console, the 'eski-clicks' that feature throughout the track are certainly derivative of these early-era production techniques, and consequently say more about the music's production than those scenes in the track's music video set in a recording studio.

While by no means extensive, I hope to have illustrated here some of the ways in which 'Wot Do U Call It?' informs a listener of the details of its production and the cultural setting from which it emerged. Though perhaps available only to those listeners who are able to pick up on the musical cues outlined above, the extramusical information contained within the song's structure nonetheless supports its musical-aesthetic breakaway from garage. While the voices that open 'Wot Do U Call It?' both specify the track's locality and establish a musical space in which genre may be questioned and indeed defined, the 'eski-clicks' throughout point to some of the production techniques unique to grime.

'Eskimo', 'Avalanche', and 'Icerink'

On *Treddin' On Thin Ice*'s track listing, 'Wot Do U Call It?' is followed by the instrumental track 'Eskimo (Interlude)', which behaves arguably as a kind of coda to the former, being in the same key and tempo.[27] 'Eskimo' is the first of three purely instrumental tracks, or 'interludes', that appear on the album, all of which serve to break up the otherwise vocal-heavy track listing. The inclusion of these interludes is significant, given the importance of MC culture to grime; as with all 'rap genres', grime has come to be defined by what is spoken into a microphone rather than what is programmed into Logic. Indeed, for Simon Reynolds, along

[26] Lambros Fatsis, 'Grime: Criminal subculture or public counterculture? A critical investigation into the criminalization of Black musical subcultures in the UK', *Crime Media Culture* 15, No. 3 (2019) 447-461, here 449; further discussion on the relationship between these 'eski-clicks' and video games will appear later in this chapter.

[27] 'Eskimo may be heard here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0D2aHkfmpTs
'Avalanche' here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uVhk67Q8mGc
& 'Icerink' here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RzZPJVyCnxI (all accessed 28th May 2020).

with ‘beat-science’, ‘dark bass pressure’, and ‘samples and arrangement ideas’, ‘MC’s chatting fast’ represents one of the core elements that connects the different musical forms of the ‘hardcore continuum’.[28]

As the presence of these interludes suggests, however, Wiley rejects mic skills as a necessary component of his aesthetics. ‘Eskimo’, ‘Avalanche’, and ‘Icerink’ all encapsulate Wiley’s belief in the ‘evolved [grime] practitioner’, for whom MC skills ‘are just one aspect of the bigger picture.[29] As Wiley himself has stated:

> Some MCs are big but they can’t write songs. They haven’t made the conversion from MC to artist. That’s why some of them are still just MCs. Once you make the conversion and start writing about your feelings and all things like that you make it real for yourself. You gotta make the conversion.[30]

Treddin’ On Thin Ice’s three interludes may also be said to expand the boundaries of grime itself as a genre. Their presence on the album is in fact a challenge to accounts of grime that focus on its lyrical material such as that of Lambros Fatsis, who argues that grime distinguished itself ‘from its stylistic predecessor, UK garage, which glamorized “champagne and cars”’, by portraying ‘the gritty […] reality of life in London’s council estates in an almost ethnographic fashion’.[31] As these interludes suggest, Wiley’s breakaway from garage is as much sonic as it is lyrical. Son Raw points out that Eskibeat rejected garage’s ‘high-end sheen’ in favour of ‘a return to a tough, broken, experimental sound not heard since the days of jungle’.[32] Further, instrumental grime had by 2004 already been established (XTC’s now-classic ‘Functions On The Low’ was released in the same year as *Treddin’*), and arguably would later become grime’s

[28] Simon Reynolds, ‘Simon Reynolds on the Hardcore Continuum’ (2013), quoted in Zuberi, ‘New Throat Fe Chat’, 190.
[29] Alex Ogg, *Paid in Full? An Introduction to Brit-Hop, Grime, and UK Rap* (Luton: GA&P ePublishing, 2011) (page numbers not given).
[30] Ibid..
[31] Fatsis ‘Grime: Criminal subculture or public counterculture?’, 449.
[32] Raw, ‘A Journey Through Wiley’s Eskibeat’.

sole creative outlet during its commercial and creative slump around 2010 in the hands of artists like Logos, Murlo, Bloom, and Visionist; Wiley is in many ways the architect of this particular strain of the genre.

Framing 'Eskimo', 'Avalanche', and 'Icerink' as instances of autonomous electronic music facilitates an investigation of grime's sonic qualities as present in *Treddin*'s three interludes. In particular, I wish to address Wiley's claims to sonic coldness. Numerous authors, as well as Wiley himself, have characterised grime as possessing 'a cold, dark sound', yet the question of exactly how the music itself articulates this coldness remains largely unanswered.[33] Ruth Adams has suggested, in reference to 'Eskimo', that this coldness is articulated via 'minimal synth lines and high hats (*sic*) skittering over heavy, often muffled and echoing bass melodies'.[34] While perfectly accurate, Adams' account fails to specify exactly how these synth lines and bass melodies express aesthetic coldness, as opposed to any other 'feeling'. In reference to what Cook terms music's 'multimedia' quality, as well as discourse on electronic, or 'laptop', music, this chapter considers the ways in which Wiley's music may express a legitimate aesthetic coldness.

"I feel angry and cold"

> I'm a winter person but the cold… sometimes I just feel cold hearted. I felt cold at that time, towards my family, towards everyone. That's why I used those names. I was going to use "North Pole" but I didn't even get that far. It was all things that were cold because that's how I was feeling. There are times when I feel warm. I am a nice person but sometimes I switch off and I'm just cold. I feel angry and cold.[35]

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[33] Wiley, *Eskiboy* (2017), quoted in Ruth Adams, '"Home sweet home, that's where I come from, where I got my knowledge of the road and the flow from": Grime music as an expression of identity in postcolonial London', *Popular Music and Society* 42, No. 4 (2018), 438-455, here 440.
[34] Adams, 'Grime music as an expression of identity in postcolonial London', 440.
[35] Martin Clark, 'Eski Beat: An Interview with Wiley', transcript of an interview for *Jockey Slut* magazine (23/10/03) published online on xlrecordings.com https://web.archive.org/web/20080216202712/http://www.xlrecordings.com/features/wiley-interview.html (accessed 2nd May 2020).

As Son Raw notes, 'Eskibeat, and early grime generally, is often described as cold, mechanical, strange, and various other inhuman qualities […]'.[36] It is, however, unclear as to how exactly this is manifested in the music, or how the sounds themselves express this coldness. As the quotation shows, Wiley himself has been keen to propound and promote this association, aligning his sound world with his *weltanschauung*: his music's 'cold' aesthetic is symptomatic of a cold-heartedness he feels generally.

Yet this aesthetic coldness remains justified only by association with Wiley's worldview. Indeed, while Wiley himself may vocally support this relation, he offers no indication of exactly what elements of his music articulate this icy atmosphere. Arguably, the music's association with coldness is in many ways indicative of the album's 'multimedia' quality. Based on what Turner and Fauconnier term 'conceptual blending', Cook has developed a model for the analysis of 'mixed media', in which 'words, pictures, and music are typically experienced […] as combined with one another and replete with meaning'.[37] Cook presents this model using what he terms an 'integration network', which has been co-opted below in Figure 1 to show how 'conceptual blending' may function when experiencing Wiley's music, and *Treddin'*s three interludes in particular.[38] As Figure 5 demonstrates, *Treddin' On Thin Ice* exhibits what Cook terms 'enabling similarities', whereby 'common attributes are presented by the media in question'.[39] That is, *Treddin*'s 'musical space' and 'extramusical space' can be shown to share corresponding (but separately unique) attributes, which when combined (when a listener/consumer engages with the album) form a 'blended space' from which new meanings emerge.[40] In other words, what is generally perceived to be the 'coldness' of electronic/digital

[36] Raw, 'A Journey Through Wiley's Eskibeat'.
[37] Cook, 'Theorizing Musical Meaning', 181.
[38] Ibid., 183.
[39] Ibid., 181.
[40] Ibid., 181-2.

sounds will, in a listeners engagement with *Treddin'*, be combined with the album's visual media. Coupled with the song titles, as well as Wiley's own declarations (of which a listener may be aware), these corresponding features generate a 'blended space', from which arises the notion of Wiley's music as aesthetically cold.

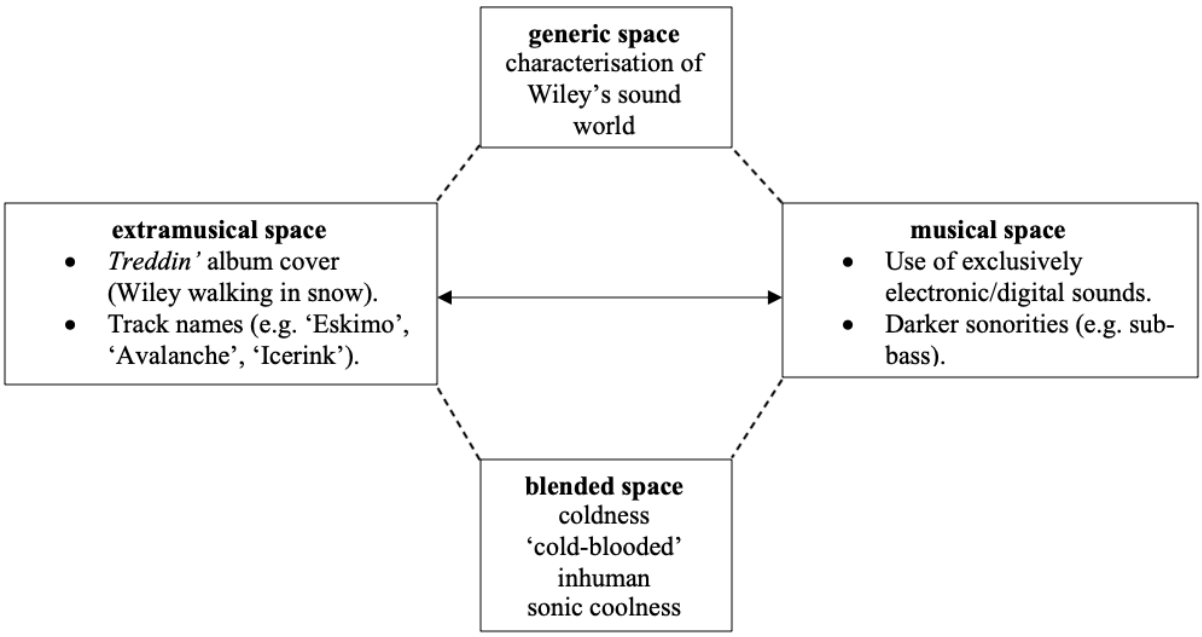

Figure 5 - Conceptual Integration Network (after Cook, 2001), adapted for the characterisation of Wiley's sound.

The above model is, however, reliant on the characterisation of digital sounds as inherently 'cold'. Indeed, once the notion of electronic-as-cold is challenged, the model in Figure 1 begins to fall apart, as the correspondence between the 'extramusical space' and 'musical space' erodes. Indeed, electronic music is not necessarily always sonically cold; by the 1990s, for example, Wolfgang Flür, who helped pioneer electronic music as a member of Kraftwerk, was exploring the 'warmth and whimsicality' of electro-pop as part of the collaborative project Yamo.[41] The example of Flür shows how the presence of electronic and digitally produced

[41] Thom Duffy, 'Yamo offers alternative to cold electronica on "Pie"', *Billboard* Vol. 109, Iss. 39 (New York, Sept. 27, 1997), 66.

sounds does not necessarily preclude 'complexity, warmth and depth', and as Kodwo Eshun has stated in defence of electronic music's emotional potential: '[M]achines don't distance you from your emotions, in fact quite the opposite. Sound machines make you feel more intensely, along a broader band of emotional spectra than ever before'.[42] As Eshun argues, electronic music production is not an inherently 'icy' practice, but rather offers its practitioners a broad emotional spectrum from which they may draw in order to express themselves. Whether an artist's sound is aesthetically 'cold' or not, therefore, depends upon which areas of this emotional spectrum they employ.

'Eskimo', 'Avalanche', and 'Icerink', therefore, can be defined as aesthetically 'cold' not simply by the presence of exclusively electronic sounds, but by the areas of the digital emotional spectrum on which Wiley draws in their composition. Each of these interludes can be shown to display the tendencies of what Alexei Monroe terms 'the glaciation of sound'.[43] As Monroe highlights, the 'technical possibilities represented by the laptop allow for […] an exploration of the crystalline processes of sonic ice formations', which are articulated by 'shimmering clusters of high-frequency shards and metallic-synthetic textures'.[44] Indeed, it is not difficult to hear these characteristics throughout *Treddin'* as a whole, and its three interludes in particular: 'Avalanche' is composed primarily of unaccompanied 'metallic-synthetic' bass textures (particularly from 0:11 onwards), and the 'eski-clicks' that permeate 'Icerink' can easily be labelled 'clusters of high-frequency shards'.[45] For Monroe, music such as Wiley's that articulates this 'glaciation of sound' represents 'the continuation of electronic/noise music's tradition of aesthetic coldness as a means to […] challenge everyday reality'.[46] This challenge

[42] Alexei Monroe, 'Ice on the Circuits/Coldness as Crisis: The Re-subordination of Laptop Sound', *Contemporary Music Review* 22, No. 4 (2003) 35-43, here 36; Kodwo Eshun, quoted in Monroe 'Ice on the Circuits/Coldness as Crisis', 36.
[43] Monroe, 'Ice on the Circuits/Coldness as Crisis', 42.
[44] Ibid..
[45] Ibid..
[46] Ibid..

to everyday reality, as Monroe argues, takes the form of sonic resistance, as 'the perceived and actual coldness of electronic/digital textures' counterbalances the 'incessant funky warmth of mass corporate culture'.[47] While Monroe's dichotomy is rather simplistic, and relies upon the contentious notion of 'mass global cultural warming' designed to 'conceal the moral coldness of […] authoritarian agendas', it nonetheless offers a useful approach for considering Wiley's cold aesthetic, as well as grime's sonically rebellious or counter-cultural qualities.[48] While much has been made of rap's 'cinematic, well-crafted, gritty, and vulgar' lyrical radicalism, few studies actually focus their analysis on the rebellious potential of the sounds themselves.[49]

Treddin' On Thin Ice's three interludes illustrate this potential for sonic resistance. As well as employing the high-frequency clusters and synthetic textures outlined by Monroe, and indeed because of this, 'Eskimo', 'Avalanche', and 'Icerink' all push on 'established boundaries of music engineering, […] recording with the sound meters well into the distortion zone', a technique Tricia Rose calls 'working in the red'.[50] As Rose reminds us, 'volume, density, and quality of low-sound frequencies are critical features in rap production', and Wiley's interludes are no exception to this.[51] Figure 6 compares 'Eskimo' with 'Time Pie' from the eponymous 1996 album by the aforementioned collaborative electronic project Yamo.[52] The waveform graphs give graphic representations of the audio signal in each track's 'drop', often the moment of greatest sonic density, which occurs around 0:30 in both songs, with the x-axis representing time and the y-axis the amplitude levels of the audio output. As the graph illustrates, the overall amplitude in 'Eskimo' (after the drop) appears expanded when compared both to its own introduction and the entirety of 'Time Pie', whose graph remains relatively steady throughout. In favouring frequent, high-amplitude attacks as opposed to the more consistent and contained

[47] Ibid..
[48] Ibid..
[49] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise*, (Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 128.
[50] Ibid., 74-5.
[51] Ibid., 75.
[52] 'Time Pie' may be heard here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OEf-bCbRcaU (accessed 29th May 2020).

amplitude levels in ‘Yamo’, ‘Eskimo’ adheres to those principles of volume and density outlined by Rose, and demonstrates Wiley’s disruptive production values. Further, given Thom Duffy’s characterisation of Yamo’s electronic sound as ‘warm and whimsical’, Figure 2 offers an opportunity to consider the sonic disparities that characterise Monroe’s warm/cold dichotomy. Since for Monroe ‘abrasive examples of [electronic music] will always be labelled cold’, it may be inferred that aesthetic warmth is characterised by sonic smoothness.[53] As apparent in Figure 6, Yamo’s warmth and whimsicality are reflected in the relatively stable amplitude levels in ‘Time Pie’, as each attack point (represented by the vertical lines in the graph) is mitigated by the presence of a consistently maintained audio output level. The comparative turbulence present in Eskimo, however, is reflected in a more visually striking graph, as each attack is accompanied by a high-amplitude block of sound. Indeed, while the attacks in ‘Time Pie’ serve to punctuate an otherwise regular amplitude level, ‘Eskimo’ takes these attacks as its primary mode of expression, generating the sonic ‘abrasiveness’ that Monroe sees as definitive of ‘cold’ electronic music.

[53] Monroe, ‘Ice on the Circuits/Coldness as Crisis’, 37.

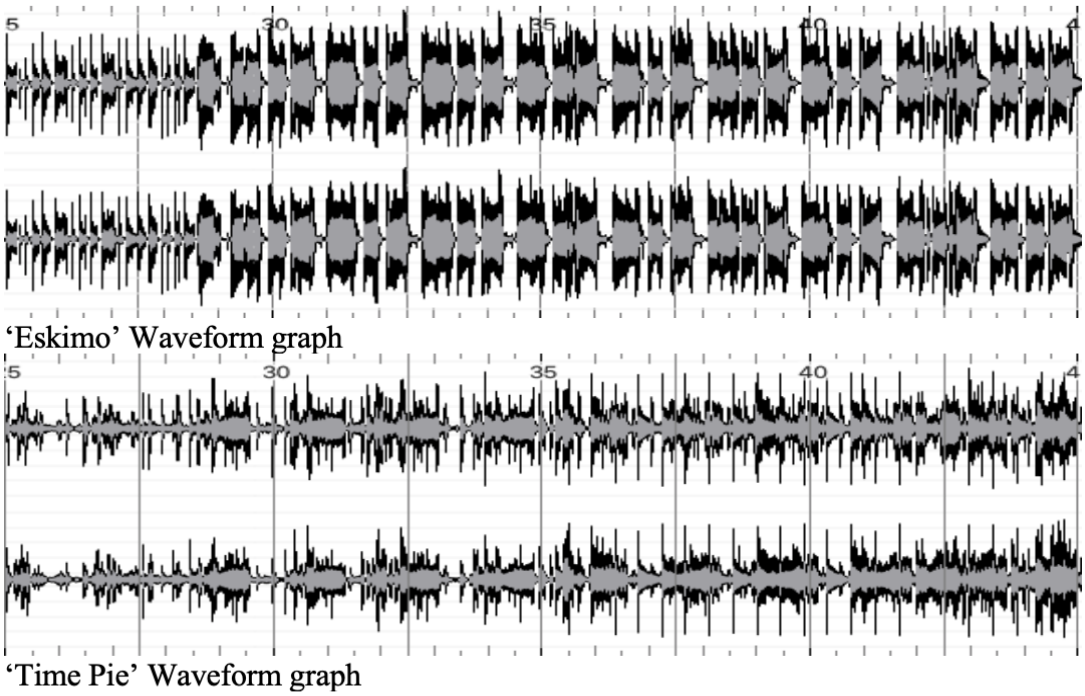

Figure 6 - 'Drops' from 'Eskimo' and 'Time Pie' Waveform (from Sonic Visualiser).[54]

Thus, by Monroe's characterisation of musical coldness as sonically 'abrasive', or resistant to 'global cultural warming', Wiley's interludes appear to aesthetically justify his claim to 'coldness'.[55] Whether this cold aesthetic is also articulated via Monroe's 'glaciation of sound' is, however, rather more contentious. While I have argued that 'Eskimo', 'Avalanche', and 'Icerink' all exhibit 'shimmering clusters of high-frequency shards and metallic-synthetic textures', the argument relies to a great extent upon how Wiley's handling of timbre is described, which may be contentious in itself.[56] Monroe's definition is itself symptomatic of a conflation between what Mary Simoni terms the 'acoustical' and 'psychoacoustical' properties of sound.[57] Simoni highlights that while timbre 'has evolved to become one of [electronic

[54] Note on the use of waveform graphs: Throughout this thesis, I employ waveform graphs when discussing particularly abstract qualities of sound, such as 'character'. Grime music has often been characterised as a sonically 'aggressive' or 'violent' music; as a black cultural artform, the implications of these characterisations cannot be ignored. The waveform graphs in this project, therefore, are a form of shorthand, and allow me to illustrate elements of grime's sound world without reference to potentially sinister or politically-charged language.
[55] Ibid., 37-42.
[56] Ibid., 42.
[57] Mary Simoni, 'The Analysis of Electronic Music', in Nick Collins & Julio d'Escrivan (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Electronic Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) 274-298, here 278.

music's] defining attributes', its centrality to the genre has 'compelled [the] struggle to define it'.[58] Proffering a practical 'working' definition, however, Simoni characterises timbre as 'the character or essential quality of a sound, where a listener may or may not be able to define its origin'.[59] Simoni continues:

> We use the term *sound object* to label a timbral sound event that has an identifiable musical shape over time. A sound object may be measured for acoustical (objective) and psychoacoustical (subjective) properties that contribute to our ability to comprehend it and subsequently become a bearer of musical meaning.[60]

While the relation Simoni draws between psychoacoustics and subjectivity is arguable, it remains a useful association for the discussion of sound 'origin' in relation to electronic music, where psychoacoustic attributes may represent those properties of a sound whose origin is indeterminate.[61] That a listener may not be able to define a sound's origin becomes significant in Wiley's interludes. If, for example, we class the unaccompanied synthesised bass lines in 'Avalanche' as 'sound objects' with 'identifiable musical shape[s]', it becomes clear that a listener cannot necessarily separate the acoustical from the psychoacoustical, given that the origin of the sound object cannot be determined beyond the obvious fact that it is generated digitally. Thus, in a listener's comprehension of these sound events, the acoustical and psychoacoustical are conflated, and the musical meanings attached to these properties become coterminous.

[58] Ibid., 277-8.
[59] Ibid., 278.
[60] Ibid..
[61] For more on psychoacoustics and objectivity see Monika Gatt and Marcus Guettler, 'Objective Psychoacoustics', *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 141, No.5 (2017), 4028.

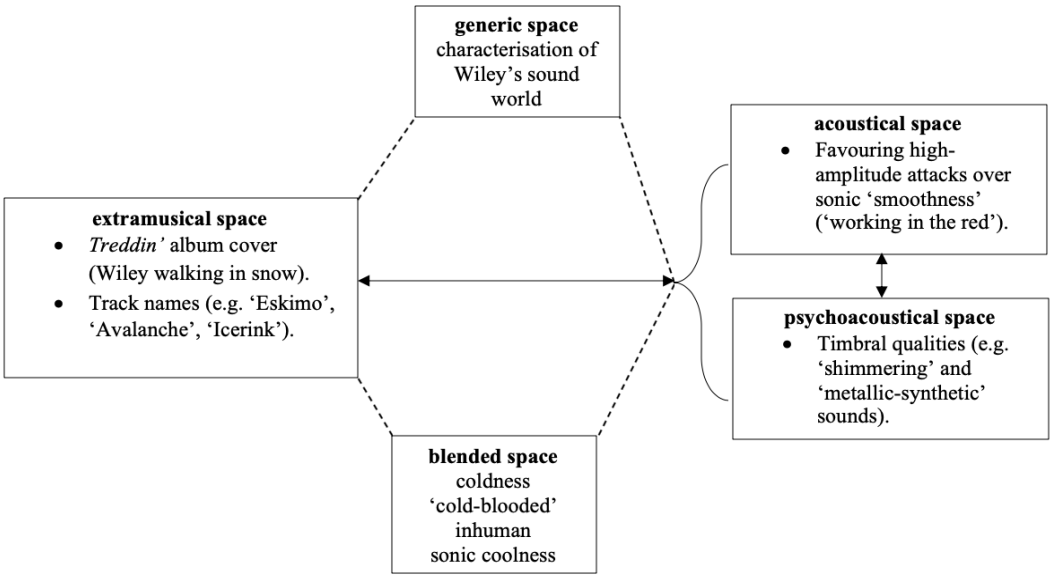

Figure 7 - Cook's Conceptual Integration network for the characterisation of Wiley's sound (revised).

Figure 3 shows the integration network presented in Figure 1, revised here to illustrate the more nuanced relationships between each 'space', and specifically what in Figure 1 is termed the 'musical space'. The enabling similarities shown in Figure 3 no longer only exist between the musical and extramusical space, but within the musical space itself, divided into the acoustical and psychoacoustical spaces outlined by Simoni. As shown, these two musical spaces ('acoustical' and 'psychoacoustical') hold attributes which, for listeners, correspond with one another, forming a larger musical space which then combines with the attributes of the 'extramusical space' to form a 'blended space'. The blended space in *Treddin'*, from which arises the notion of Wiley's music as aesthetically cold, can therefore be shown to derive from a correspondence between features in the album's 'extramusical' space and both the tangible (acoustical/objective) and more ideational (psychoacoustical/ subjective) qualities of Wiley's sound world.

‘Grime Cyborgs’

Warren A. Stanislaus has proposed the centrality of Japanese cultural artefacts to Wiley’s (and grime’s) ‘countercultural expression of coldness’.[62] The ‘coldness’ expressed and self-proclaimed by Wiley describes the experience of radical alienation, or the articulation of black urban life on the margins of British society – ‘it’s a cold, dark sound because we came from a cold, dark place’.[63] Stanislaus argues that ‘diet of Japanese pop culture’ – in the form of television anime series, portable game devices, arcade machines, etc. – on which grime artists grew up as children of the 1980s and 1990s meant that these pop culture artefacts became what Henry Jenkins describes as ‘stuff’, or ‘the accumulated things that constitute […] familiar surroundings’.[64] At the same moment of Japan’s expanding global cultural presence, grime artists were consuming, remodelling, and remixing Japanese pop cultural artefacts ‘to better comprehend and give voice to their latent feelings of coldness’.[65] Stanislaus argues that as a result of this historical proximity and enculturation, grime’s ‘distinct manifestation of a commitment to realism’ and sonic articulation of the ‘coldness of life in the endz [the harsh reality of life in inner city London]’ is generated and imagined in dialogue with these cultural artefacts, in a crisscrossing and amalgamation of narrative and audio-visual elements from multiple media sources such as video games, anime (hand-drawn and computer-generated Japanese animation), and manga (Japanese comics or graphic novels).[66]

Stanislaus does not investigate the notion of ‘coldness’ in a meaningful sense, deriving its connection to grime’s sound from the same extramusical information discussed in relation to Cook’s integration network (track names like ‘Eskimo’, Wiley’s own claims to coldness) and equating the term understandably but reductively to a feeling of modern metropolitan

[62] Warren A. Stanislaus, ‘From Cool Japan to Cold Japan: Grime Cyborgs in Black Britain’, *Japan Forum*, (2022), 1-24, here 3.
[63]Ibid.; Wiley quoted in Stanislaus, ‘From Cool Japan to Cold Japan’, 10.
[64] Henry Jenkins quoted in Staninslaus ‘From Cool Japan to Cold Japan’, 4.
[65] Stanislaus, ‘From Cool Japan to Cold Japan’, 4.
[66] Ibid., 4-10.

alienation. Stanislaus argues that grime artists remodel specific elements from Japanese pop cultural content and technologies to 'carve out a new hybrid cultural space that gives voice to black urban life […] and generates empowered cyborgian identities that articulate counterhegemonic black subjectivities'.[67] While the genre's apparent relation to 'cool Japan' in Stanislaus' reading does not necessarily enrich our understanding of grime music's 'intrinsic' sonic coldness, it does contribute to an appreciation of elements of its aesthetic language. The 'eski-clicks', for example, identified earlier in this chapter both in 'Wot Do U Call It?' and the three interludes as video game sounds or high-frequency clusters that characterise much of Wiley's sound exhibit what Stanislaus identifies as grime artists' entanglement with games consoles, and the roles these machines played in the music's soundscape:

> Brothers Skepta and Jme reveal in interviews and song lyrics, that they produced on the Super Nintendo and PlayStation using games, such as Mario Paint and Music 2000 […] Further extracting from these technologies, artists selectively sample and reproduce 8-bit and 16-bit chiptune sound effects, such as beeps, suctions, swipes, chimes, coin grabbing jingles, throbs, battle cries and whips. These 'cold' sounds continue to make up grime's distinctive sonic palette.[68]

Though in fact Wiley's 'eski-clicks' can be found in the factory pre-set banks of a now-discontinued Korg sound module, they nonetheless evoke the chiptune sound effects listed by Stanislaus. Further, and perhaps more concrete, examples of grime's games-console entanglement can be found in D Double E's 2010 'Street Fighter Riddim', whose title references the popular Japanese video game *Street Fighter* and opens with chiptune sweeps, strongly reminiscent of video games.[69] More generally, the relation that Stanislaus highlights between grime and Japanese pop culture is evident. Clear examples of this relationship include

[67] Ibid., 3.
[68] Ibid., 17.
[69] 'Street Fighter Riddim' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tKljEHPUjnk (accessed 23rd July 2023).

(but are certainly not limited to): Jme's 2015 'The Very Best' and 2006 'Final Boss', the first of which quotes and adapts both imagery and musical material from the *Pokémon* animation series and the second of which remixes a sample of the music from 'The Doomsday Zone' final boss level of Sega's 1994 video game *Sonic & Knuckles*; AJ Tracey's 2020 'Hikikomori', so-called in reference to the contemporary phenomenon where some Japanese youth choose to withdraw from society through varying levels of isolation and confinement; and Skepta's 2016 album *Konnichiwa* which, as explored in chapter seven, revives and adapts many elements of grime's classic, Japan-inspired, chiptune and video-game-influenced sonic palette.[70]

The extent to which this Japanese cultural influence allows grime artists to form transgressive and self-generated 'new cyborg identities' – not limited to externally defined social categories and thus affording opportunities for 'agency, liberation, and imaginative possibility' – is debatable and perhaps tangential to the present discussion.[71] More important is the impact of Japanese pop culture on grime's sound palette. Wiley's sound world, in particular the 'eski-clicks' that permeate *Treddin' On Thin Ice*, exhibits this influence and thus, given the album's 'blueprint' quality, builds it into grime's sound palette. Rather than necessarily expanding upon the elusive notion of 'coldness', Stanislaus identifies a key sonic influence both specifically for Wiley and for grime music generally. As shown throughout this project, producers have continually returned to the chiptune-influenced sound palette present on *Treddin'*. Stanislaus' writing thus offers a potential framework for considering certain unifying aesthetic trends throughout the grime genre, and importantly one that draws from tangible sonic and cultural sources rooted in acoustical space as opposed to more ideological and intangible extramusical ideas of 'coldness'.

[70] Jme 'The Very Best' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-XvsTYq9INU (accessed 24th July 2023); Jme 'Final Boss' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RfHeSnG04M0 (accessed 24th July 2023); AJ Tracey 'Hikikomori' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOsjPu2_K_M (accessed 24th July 2023).
[71] Stanislaus, 'From Cool Japan to Cold Japan', 15.

While the degree to which *Treddin' On Thin Ice*'s interludes articulate a legitimate aesthetic coldness remains contentious, these instrumentals, stripped of all lyrical and vocal material, offer a valuable insight into not only Wiley's musical aesthetics and compositional style, but the sounds and sources from which grime artists have drawn inspiration since the genre's inception. As discussed in chapters five and seven, grime's mid-2010s renaissance relied heavily on the revival and reinvention of Wiley's handling of sonic parameters, his employment of what has come to be regarded as grime's classic sonic palette (the 'eski-clicks' and computer-game-derived chiptune sound effects) and in some cases Wiley's compositions themselves (e.g. Skepta's seminal 'That's Not Me' – see chapter seven). Boakye describes the 'Eskimo' interlude as 'prototype grime for the ages', spearheading the birth of grime amid the 'post-garage' era at the turn of the century – 'In 2002, it sounded like the future, and in 2016, the tin foil hasn't crinkled'.[72]

"Everyone who likes this come this way"

Wiley's *Treddin' On Thin Ice*, alongside fellow Roll Deep member Dizzee Rascal's debut *Boy In Da Corner* (see chapter four), has long been considered a foundational text in grime's history. As a figure alone, Wiley is credited with not only fuelling grime's emergence from the British Underground's post-garage music scene – as a solo artist, a founding member of 'crossover' group Roll Deep, and a mentor to Kano and Dizzee Rascal – but also for continuing to carry the genre from its infancy through adolescence. Wiley mentored 2010s grime hero Skepta, joining the North-London rapper's collective Boy Better Know, and co-signed Stormzy, all while releasing music that has continually re-shaped and crafted the sound of a culture. Further, Wiley perfectly exemplifies grime's early methods of production, distribution, promotion, and consumption, adhering in an almost textbook manner to the practices outlined by Simon

[72] Boakye, *Hold Tight*, 108.

Reynolds as characteristic of the hardcore continuum: pirate radio stations (both independently and with Roll Deep), independent record shops (often selling his own pressings to shops, as well as directly to customers from his car boot), white labels and dubplates (on which many early cuts from *Treddin'* first appeared), and specific rave promoters and clubs (Wiley even founded his own 'Eskimo dance' grime club night/event series).

Treddin' On Thin Ice is the musical demonstration of Wiley's status as one of grime's founding fathers. As an analysis of 'Wot Do U Call It?' demonstrates, the album effects almost in real time grime's delineation and separation from garage and other prevailing musical trends. Effecting a comparison between his own sound and what came before ("Listen to this, it don't sound like garage"), Wiley establishes a musical meta-commentary on the evolution of grime from garage, and is able to validate the former by means of a musical dialogue with the latter. The instrumentals 'Eskimo', 'Avalanche', and 'Icerink' further this validation and definition, crafting grime's sound world and introducing what will come to represent the genre's key musical and extra-musical characteristics. As instances of autonomous electronic music, the instrumentals not only exhibit the timbres and textures that would define grime's early and 'golden era' sound, but also raise important questions about the extra-musical characteristics heavily associated with grime music by artists, fans, and critics – in particular the notion of 'coldness'. Though the relationship between grime and 'coldness' remains somewhat rhetorical and contentious, an interrogation of this relationship nonetheless facilitates an appreciation of the associative, discursive, conscious and unconscious processes that contribute to such a characterisation. Arguably, 'coldness' is no more and no less than a term employed to roughly describe grime's sound world in place of more academic and technical terminology, and repeated references and claims to 'coldness' made by grime artists throughout the genre's history represent a claim to belonging, or to aesthetic heritage.

Wiley's full-length debut thus represents not only an opportunity to consider the ways in which grime artists attempted to define and craft their sound in the genre's early years, but also to interrogate the musical and extra-musical motifs and tropes upon which the scene has come to rely in more recent years. *Treddin' On Thin Ice* is undoubtedly a foundational part of grime's history, not only delineating and validating grime's sound at the turn of the century but, as the chapters that follow demonstrate, representing a key text through and against which future grime artists have continued to define and develop the genre.

Chapter Three – Kano *Home Sweet Home* (2005)

> Instead of clobbering like a cracked-up Thing popping Pow! pills, this East London MC nightcrawls through the shadows, slipping deep lyrical daggers over beats that are meticulously polished, waxed, and primed to play mirror to Kano's steep autobiographical musings.[1]

Ryan Dombal's writing is astute in its account of Kano's 2005 debut album *Home Sweet Home*. Referring to Lethal Bizzle's 2004 single "Pow! (Forward)", Dombal sets *Home Sweet Home* against more 'brutish […], hollered, squawking, Dizeed, manic' instances of grime music (of which Bizzle's high-energy track is a notable example), hearing in Kano's debut a level of lyrical and musical sophistication that is unusual (or perhaps unexpected) for the genre.[2] When compared to Wiley's *Treddin'* or Dizzee Rascal's *Boy In Da Corner*, Kano's debut appears to broaden, augment, and even elude the musical language associated with grime music. This may be explained by the degrees of involvement of each artist with producing their respective albums: while Wiley and Dizzee's debuts are essentially self-produced, *Home Sweet Home* lists nine different production contributors (of which Kano is one). In this sense, the album's focus is centred less upon Kano's musical authorship than on his lyrical penmanship. As Dombal highlights, Kano 'doesn't just defy the sonic tradition of grime on *Home Sweet Home*, he defies the tidy boxes MCs are usually plopped in upon their arrival'.[3] While *Home Sweet Home* does in many ways effect an expansion of grime's sound world and musical vocabulary, it is the ways in which Kano ties the album's disparate sonic influences together though lyrical and vocal craftsmanship that lends the work its significance. The album can be conceived as a *tour de force* in grime MC culture, and it is this idea upon which this chapter is focused. In

[1] Ryan Dombal, 'Kano - Home Sweet Home', *Pitchfork* (July 2005) https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/4598-home-sweet-home/ (accessed 2nd November 2021).
[2] Ibid..
[3] Ibid..

examining several tracks from *Home Sweet Home* and the range of vocal flows they contain, the chapter considers more closely MC culture in grime music, as presented by Kano.

"My flow's big, big, big I spit hits kid"

> I couldn't give a fuck about your reputation
> I'm the star from the top like Christmas decorations
> And me merking you right now
> That's my estimation

The declaration that enters three seconds into 'Mic Check 1-2', track six from *Home Sweet Home*, sets the tone for much of what is to follow. Dismissing the need for any real kind of introduction, the track immediately establishes the swaggering and confrontational character of Kano's prosody and delivery that is maintained throughout 'Mic Check' (and much of the album). Indeed, the lines quoted above capture Kano's lyrical preoccupations throughout the song, and almost all of what follows can be placed under at least one of these three headings: "I couldn't give a fuck about you" (trash-talking rivals and their work) /"I'm the star" (self-aggrandising autobiography)/"Merking you right now" (battling or 'clashing' another MC). This boastful, swaggering, and competitive tone in 'Mic Check' betrays its author's roots in wider practices of MCing. Indeed, 'Mic Check' is in many ways a self-referential homage to Kano's background in grime 'crews', MC 'clashes', and pirate radio. Support for such a reading is found within the lyrical content of the song itself. In the 'phone call' that punctuates the song at roughly the halfway mark (1:08 – 1:21), Kano namechecks both "Deja" and "Nasty"; 'Deja' refers to legendary East London pirate radio station Deja Vu FM, and 'Nasty' to N.A.S.T.Y Crew (Natural Artistic Sounds Touching You), an East London-based collective of which Kano was a member.

In the song's mock call, produced sonically through a combination of EQ manipulation and High and Low Pass Filters (with Kano providing both voices), the speaker announces "There's beef on Deja, its going off on the roof" (1:11). While only a moment in the brief exchange, this sentence nonetheless captures a defining feature of pirate radio. Indeed, for a suitably encultured listener, this conversation becomes a kind of evocation of pirate radio culture. The speaker's East-London accent, use of slang ("beef" and "going off"), namechecking (and abbreviating) Deja Vu Fm, as well as the authentically-rendered telephone vocal timbre all serve to specify the cultural and social practices associated with pirate radio, and connect 'Mic Check' to those practices.

Furthermore, Kano's reference to N.A.S.T.Y Crew is significant: crews have functioned – and continue to function – as an important vehicle for grime's social and cultural growth and development, often doubling as a record label through which artists can publish their work. Indeed, most now well-known solo grime artists have at some stage been involved in crews: Wiley, alongside Dizzee Rascal, DJ Target, and Flowdan, formed pioneering grime crew Roll Deep (namechecked as 'The Roll Deep Empire' on 'Wot Do U Call It?') in early 2001; Kano, D Double E, and Jammer were among the members of N.A.S.T.Y Crew; Wiley, Skepta, Jme, and Jammer were all members of Boy Better Know (BBK), an integral part of grime's 'renaissance' in the 2010s – though the notion of a crew is largely a hangover from UK garage (Roll Deep evolved from the Pay As You Go Cartel, a UK garage crew formed in 2000). This close relation between grime and garage crews is illustrated by groups such as UK garage collective So Solid Crew, whose 2001 UK number one single '21 Seconds' Zoe Adams points to as a 'crucial evolutionary step in the prehistory of today's vibrant grime scene'.[4]

[4] Dorian Lynskey, 'How the mainstream finally came to grime', *GQ* https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/dan-hancox-inner-city-pressure-the-story-of-grime (accessed 20th June 2021); Zoe Adams, '"I don't know why man's calling me family all of a sudden": Address and reference terms in grime music', *Language & Communication* 60 (2018), 11-27, here 12; '21 seconds' and its accompanying music video may be heard/found here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g7VhofoV3qs (accessed 29th May 2021).

So Solid Crew's track exemplifies what may be called a 'crew aesthetic'. The song behaves as what Ruth Adams terms a 'showcase' song, and functions primarily as a vehicle through which each MC can exhibit their mic skills; each new verse (from a new MC) opens with a kind of introduction ("Megaman up first and he won't second no shit", "Asher D's never fading", "M to the A to the C that's me", etc.), and there is little thematic consistency between these verses, other than sporadic reference to the song's hook (having "21 seconds to go").[5] Suited to the competitive, combative, and frenetic environment of pirate radio or crew clashes, the lyrical content 'is neither narrative nor particularly original, though often witty', and consists of 'stated intentions to make money and get high, and of boasts about the prowess of individual MCs and the crew as a whole compared to their peers'.[6]

In light of this, it is easier to find hangovers from this crew aesthetic in 'Mic Check 1-2'. Given Kano's involvement with N.A.S.T.Y Crew and pirate radio, as well as his background in MC clashes – exhibited best in his appearance on *Lord of the Mics*, a series of film-recorded clashes wherein MCs 'battle' each other over grime instrumentals – it might be expected that the kind of competitive and swaggering microphone persona promoted by clash culture would form an important facet to *Home Sweet Home*'s lyricism and vocal delivery. 'Mic Check 1-2' illustrates the continued importance of the 'art of braggadocio' to grime MCing.[7] It is in many ways a 'showcase song' in the manner of So Solid Crew, and Kano is concerned less with narrative arc or originality than with displays of swagger. Significantly, rather than 'stated intentions to make money and get high' (although Kano does state he was "born to be rich", and admits to having "money on [his] Christmas list"), Kano boasts of something 'more central to [his] identity': "My flow's big, big, big", "I flow ill like a sickness",

[5] Ruth Adams, '"Home sweet home, that's where I come from, where I got my knowledge of the road and the flow from": Grime music as an expression of identity in postcolonial London', *Popular Music and Society* 42, No. 4 (2018), 438-455, here 440.
[6] Ibid..
[7] Mitchell Ohriner, *Flow: The Rhythmic Voice in Rap Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 3.

"when I spit hot shit I'm on fire".[8] While 'flow' is an incredibly hard term to define exactly, as Ohriner indicates, encompassing as it does a host of connotations pertaining to rhythm, lyricism, 'liquidity', and the technical act of rapping or MCing itself, the term remains nonetheless a meaningful expression, not least to artists themselves.[9] Kano's repeated references to his own flow in 'Mic Check 1-2' are significant in this sense. Regardless of exactly which definition of the term he is invoking, his preoccupation with demonstrating the superiority of his flow betrays the influence of 'clash culture', where rhythmic accuracy, lyrical content, and technical ability are all crucial to an artist's success.

Clash culture maintains what Ohriner labels a 'prescriptive theory' towards the notion of flow.[10] Prescriptive theories, as opposed to 'descriptive' approaches, 'tells […] artists how to create "good" music, rather than defining common practices exemplified by the artists themselves.[11] Specifically with regard to rap music, these prescriptive theories, formulated by practitioners, fans, and 'rap pedagogues', have come to create and detail what Ohriner calls 'the law of flow'.[12] While not necessarily unanimously agreed upon or binding (Ohriner describes his own label as 'somewhat facetious'), this 'law' nonetheless provides a loosely defined and perhaps unconsciously held set of ideas of what exactly an artist should be doing when rapping, or flowing, that invoke the same connotations detailed above: control, smoothness, continuity, lyrical invention, and rhythmic accuracy (following or sticking to the beat).[13] As well as trading insults, boasting, and toasting, grime MCs are expected to adhere to the 'law of flow' – "Couldn't get your punchlines out on time/Now you wanna diss me? Oh blud, what a cheek".[14]

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[8] Ibid..
[9] Ibid., 3-10.
[10] Ibid., 10.
[11] Ibid..
[12] Ibid..
[13] Ibid..
[14] Skepta, 'Lyrics', *Konnichiwa* (2016) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uxxUT1WPASU (accessed 5th January 2022).

There is, of course, space given within these laws for innovation; as can be expected, aesthetic interest derives from the manipulation and abandonment of expectation. Rather than a constraint, the beats or 'instrumental streams' over which MCs deliver their lyrics can function as a structural platform, providing the boundaries against which artists can stretch and push. Ohriner highlights the constant rebalancing between 'fidelity and invention', that MCs must exercise to 'maintain the integrity of the flow while avoiding boredom'.[15] Given that the instrumental streams over which MCs flow often change little within the verses themselves ('samples and drum patterns repeat endlessly'), artists must find ways to avoid 'matching this stasis'.[16] One way to achieve this is by altering the flow mid-verse, or 'flipping the flow'.[17] 'Mic Check 1-2' sees Kano deploying this technique. The instrumental, or beat, in 'Mic Check 1-2' changes very little, with the song's structure (i.e. verse, chorus, etc.) demarcated by shifts in the texture – specifically the removal or re-introduction of the horn line that opens the track (shown as the top voice in the bass clef in figure 8).

[15] Ohriner, *Flow*, 16.
[16] Ibid..
[17] Ibid..

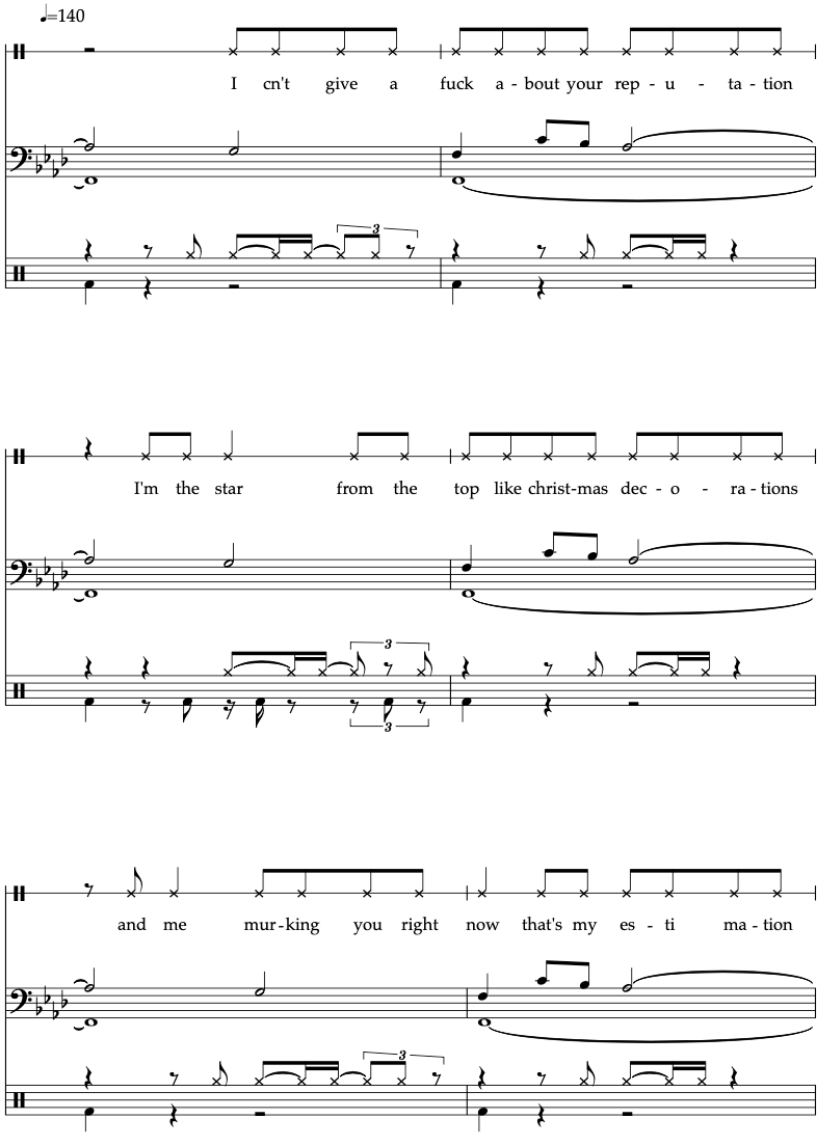

Figure 8 - 'Mic Check 1-2' (0:02-0:12)

Kano's opening flow (figure 8) is steady, stretching lyrics and syllables over relatively 'heavy' quaver and crotchet rhythms that match the slow, weighty bass notes that sound every two bars (given as tied semibreves). These heavier values gradually give way to livelier semi-quaver and quaver figures (0:18 – 0:27) that anticipate the more energetic bassline that enters on the lines "pain in the backside" (figure 9). By gradually accelerating his flow, Kano lends the opening thirty seconds of 'Mic Check 1-2' a sense of musical development and energy that compensates for the instrumental's rhythmic, dynamic, and textural stasis. Indeed, the sense of release that occurs at 0:27 derives entirely from the tension generated by Kano's delivery.

Through flow flipping, Kano is able to manipulate the sense of pulse within the song without much change instrumentally; the heavier vocal rhythms that open the song lend the introduction a half-time feel that, as the flow speeds up, gradually gives way to a strong four feel that is then accentuated and reinforced by the use of smaller note values in the bassline at 0:27.

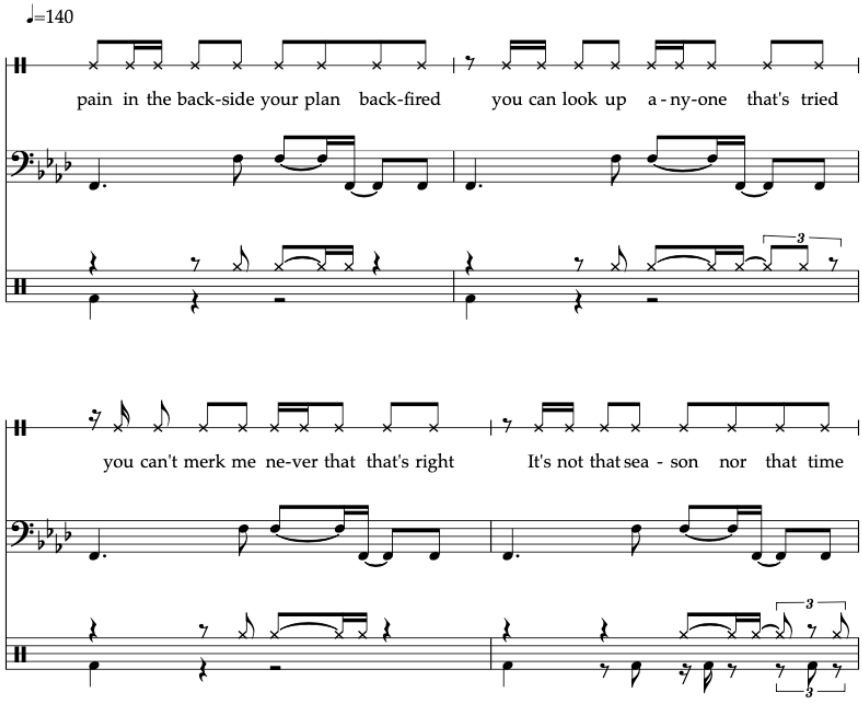

Figure 9 - 'Mic Check 1-2' (0:27-0:34)

Figure 9 shows more clearly Kano's employment of flow flipping, as he alters his flow mid-verse. The lively semiquaver rhythms give way to heavier quaver and dotted quavers, as Kano once again shifts the overall rhythmic character to a half-time feel on the words "What d'you call it garage?/What d'you call it grime?" (in reference to Wiley's 'Wot Do U Call It?'), further reinforced by the immediate reintroduction of rapid semiquavers ("Call it what you wanna call it"). It is likely that Kano conceives his compositional process not in terms of subdivision, but in syllable rate. While figure 10 provides a visualisation of this shift between half and four time feels, showing simply the presence of more or fewer 'notes' from one bar to the next, listeners will *hear* this shift as a drastic change in the number of syllables from line to line. As Ohriner

indicates, 'flipping the flow' is often achieved by this abrupt change in syllable rate or 'density'.[18] From the lines "What d'you call it Grime?" to "Call it what you wanna call it I'm fine […], Kano more than doubles the syllabic count from 5 to 12, flipping the flow from slow to quick simply by inserting syllables in metric positions that were previously silent. 'With the newly inserted syllables, the duration between syllables is lessened', and it is this that listeners will more readily detect.[19]

The distinction between syllabic rate and rhythmic subdivision is important. While the figures provided in this chapter aim to illustrate the alterations and variations of Kano's flow throughout 'Mic Check 1-2', transcribing and presenting any rap music (a music firmly grounded in oral tradition and live performance) using conventional Western music notation is almost always problematic. Western notation cannot convincingly capture rap's practices of composition or performance, in which MCs and rappers work simply from words on the page or (if freestyling) in their head, rather than from sheet music. Sheet music's relationship to any form of rap music is almost always descriptive and never prescriptive. Of particular significance in relation to this chapter is the issue of quantization. Though being 'on-beat' is stressed as the central concern of the 'law of flow', rap performance, and indeed almost all human-produced performance, is 'replete with very small intervals of time that anticipate or delay the beat'.[20] In contrast to the instrumental streams over which they perform, an MC's flow, whether recorded or captured live, is impossible to quantize perfectly. Indeed, whether this is at all desirable is questionable: Adam Bradley observes that 'like jazz musicians, MCs boast about staying in the pocket of the beat, finding the place where their voices are rhythmically in sync with the drums'.[21] While Bradley does account for 'moments of calculated rhythmic surprise, and concedes that 'flowing in lockstep with the track at all times […] can

[18] Ibid., 17.
[19] Ibid..
[20] Ibid., 11.
[21] Adam Bradley, *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop* (Basic Books, 2009), 6.

sound dull', his account nonetheless maintains that 'an effective rap lyricist must satisfy the listener's innate desire for order'.[22] Bradley's account precludes for the most part the possibility of subtler relationships to rhythm and the expressive potential of rhythmic non-alignment, or 'microtiming'. For example, Ohriner points to the study of microtiming, or 'expressive timing', in Afro-diasporic music, and the ways in which these non-alignments 'create forward motion and rhythmic interplay between textural layers'.[23] The section of 'Mic Check' given in figure 10 illustrates this: other than "call it" in the third bar and "short or-(der)" in the fourth bar which do align with percussive hits in the instrumental – Kano's flow is rarely 'in the pocket'. Rather than violating any sense of rhythmic 'order', the kind of push and pull effected by Kano's microtiming serves to furnish 'Mic Check' with a more nuanced and animated overall rhythmic character. Far from breaching any 'law of flow', rhythmic non-alignments are often what give artists their individuality. Indeed, in place of more crew-derived techniques such as literally stating one's name ("M to the A to the C that's me" – '21 Seconds'), an MC's rhythmic idiosyncrasies – alongside vocal timbre and perhaps accent – are often what allows listeners to recognise them on a given song, and what allows MCs to craft a kind of microphone-based musical identity.

[22] Ibid..
[23] Maria Witek (2017), quoted in Ohriner, *Flow*, 185.

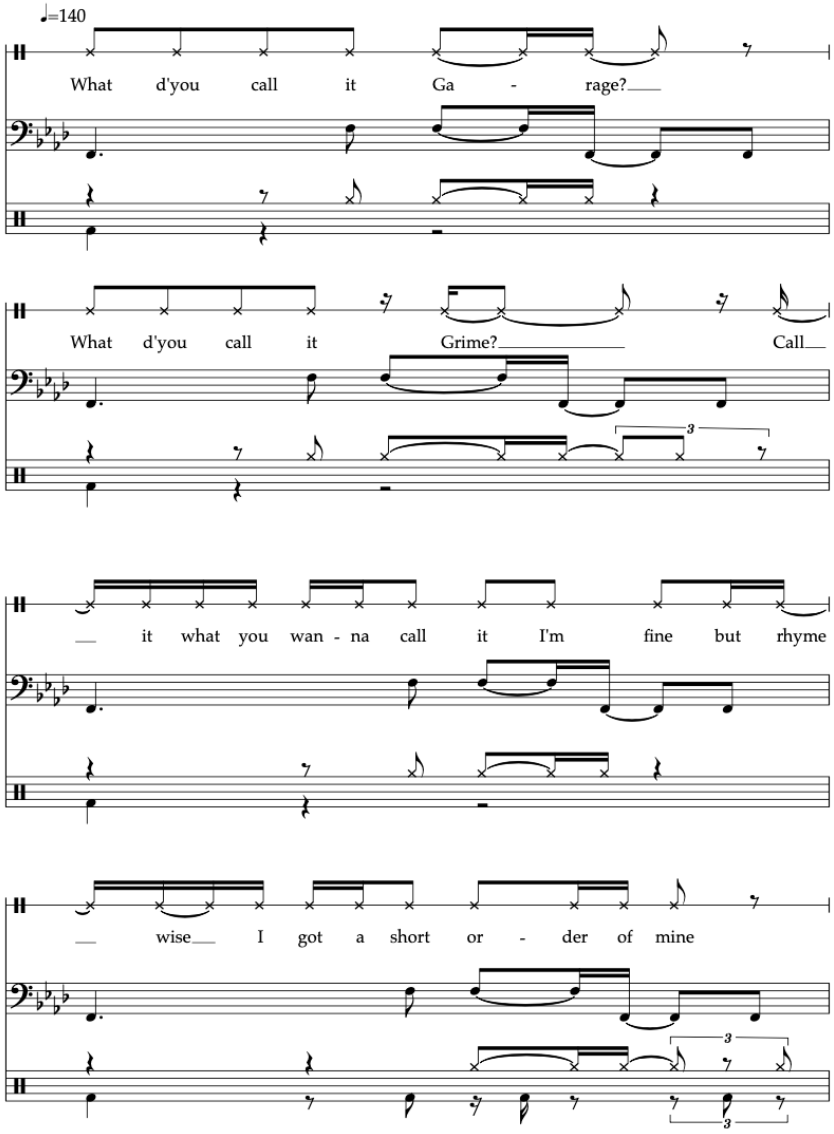

Figure 10 - 'Mic Check 1-2' (0:44-0:50)

Figure 11 illustrates another way in which flow flipping is achieved, not through manipulation of syllable rate but of rhyme rate. Rhyming vowels in ‘Mic Check’ are separated by roughly four beats, and this is generally maintained throughout the first minute and a half of the song, even as Kano deploys the kind of rhythmic and syllabic acceleration outlined above. As figure 11 shows, however, Kano’s final verse (1:21 – 1:50) drastically increases the rate of the repetition of rhyming vowels.

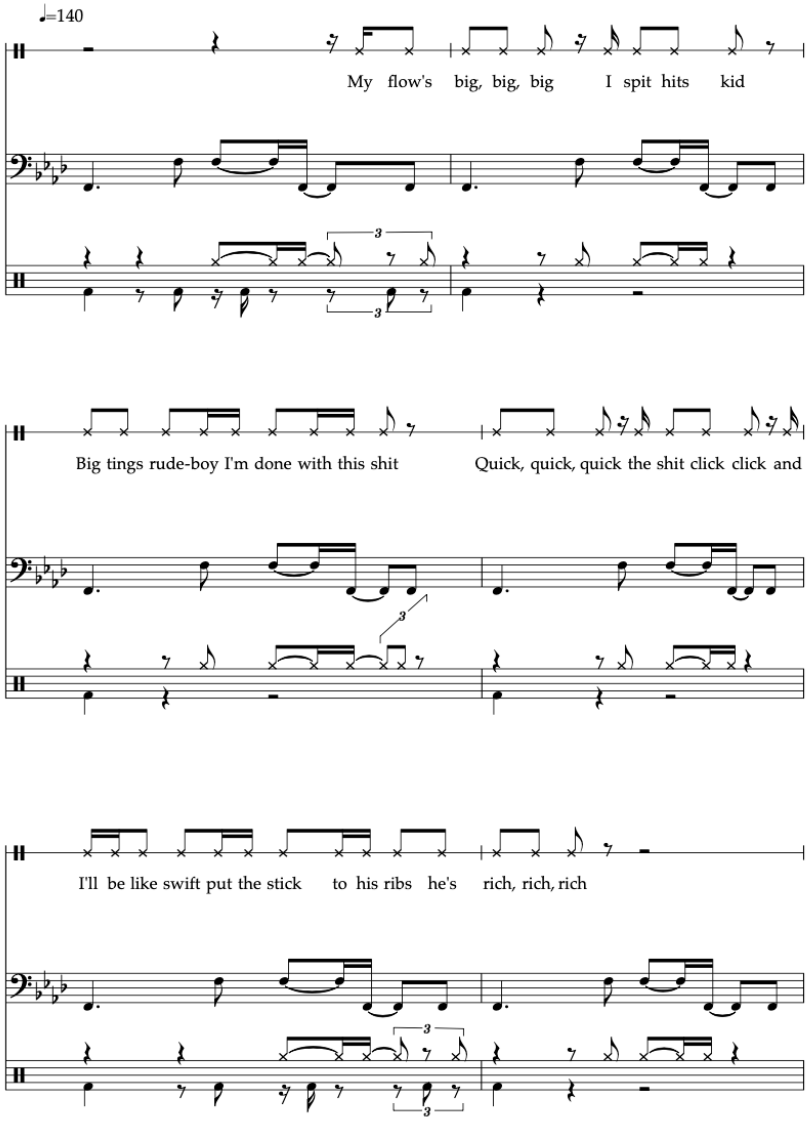

Figure 11 - 'Mic Check 1-2' (1:21-1:30)

The use of repeating words, as well as true and half-rhymes, means rhyming vowels are sometimes separated by half a beat (or arguably not separated at all): “big, big, big, I spit hits kid” gives six iterations of the Near-Close Near-Front Unrounded Vowel, or the phoneme /I/, in the space of one bar. Without increasing the rhythmic currency of his flow (i.e. semiquavers and quavers), Kano is able to effect a sense of acceleration in his flow, manipulating the sense of speed in his verse through rhyme rate alone. His explicit reference to his flow within the verse itself (“My flow’s big, big, big”) serves to highlight this form of ‘flipping’.

Interestingly, Kano uses this phoneme as a kind of rhyming motif throughout the entirety of the last verse, squeezing in as many instances of the vowel as possible, which not only emphasises the flow flip, but serves to showcase his ability as an MC to make as much out of one vowel as possible while retaining some degree of lyrical coherency:

> My flows big, big, big I spit hits kid
> Big tings rude-boi I'm done with this shit
> Quick, quick, quick - the shit click
> Click and I'll be like swift put the stick to his ribs
> He's rich, rich, rich - take that shit
> You win some you lose some son - life is a bitch, bitch, bitch
> Ain't that a bitch?
> Oh well, bad luck - piss, piss, piss
> I was born to be rich
> Santa knows I had money on my Christmas list
> And when you get some comes chicks
> Then all of your texts end in a kiss, kiss, kiss
> Hi - hug kiss, kiss that how they greet me
> All because I flow ill like a sickness, I'm a sick kid
> But when I spit hot shit I'm on fire, but I'm a big blitz

The example highlights some of the ways in which Kano exhibits his ability throughout 'Mic Check 1-2'. In line with the expectations associated with clash culture and pirate radio, his vocal performance is replete with explicit lyrical reference to MCing ability as well as with technical demonstrations of this ability. The song's lack of any real narrative structure and preoccupation with underlining the greatness, lyrical and otherwise, of its author both highlight the influence of 'showcase' songs and 'crew aesthetics' on 'Mic Check 1-2'. Kano's lyrical and technical flourishes serve to demonstrate aesthetic hangovers from the pirate radio era, exhibiting the same swaggering, competitive, and braggadocio approach to MCing promoted in the arena of radio and clashes.

Kano's employment of flow flipping, however, may serve a different purpose. While the competitive environment of pirate radio and clashing manifests itself in his verses, 'Mic Check 1-2' is a song that features only one MC – Kano himself. Flow flipping and boasting are of course efficacious for both claiming and demonstrating one's lyrical superiority in a combative musical setting, yet there is no other voice in 'Mic Check' with whom Kano can clash, or to whom he can direct his "big blitz". It is likely that Kano is simply addressing the listener, attempting to separate himself from a perceived, rather than a real or specific rival, since the 'art of braggadocio' is a common feature of almost all rap music. Kano's delivery on 'Mic Check' could, however, also be heard as a kind of emulation of what one would expect to hear on pirate radio. With no other MC to specifically target or outdo, the employment of flow flipping throughout the track can alternatively be heard as an attempt to evoke the voices of other MCs – the absence of other artists meaning that Kano must fabricate them. Thus 'Mic Check 1-2' becomes a kind of polyvocal homage to pirate radio, with Kano playing all the parts. The phone call within the song exhibits this polyvocality explicitly, as Kano literally has a conversation with himself, only superficially altering his voice to delineate the two 'characters' on the call. It is not too much of a stretch, therefore, to image that this form of voice acting, or characterisation, is present throughout the entirety of 'Mic Check', albeit more in sonic 'effect' than anything else.

'Mic Check' represents a crossover moment, in that it weaves into its own musical fabric the development of Kano from battle MC to grime artiste. Kano's employment of lyrical material and microphone technique derived from pirate radio clashes and crew performance lends the song the quality of something being captured rather than crafted. 'Mic Check' is thus not only an homage to the combative dynamics of clashing and pirate radio, but an early attempt to convert an essentially performance-based musical style into a recorded artform. As the later chapters on Stormzy and Skepta demonstrate, the deliberate evocation of grime's pirate radio

practices, effected overtly in 'Mic Check' through the mock phone call that punctuates each of the song's verses and more covertly in the structuring and performance of the verses themselves, has become a way of authenticating oneself as a legitimate MC. By demonstrating an awareness of the dynamics of crew clashes and pirate radio sets Kano claims a belonging to grime culture. As an early-era grime MC and a veteran of pirate radio, Kano is establishing a blueprint for this practice, employing the same techniques derived from his own experience of grime's early performance spaces in his recorded work. In doing so, Kano connects his work to the genre's early performance traditions and provides a framework for recorded grime MCing that would become foundational to the genre's development and definition.

"This is what it means when DJs reload it"

Nabeel Zuberi has indicated that 'while genre tags such as hip hop and grime are key to understanding the organisation of music for producers, industries and listeners, the MC is a figure that points to the limits of generic categories, as well as related terms such as "scenius" and "hardcore continuum".[24] Operating across 'different but connected genres', the MC is attached less to specificities of genre and more to broader oral and performance traditions.[25] As Zuberi states, the MC 'invokes and "toasts" musical and other cultural forebears and rivals and so "traces" a tradition or community in which the MC is embedded'.[26] The 'tradition or community' in which Kano is most obviously embedded is grime, and by extension UK garage, Drum 'n' Bass, Jungle, and the other musics that fall into Reynolds' hardcore continuum. Many grime MCs began developing their skills by flowing over earlier musics in the continuum, namely Drum 'n' Bass and Jungle, as well as in the garage/grime crews mentioned above. If

[24] Nabeel Zuberi, 'New Throat Fe Chat: The Voices and Media of MC Culture', in Jon Stratton and Nabeel Zuberi (eds.) *Black Popular Music in Britain Since 1945* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016) 187-201, here 189.
[25] Gervase de Wilde and Gabriel Myddleton quoted in Zuberi, 'New Throat Fe Chat', 189.
[26] Zuberi, 'New Throat Fe Chat', 186.

'Mic Check 1-2' represents an homage to the 'crew aesthetics' and combative elements of the early grime scene, pointing to the genre's more immediate history and traditions, 'Reload It' sees Kano reaching further back into the oral and performance traditions of the continuum. Featuring Demon and D Double E, who himself has stated that he 'started MCing on Jungle', the track is thematically centred on the practice of 'reloading'.[27] Derived from Jamaican sound system culture, a reload, or rewind, is simply the act of stopping a song, rewinding it back to the beginning, and starting it again. Harold Heath argues that the continued presence of rewinds in hardcore rave, jungle, garage, and grime, and indeed most musics included in Reynolds' continuum, is demonstrative of their roots in Jamaican sound system culture, as well as the sense of continuity and development between the genres ('genres which put the drum and the bass at the very centre of the audio experience').[28] 'One of the most visceral techniques available to the DJ', a reload is often the only communication between a DJ and the crowd: the crowd cheers for a song, which is in turn acknowledged by the DJ, who rewinds the track and lets them hear it again.[29] 'Reload It' takes the reload or rewind as its point of departure, evoking the performance practices of the musics associated with the reload in order to trace the oral and performance traditions to which grime, and Kano, belong.

Heath underlines the importance of the MC to the 'continued life and reinvention of the rewind': it is often the MC who will call for the rewind, acting as 'a kind of arbiter/translator/hyper between the crowd and the DJ'.[30] The introduction of MCs' verses into the fabric of the music in UK garage and grime, in which the MC's voice is a central part to the 'sound', meant that though reloads continued to exist, crowds could now call for a kind of lyrical rewind. In a live setting, therefore, MCs battle to 'collect' rewinds as a form of point-

[27] D Double E quoted in Hattie Collins and Olivia Rose, *This is Grime* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2016), 30.
[28] Harold Heath, 'Reload! A History of The Rewind', *djtechtools.com* https://djtechtools.com/2018/08/31/reload-a-history-of-the-rewind/ (accessed 10th January 2022).
[29] Ibid..
[30] Ibid..

scoring; if, as Kano states, the "sixteen was mean" (the sixteen bars MCs are usually given to flow over an instrumental) then the crowd may demand to hear it again. Though an inherently live practice, and therefore impossible to authentically reproduce in studio-recorded music, reloads remain an important signifier of 'value', and the practice is often reproduced or at least referred to in recorded garage and grime.[31]

'Reload It', as may be guessed from its title, takes the reload as its central theme ("This is what it means when DJs reload it"), and deploys the sampled sounds of disc scratching and 'spinbacks' as one of its main musical motifs (0:03 – 0:50). In the song's opening minute, these sampled 'spinback' sounds combine with Kano's repeated line "This is what it means when DJs reload it", which itself is manipulated so it 'skips' ("Thi-this i-i-is what it means", "re-reload reload it"), in a way that evokes the sonic environment of a sound system event. That Kano's lyric points to its own manipulation (i.e. being rewound) serves not only to highlight the musical practice enacted, but implies a degree of self-awareness and critical distance in the song's use of the reload. Further, Kano's flow at one point mimics a quasi-reload (1:37), as he deliberately stutters over the words "bad boy" ("bad, bad, bada-bada, bad, bad, bada-bada, bad boy"), subtly drawing attention once again to the song's theme through vocal delivery alone. As a piece of recorded music, however, and not a live performance, these rewinds cannot serve the conversational or interactive purpose highlighted by Heath. Rather, they serve to position 'Reload It' as a product of a particular musical tradition.

The instrumental over which the verses are delivered serves to further evoke this sense of tradition. Produced by American DJ Diplo, the instrumental, or 'beat', more obviously draws from grime's 'hardcore' musical lineage in its clear evocation of Drum 'n' Bass and Jungle.

[31] An earlier example of this is Artful Dodger and Craig David's 1999 Garage tune 'Re-Rewind (The Crowd Say Bo Selecta)', which can be heard here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZ0gHy2N78s.

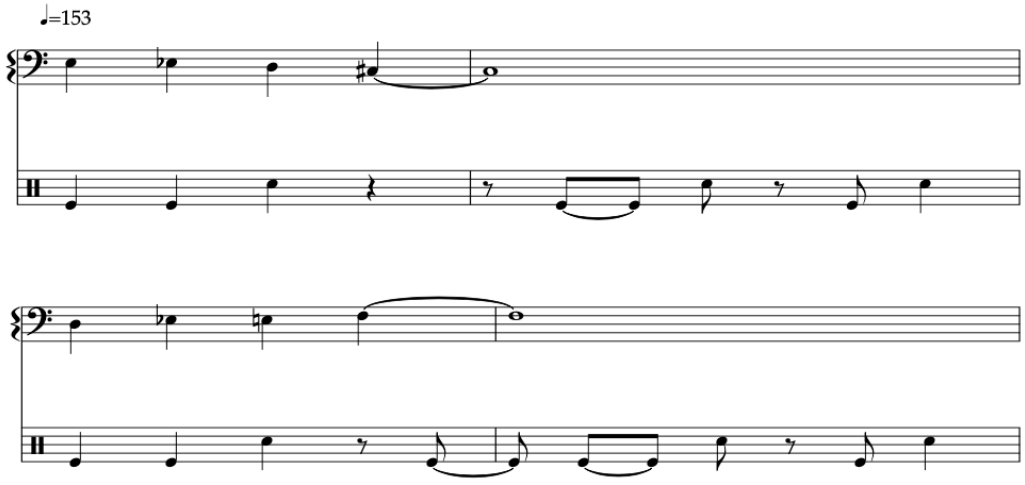

Figure 12 - 'Reload It' Basic Kick and Snare pattern

'Reload It' switches between two basic rhythmic characters as other textural and melodic elements are added or removed – a half-time feel that is illustrated in figure 12 and a more accelerated double-time/four-to-the-floor feel shown in figure 13. It is in these double time sections, over which the song's verses are delivered, that the evocation of Drum 'n' Bass and Jungle is most felt – the rapid cymbal patterns and syncopated kick and snare drum pattern recall Jungle's kinaesthetic rhythmic assemblage while simultaneously retaining the essentially danceable nature of Drum 'n' Bass'.[32] It is through the evocation of these musics, and their associated performance practices, that Kano can further effect a connection between his music and grime's cultural lineage.

[32] Goldie's 'Timeless' is perhaps the best example of this Jungle/Drum 'n' Bass crossover: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Usqwy2-E4SE (accessed 21st August 2023).

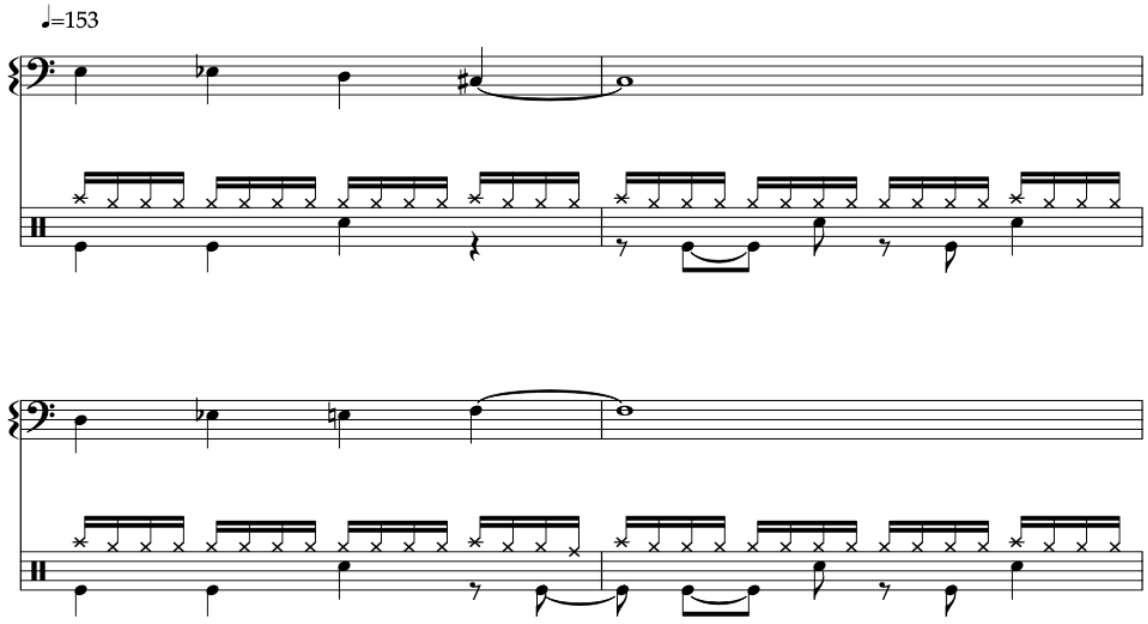

Figure 13 - 'Reload It' Basic Cell

At both Jungle and Drum ‘n’ Bass raves, the point at which a track switches to a more double-time feel, or the drop, indicates a moment of increased excitement for an audience. The switches between these two rhythmic characters in ‘Reload It’ are marked by a scratching or ‘spinback’ sound (0:24, 1:39), and at the song’s climatic ‘drop’ (2:26 – 2:30) Kano both draws attention to the switch with the lyric “DJs wheel it up!” (another way of saying ‘reload it’), and incorporates an imagined audience with recorded ‘crowd noises’ after the line “we make people say”. As opposed to the ‘spinback’ sounds discussed above which, although motivic, serve a largely decorative purpose, the ‘scratches’ that announce the drops throughout the song serve a structural purpose. Given the established communicative power of reloads in sound system culture, these structural scratches behave almost as recorded and in-built signals to Kano’s listeners, guiding them through the song in the same way that a DJ would lead an audience. This sense of communication is emphasised at the song’s climactic drop, as Kano calls for a rewind (“DJs wheel it up”). In doing so, Kano is performing the same role as Jungle and Drum

‘n’ Bass MCs, acting as an arbiter or hyper between a crowd (in this case a recorded one who shout “bop, bop, bop”) and the (here imagined) DJ.

This appeal to the spirit of sound system culture is underlined lyrically in the moments that follow the main ‘drop’ in ‘Reload It’:

> Yo, K to the A
> K to the A to the N to the O
> I know that you people already know
> I get a reload purely for the flow

Kano’s lyrics not only demonstrate an evocation of crew-based MCing (So Solid Crew’s “M to the A to the C that’s me”), but, in response to the recorded crowd sounds that immediately precede them, effect a kind of vocal or lyrical reload by employing the same structures (“[insert letter] to the [insert letter]”) found in the first verse, when Kano says he “can spit like an old school MC”:

> Living like K-A blowin' up roads
> K-A-N shottin' like O's
> […]
> A-B-C, One-Two-Three
> K-A-N-O lyrical G
> […]
> K-A, I'm a bad boy though

This evocation of crew-based or clash MCing is continued in the guest verses provided by D Double E and Demon. While their sheer presence alone is reminiscent of live sound system events and pirate radio, where a number of MCs would crowd around a single microphone and vie for performance time, the construction of their verses underlines the song’s overt ties to grime’s cultural lineage:

[Verse 3: D Double E]
Yo D Double spitting the shit you feel I keep it real
What's the deal?
I heard you wanna steal my skill
You must not know me still
I get the tune jacked like Jill, badder still
Lyrically 9 mil to the dj's whi-hall (wheel)
Spin back like windm-ihall (windmill)
My selecta know the di-hall (deal)
Keep it real on the wheels of sti-hall (steel)

[Verse 4: Demon]
Let's play a game called reloads
Let's see who can get the most reloads
Big dances, Demon gets reloads
Sidewinder, yeah, I can get reloads
You don't wanna bring arms house, that's a reload
When I say the gash lyric, I get a reload
Rebore, buss that, yeah, that's a reload
Pissed off 'cause you don't get no reloads

Ohriner has suggested that rap music's 'density of rhyme aids in memory recall for both performers and listeners', and that it is rhyme's 'economy of sounds' which makes it appealing to MCs.[33] Both D Double E and Demon's verses are demonstrative of this: as well as each artist introducing themselves within their verses, and Demon's reference to the now-legendary "Sidewinder" underground club night (see chapter seven), it is the rhyme schemes presented in both verses that evoke the kind of MCing suited to live sound system events. Both verses demonstrate a clear and obvious 'density of rhyme' in that they each are monorhymed, designed presumably to aid recall in a live setting and to help audiences remember the verses

[33] Ohriner, *Flow*, 64.

(as well as doing so for the MC). D Double E's verse, however, transforms its monorhyme into a kind of lyrical challenge, as D Double finds seemingly more far-fetched words to rhyme with "real" (like "windm-ihall") to make a potentially repetitive verse engaging and complex, but memorable nonetheless. Demon's verse, however, takes a different route and doubles down by continually rhyming "reload" with "reload". Rather than inspiring monotony, however, Demon's verses are designed to elicit audience engagement. As the background vocals suggest and actually enact (2:55-3:07), the repetition of the word "reload" invites an imagined or implied audience to chant along and in doing so evokes the performance practices of rave and clash MCing in which memorable verses allow MCs recognition, and audience participation is encouraged.

While a studio recording cannot truly recreate the dynamics of sound system culture, which is predominantly based on live performance, Kano's 'Reload It' is able to successfully adapt and convincingly transpose many of the culture's performance practices to create a song that honours rather than mimics grime's lineage. 'Reload It' musically evokes the underground musics that immediately preceded grime (Jungle and Drum 'n' Bass), and draws upon the performance practices of these genres to tie together the strands of oral and performance traditions from which grime emerged. In recalling these practices, 'Reload It' traces in real time grime's immediate history and, importantly, the development of the grime MC from previous microphone-based practices. Like Wiley's 'Wot Do U Call It?', 'Reload It' behaves as a kind of meta-commentary on the evolving practices associated with and expected of an MC. Crucially, this meta-commentary is enacted through the voice of the MC himself. Kano's lyrics comment on and directly describe what is happening musically ("this is what it means when DJs reload it", "that sixteen was mean and he knows it", "DJs wheel it up"), emulate live performance practices ("Thi-this i-i-is what it means", "re-reload reload it", "bad, bad, bada-bada, bad, bad, bada-bada, bad boy"), all while executing the combative and self-

congratulatory, as well as technically skilful, lyrical performance expected of an MC ("I know that you people already know/I get a reload purely for the flow/Give me that stage and a microphone/A beat and that's my time to glow"). The presence of D Double E and Demon on 'Reload It' confirms the song's sense of cultural evocation and commentary by incorporating and recalling the techniques and practices associated with live MCing. 'Reload It' in many ways negates the need for a live audience by building both audience reaction and participation (for example Demon's "reload" chanting) into the recording, or simply implying it.

'Reload It' is, like 'Mic Check', a crossover moment in grime's early history. It presents the same quality of something captured rather than overtly crafted, although this quality is to some degree intentional. 'Reload It' employs the performance-based aesthetic practices of historical (relative to grime's short history) forms of MCing (at Jungle raves, on pirate radio, at clashes) to invoke and 'toast' the musical and cultural scenes attached to these forms of microphone practice so as to trace the traditions and define the community to which Kano feels he belongs and in which he is embedded.

"I'm trying to perfect my flow"

Grime artists in the scene's early years lean on and call upon earlier practices from the genre's lineage in order to craft their own musical identities, and it is this that lends tracks like 'Reload It' and albums like *Home Sweet Home* their crossover quality. 'Mic Check' and 'Reload It', both unconsciously by virtue of Kano's own past performing on pirate radio and as a member of N.A.S.T.Y crew, and deliberately through more direct musical and lyrical borrowings, evoke the MCing styles of the musics from which grime emerged and of the spaces where the genre was crafted. In doing so, Kano contributes to an early blueprint for authentic grime MCing from which future artists draw, as this project's later chapters on Skepta and Stormzy discuss. This blueprint is essentially the incorporation of vocal techniques and lyrical material that

derive from both grime's and earlier genres' live performance practices, in which complex phraseology and narrative complexity are rejected in favour of direct constructions and memorable phrases designed to elicit a reaction 'in the rave'. That is not to say, however, that *Home Sweet Home* is not lyrically complex. Indeed, the recorded format and the grime solo album bring problems related to repetitive listening and single authorship, namely the dangers of monotony and lack of variation. Crew clashes, pirate radio sessions, and raves would all feature numerous MCs vying for time on the mic, and Kano demonstrates throughout *Home Sweet Home* how grime in its recorded form attempts to match and replicate this sense of excitement and variation through flipping the flow, mimicking and evoking the dynamics of live performance spaces, and guest features. As the many albums that have followed *Home Sweet Home* demonstrate, these attributes have continued to influence and shape MCs' approach in composing and crafting their work, as well as presenting themselves as authentic grime artists (see chapters seven and nine).

Kano's ability to convincingly tie together practices from several genres and performance spaces also demonstrates the limitations of genre categories themselves. Though the examples given in this chapter draw from the hardcore continuum (i.e. Jungle and Drum 'n' Bass), MCs continue to operate in other diverse musical spaces and styles. *Home Sweet Home*'s 'I Don't Know Why', for example, in which Kano claims he "can spit rock, grime, hip hop, and more" is built around a sample from Black Sabbath's 'War Pigs' (much like 'Typical Me', which is also built around an electric guitar riff).[34] Further examples include Lethal Bizzle's 2007 'Babylon's Burning the Ghetto' which draws substantially on The Ruts' post-punk 1979 single 'Babylon's Burning', and Dizzee Rascal's 'Goin' Crazy', a duet with former Take That member Robbie Williams (though, as is discussed in chapter four, much of Dizzee's

[34] 'I Don't Know Why' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zfDzIm3hToQ (accessed 20th August 2023); 'Typical Me' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fA0-kNLqzOM (accessed 20th August 2023).

career has been defined by eclecticism).[35] The MC is tied not to genre distinctions, or confined to limiting formulations such as the hardcore continuum, but is connected to broader oral and performance traditions that allow for more fluid conceptions of influence and identity.

As the chapters that follow demonstrate, the MC's ability to operate across diverse musical styles has been foundational to the coherence and ongoing development of grime as a genre. MC culture remains 'vital and varied in its flows and lyrical content', and the voice of the MC is not only important in unifying, developing, and expanding genre boundaries by operating in and across 'distinctive but related musical fields', but also in its articulation of local conditions through 'the mythologies of urban life'.[36] *Home Sweet Home* is exemplary of this, as Kano unifies musics both directly connected to grime's cultural lineage (Jungle and Drum 'n' Bass) and quite distinct from it (1970s Heavy Metal), while delivering verses that embody the cultural and musical traditions, and articulate the local conditions and urban mythologies, of the community (or communities) to which he belongs. *Home Sweet Home* demonstrates the aesthetic and social expectations that will come to define the MC's role in grime, and as such represents a foundational text in the development of the genre.

[35] 'Babylon's Burning The Ghetto' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hbf83rLG2mQ (accessed 20th August 2023); 'Goin' Crazy' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eG-yMcqwR6o (accessed 20th August 2023).
[36] Zuberi, 'New Throat Fe Chat', 200.

Chapter Four – Dizzee Rascal

Alongside Wiley's *Treddin' On Thin Ice*, Dizzee Rascal's 2003 *Boy In Da Corner* is considered by many to represent a blueprint for grime music. Sounding 'like nothing else', the album exhibits the same kind of 'envelope-pushing music' present on *Treddin'*: 'Disjointed electronic pulses pass for rhythms. Above them lurch churning bass frequencies, disturbing choruses of muttering voices, clattering synthesisers that recall police sirens and arcade games, and […] bursts of rock guitar'.[1] Winner of the 2003 Mercury Prize, *Boy In Da Corner* helped to pioneer and establish grime's sound world, and to distinguish the genre from UK garage, which to Rascal was 'all too nice sounding'.[2] Given the avant-garde and visionary qualities widely attributed to the album, and Rascal's own aversions to music 'too nice sounding', Dizzee's performance at the London 2012 Olympic opening ceremony nine years after *Boy In Da Corner*'s release appears somewhat incongruous. Wearing an embroidered E3 baseball jacket (in tribute to the East London postcode from which he, and grime, originated), Dizzee performed 'Bonkers', the second single from his fourth studio album *Tongue n' Cheek* (2009). Produced by American DJ Armand Van Helden, the house-inspired sound and highly danceable four-to-the-floor rhythm of 'Bonkers' – a 'Radio 1 friendly banger' – is a far cry from the envelope-pushing music present on Rascal's debut.[3] The song's immediate (and continuing) commercial and chart success – 'Bonkers' was the first of four number one singles from *Tongue n' Cheek*, and at the time of writing remains his most-streamed song on Spotify – perhaps made it an obvious choice for the Olympic opening ceremony, for both Dizzee himself and those in charge of the ceremony. Yet there exists a friction between the E3 jacket

[1] Alexis Petridis, 'Dizzee Rascal: Boy in da Corner', *The Guardian* https://www.theguardian.com/music/2003/jul/18/popandrock.artsfeatures (accessed 1st September 2021).
[2] Dizzee Rascal quoted in Dan Hancox, *Inner City Pressure: The Story of Grime* (William Collins, 2018), 76.
[3] 'Dizzee Rascal Tongue N Cheek Reviewed Track By Track' *The Quietus* https://thequietus.com/articles/02760-dizzee-rascal-tongue-n-cheek-reviewed-track-by-track (accessed 2nd February 2022).

worn by Dizzee, an homage to both his own roots and those of the music he helped to define, and the American-influenced electro-pop sounding through the Olympic stadium's one-million-watt sound system. That the tower blocks from which grime-pioneering pirate radio stations (including Deja Vu) broadcasted were demolished to make way for the Olympic park in Stratford serves only to underline this tension.

Yet 'Bonkers' and *Tongue n' Cheek* do not necessarily represent Dizzee Rascal's 'Judas' moment. Rascal's movement from avant-garde musical innovation to comparatively derivative dance-pop is not the obvious transgression of image enacted by Bob Dylan 'going electric' in 1965. Allan Moore highlights that Dylan's famous incident transgressed an 'image […] that had been created around him', leading to an opposition between an 'accepted persona' and one that 'was received as transgressive'.[4] In Dizzee Rascal's case, such an obvious transgression is seemingly absent. Grime's continuing absence from British popular consciousness in 2009 – Logan Sama had declared it 'dead' in 2007 – partly explains this; audiences had little concept of what exactly Dizzee Rascal was (or was meant to be) transgressing musically.[5] The MC's voice remains central to *Tongue n' Cheek*'s aesthetic, and thus the album maintains the basic parameters that might be expected of grime, or any rap music (i.e. an MC performing over an instrumental beat). In his role as MC, therefore, Dizzee does not appear to depart from an 'accepted persona' or image – in a fundamental way, he is still satisfying the expectations that audiences hold him to. Yet even a cursory listening of *Boy In Da Corner* and *Tongue n' Cheek* highlights the sharp contrast between the two albums, both musical and lyrical. If Dizzee's departure from the experimental to the commercial does not

[4] Allan Moore, *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song* (Routledge, 2012), 262.
[5] Logan Sama quoted in Hancox, *Inner City Pressure*, 185. Sama's declaration is somewhat ironic: "Grime is dead. Didn't you know? I have heard it said in a couple of interviews by non-grime artists. I've read it on a couple blogs. Heard it from DJ's that used to play Grime. Yeh man, I agree. It is dead. If you are looking to jump on a grime tune or do a track with Grime artists to get a little hype for yourself and your career, it's dead for you. If you are a major label looking to cherry pick the most exciting UK urban acts and repackage them into watered down pop friendly parcels with music that sounds NOTHING like what we do down here in the grime scene, it's dead for you". https://www.grimeforum.com/threads/19547-Grime-is-dead (accessed 21st February 2022).

represent any significant transgression of image, then *Boy In Da Corner* and *Tongue n' Cheek* must presumably represent in some way iterations of the same essential animating artistic principle. Examining the two albums in tandem facilitates a consideration of what this principle, if existent (or extant), is. Further, an examination of the various differences between *Boy In Da Corner* and *Tongue n' Cheek* facilitates a consideration of the often arbitrary cultural and social biases that underlie distinctions between 'hardcore' and 'softcore', or underground and mainstream. Given Dizzee's course from underground to mainstream is marked as much economically as it is aesthetically, this chapter also explores the complex politics involved in underground music's commodification, and the tensions that exist between what is considered hardcore/softcore and anti-establishment/mass-cultural in this context. The two albums' release years, 2003 and 2009, bookend what can be called grime's first 'era', from the pioneering albums of the early 2000s (including *Boy*) to what was felt to be its temporary 'expiry' by 2010, as heralded by Sama. An examination of *Boy* and *Tongue* is thus one not only of Dizzee Rascal's musical trajectory through the decade but, given Dizzee's stature within the genre, the development of grime as a music.

"the only pop you'll hear from us is 'pop pop pop', then we're out"

> Oiiiiii
> Yeah
> Stupid Idiot
> Fix Up, Look Sharp
> Don't make me get the blitz out, get dark
> Hear the bang, see the spark
> Duck down, lay down, *just calm down*

Barked over sampled drums from Billy Squier's 'The Big Beat', the opening to 'Fix Up Look Sharp', the second single from *Boy In Da Corner*, encapsulates the energy and attitude

maintained throughout Dizzee Rascal's debut.[6] Indeed, Dizzee's approach to the sampling of Squire's drums is indicative of the album's aesthetic. A comparison between Squire's original drum sound and Dizzee's employment of the sample illustrates *Boy In Da Corner*'s often brash sonic character. As figures 14 and 15 highlight, 'Fix Up Look Sharp' takes Squire's original drums and 'fattens' them, presumably adding gain to produce higher amplitude levels (to the point of exceeding Sonic Visualiser's amplitude y axis, leading to 'clipping' - reflected in the red lines in figure 15), reflected in a more visually-striking waveform graph. Indeed, decibel level, or loudness, is arguably one of the salient parameters of Dizzee's production – even the "Oiiii" that opens 'Fix Up' rivals the amplitude peaks of Squire's drums (shown to the far left in figure 15). Closer inspection of figure 15 reveals another, less conspicuous feature of Rascal's production, or rather provides insight into his 'set up'. The silences between each drum phrase in 'Fix Up' are sudden and take on an almost thematic importance. As their respective waveform graphs show, Squire's drum hits dissipate naturally (shown by the 'tail' that follows each amplitude spike), while Dizzee's completely cut out after every second snare hit.

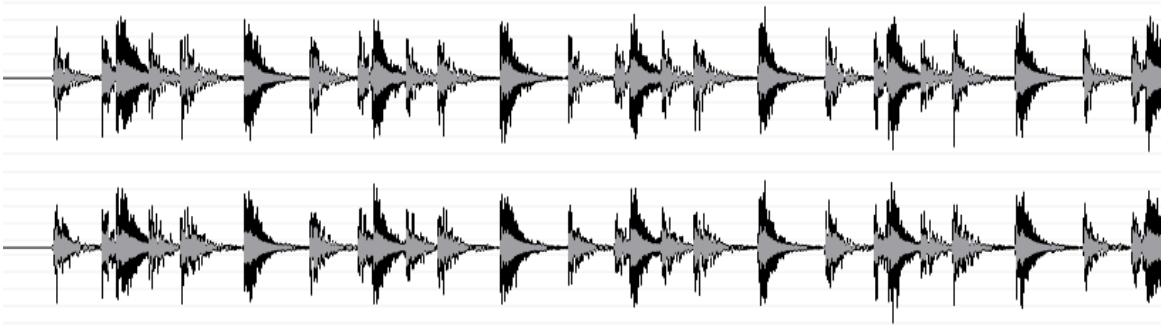

Figure 14 - Waveform graph of Billy Squier 'The Big Beat' (0:00-0:11).

[6] 'Fix Up Look Sharp' can be heard here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r7m9zZLy-1U (accessed 25th February 2022).

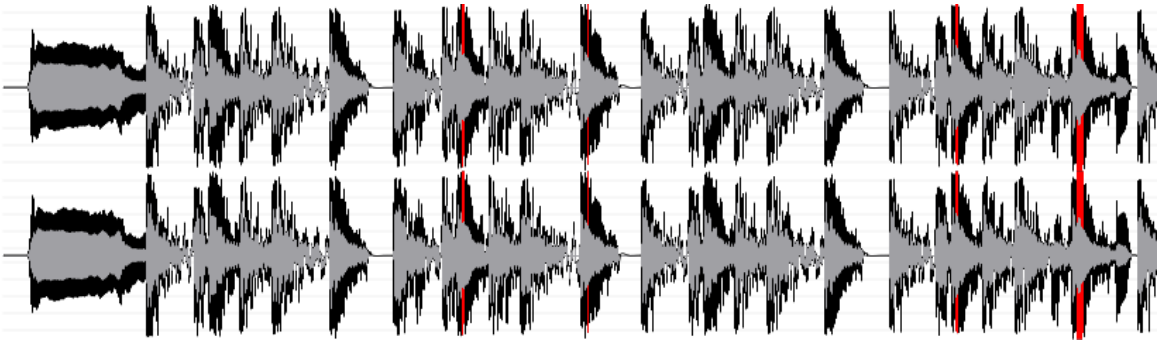

Figure 15 - Waveform graph of Dizzee Rascal 'Fix Up Look Sharp' (0:00 - 0:11).

Squier's 'Big Beat' has been sampled on numerous hip-hop (and non-hip-hop) songs since its release in 1980, including Run-D.M.C's 'Here We Go', Big Daddy Kane's 'Put Your Weight On It', and Jay-Z's '99 Problems'. Of these examples, Run-D.M.C's 'Here We Go' is perhaps closest to 'Fix Up Look Sharp' in its employment of 'The Big Beat'; a live recording from their self-titled 1984 album *Run-D.M.C*, Squire's drums are looped continuously (interspersed with 'scratching') by DJ Joseph "Run" Simmons as Darryl "D.M.C." McDaniels and Jason "Jam Master Jay" Mizell exchange verses.[7] Given Simmons' assumed use of vinyl discs, and the live setting in which the recording was made, any alteration to Squire's original is precluded, aside from the scratching that punctuates the song's verses. In the same way that use of vinyl may be deduced from Run-D.M.C's 'Here We Go', Dizzee Rascal's handling of the 'Big Beat' drums indicates not only the use of comparatively modern production methods generally, but specifically the type of audio workstation on which 'Fix Up' was 'made'. The cut off after each drum phrase is facilitated by the kind of audio file manipulation facilitated by digital audio workstations (or DAWs), which by the turn of the century were becoming more widely available. Indeed, Dizzee Rascal composed the beginnings of *Boy In Da Corner* in a school music room using Cubase on a PC; 'He spun gold from the most basic and unadorned of sound

[7] 'Here We Go' can be heard here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i3SdERdqwCA (accessed 25th February 2022).

palettes: the songs he wrote in Langdon Park School were constructed from their kit of a small mixer and Cubase software on the second-hand PCs, using the Cubase sound pack'.[8] While Dizzee switched to Pro Tools and Logic (alternative DAWs) to record *Boy In Da Corner* (in a professional studio), the kind of audio file manipulation and visual information offered by these DAWs is relatively similar. As figure 16 illustrates, DAWs often make use of a grid onto and across which 'blocks' of audio are dragged, stretched, and stacked. Importantly, audio files can be simply copied and pasted across the spatialised track, as well as 'cut up' (the scissor image in the toolbar in figure 16), encouraging among other things a sort of collage approach to composition. The drum sample that runs through 'Fix Up' bears at least traces of this approach, as the slight cut off after each drum phrase evokes the 'cut and paste' techniques facilitated by Cubase and other digital audio workstations.

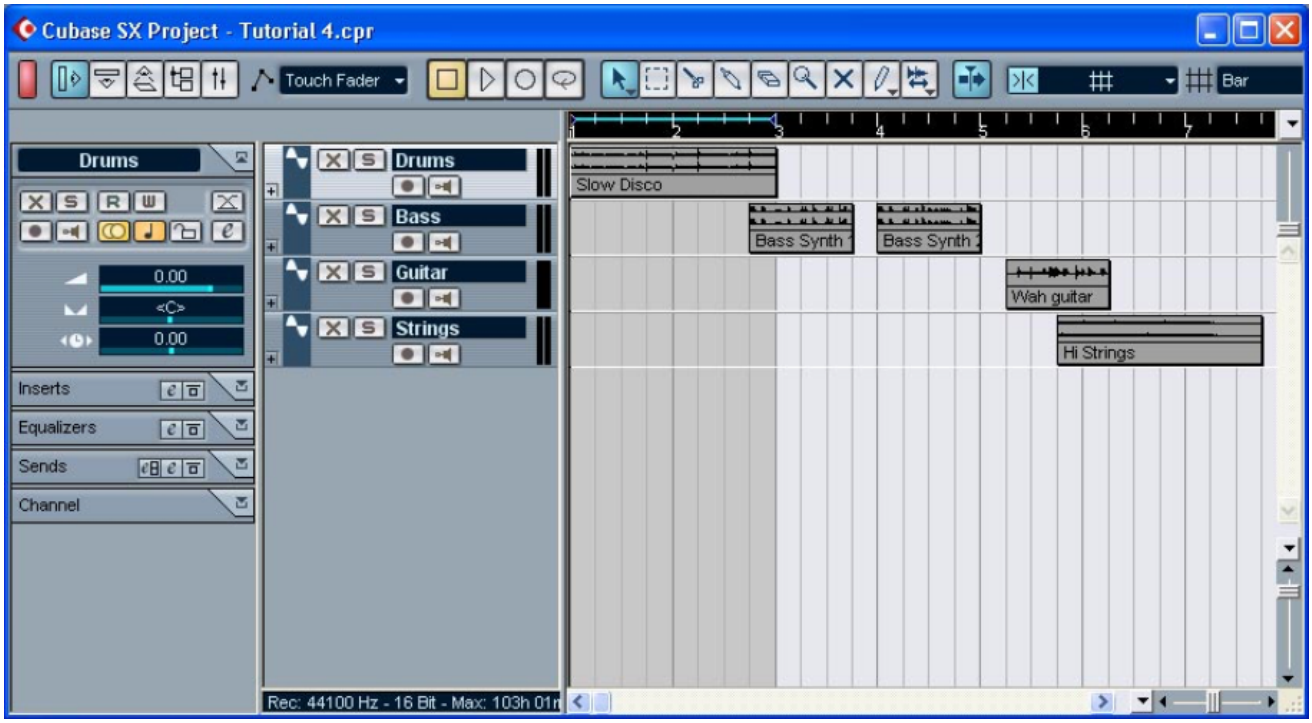

Figure 16 - Cubase SX 1 interface example.

[8] Dan Hancox, *Inner City Pressure*, 76.

More telling than Dizzee's handling of this sample is his manipulation, or lack thereof, of his 'basic and unadorned sound palette'. Other than the use of gain and compression, *Boy In Da Corner*'s sound world is characterised largely by its unaffected, 'raw' quality. Rascal himself has described part of his process candidly as 'fucking about with some weird noise', and has stated that many of his choices are influenced by his involvement with jungle:

> The reason I use those kind of sounds is because I've always liked jungle. When people moved onto the garage thing I thought it was all too nice-sounding, and I didn't really get into it. I was still into jungle, and even now I still have a bit of that in me, as you can hear from the bass line in 'Wot U On' [track 11 on *Boy In Da Corner*, which employs 'the most horrible bass sounds known to man'].[9]

'Those kind of sounds' are, in the case of *Boy*, largely raw and unprocessed synth sounds - '[s]ome people process sounds too much, but to me, that defeats the object' – or sampled percussion hits.[10] That the sounds remain unprocessed and raw is owed in part to Dizzee's work rate, or the speed at which his music is composed – 'why spend a day on one tune when you can do four?'.[11] Rascal's sound engineer Cage (with whom Dizzee mixed and recorded *Boy*) describes the process by which much of *Boy In Da Corner* was written:

> Dizzee played the drums straight into Logic Audio's MIDI sequencer. He usually plays the kick, hi-hat and snare all in one go, to create the main beat. Those elements are the minimum requirements for one of Dizzee's main beats. In any one pass he likes to play in a four-bar part, a little fill, or an eight straight away. Obviously, we can add little bits at any time, but in terms of programming after that, it is just a matter of quantising the playing. We don't really start looking into editing because as far as we're concerned, it's played, done and it works.[12]

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[9] Dizzee Rascal quoted in Hancox, *Inner City Pressure*, 76; Tom Flint, 'Dizzee Rascal & Cage: Recording Boy In Da Corner', *Sound on Sound* https://www.soundonsound.com/people/dizzee-rascal-cage (accessed 2nd February 2022).
[10] Flint, 'Recording Boy In Da Corner'.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Flint, 'Recording Boy In Da Corner'.

It is the quick-fire and rough-and-ready nature of Dizzee's process and production that is often emphasised and which, when paired with his extreme taste in sound selection, combines to produce music that is at least rhetorically experimental, energetic, and even brutal. These characteristics are manifested perhaps most directly in 'Stop Dat', a song that for Dan Hancox represents 'grime as transcendent aggression'.[13] The song's waveform graph alone appears to support this claim (figure 17). The moments of 'working in the red' seen in figure 15 feature again, only now as minor flashes within a sustained, solid block of high-amplitude sound.

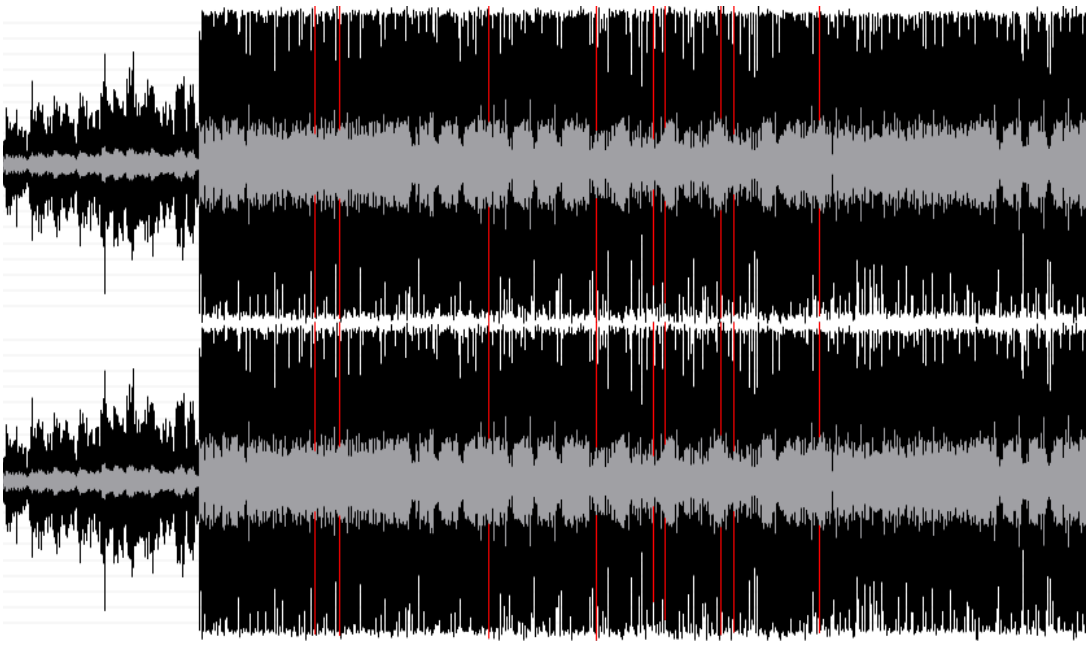

Figure 17 - 'Stop Dat' waveform graph (0:00-2:34).

'Stop Dat' opens with atmospheric, almost space age synth wanderings (0:00-0:27), represented in figure 17 by the relatively calm amplitude levels to the left of the graph, before the entry of Dizzee's vocal, accompanied by programmed drums and an angular, slightly de-

[13] Dan Hancox, *Stand Up Tall: Dizzee Rascal and the Birth of Grime* (Kindle Singles, 2013); 'Stop Dat' can be heard here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tqe3WOFAEc (accessed 25th February 2022)..

tuned synth bass (0:28). Much of the song's energy is generated by Dizzee's vocal delivery, as each line is half-shouted before being punctuated by a chorus of voices (all presumably provided by Rascal) barking "what" which, after four verses, begins to take on a thematic quality. Indeed, what is perhaps most intriguing is Dizzee's ability to deliver vocal material with anthemic or singalong 'potential' in perhaps the least inclusive manner possible. Much of the lyrical content in 'Stop Dat' is highly repetitive, and at times evokes the kind of crowd-guiding role associated with traditional MC culture:

> Boys, girls, start movin'
> C'mon, girls, boys start movin'
> Alright, don't stop, don't stop, 'til it's hurting
> C'mon, don't stop, don't stop, 'til your bleeding
>
> Alright, boy, girls start shucksin
> C'mon girls, boys start shucksin
> Alright, don't stop, don't stop, 'til it's hurting
> C'mon, don't stop, don't stop, 'til your bleeding
>
> Alright boys, girls, start movin'
> C'mon, girls, boys start movin'
> Alright, don't stop, don't stop, 'til it's hurting
> C'mon, don't stop, don't stop, 'til your bleeding
>
> Alright, boy, girls start shucksin
> C'mon girls, boys start shucksin
> Alright, don't stop, don't stop, 'til it's hurting
> C'mon, don't stop, don't stop, 'til your bleeding

Yet both Dizzee's style of delivery and verbiage, not to mention the hectic synth-driven musical kinesis that underlies it, dispels the possibility for hearing 'Stop Dat' as a singalong anthem, at least in a conventional sense. The call for boys and girls to start "shucksin" (a

synonym for dance) and "movin" until they're "hurting" and "bleeding" is a somewhat distorted twist on the call-and-response invitations to dance heard across much pop music, and indeed in Dizzee's own 'Dance wiv Me'. The first single from *Tongue n' Cheek*, 'Dance wiv Me' is the first of two collaborations with producer Calvin Harris from the album (the second being 'Holiday'), and was the first number one in Dizzee's career, spending four weeks atop the UK Singles Chart.[14] A far cry from the sonic and lyrical intensity of 'Stop Dat', the comparatively polite encouragements from Dizzee on 'Dance wiv Me' ("So lets party B, come and dance with me") are delivered over what Ian Cohen calls 'straight-laced H&M disco'.[15] A cursory waveform comparison between the two songs confirms a shift in literal sonic or auditory intensity (figure 18), and raises the same notions of sonic 'smoothness'/'abrasiveness' and warmth/cold explored in Wiley's instrumentals on *Treddin' On Thin Ice*. 'Dance wiv Me' sees Dizzee depart from the gain-driven and unprocessed textures present throughout *Boy In Da Corner*, in favour of polished, highly compressed (the reduction, or compression, of an audio signal's dynamic range), and perhaps 'radio-friendly' synth sounds, as well as a Curtis Mayfield-inspired, quasi-Soul/R&B introduction and middle eight that counterposes the song's central, bass-ostinato-driven, and disco-inspired beat.

[14] 'Dance wiv Me' can be heard here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GibLntdLiJA (accessed 25th February 2022).
[15] Ian Cohen, 'Dizzee Rascal: Tongue n' Cheek', *Pitchfork* https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/13573-tongue-n-cheek/ (accessed 2nd February 2022).

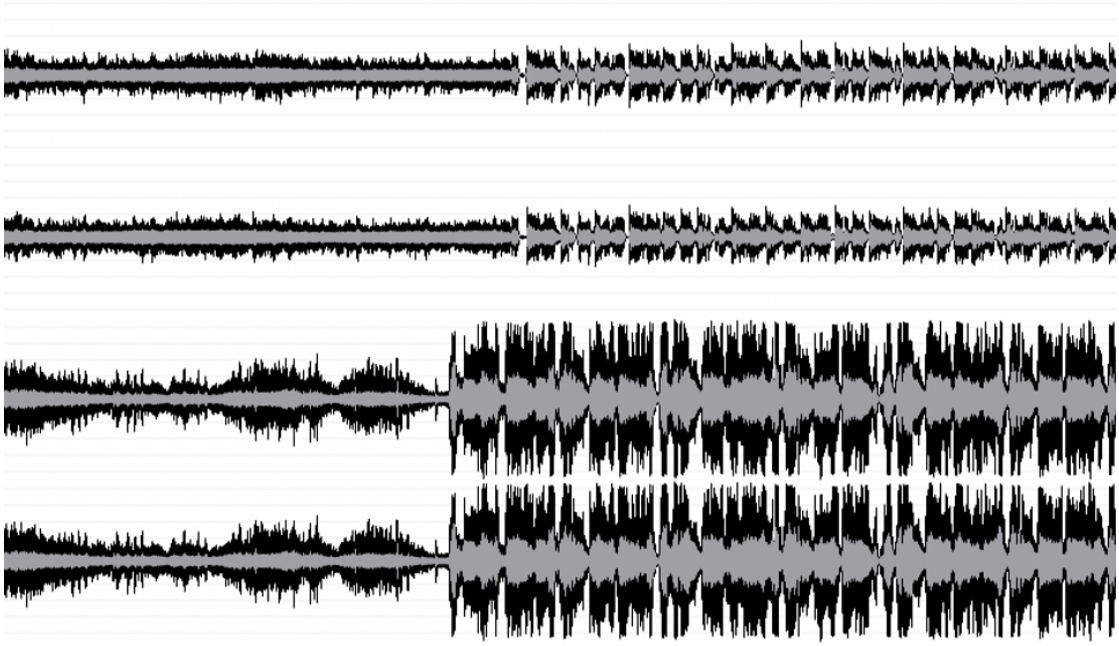

Figure 18 - Waveform comparison between 'Dance wiv Me' (0:19-0:37) and 'Stop Dat' (0:21-0:38), illustrating each song's 'drop'.

While the lyrical content differs greatly from much of *Boy* (warning of "murder on the dancefloor" is the closest Dizzee comes to matching the lyrical violence of 'Stop Dat'), 'Dance wiv Me' does contain rapped verses from Rascal. The same cannot be said for 'Bonkers', the second single released from *Tongue n' Cheek*.[16] The anthemic potential recognised in 'Stop Dat' finds its release in 'Bonkers', a song that is comprised lyrically of only two eight-bar segments, which arguably form a pre-chorus ("I wake up every day") and a chorus ("Some people think I'm bonkers"):

I wake up every day it's a daydream
Everythin' in my life ain't what it seems
I wake up just to go back to sleep
I act real shallow but I'm in too deep
And all I care about is sex and violence
A heavy bassline is my kind of silence

[16] 'Bonkers' can be heard here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISy0Hl0SBfg (accessed 25th February 2022).

Everybody says that I gotta get a grip
But I let sanity give me the slip

Some people think I'm bonkers
But I just think I'm free
Man, I'm just livin' my life
There's nothin' crazy about me
Some people pay for thrills
But I get mine for free
Man, I'm just livin' my life
There's nothin' crazy about me

While "all I care about is sex and violence/a heavy bassline is my kind of silence" is perhaps closer to Dizzee's *Boy In Da Corner* sentiments, any real sense of danger is precluded by the music over which these lines are delivered (or chanted). The more convincingly 'heavy bassline' of 'Stop Dat' is here replaced by more polite EDM and house-inspired synth sounds, underscored by a highly danceable, four-to-the-floor rhythm (where each beat of each bar is marked by a kick drum).

Indeed, a comparison between *Tongue n' Cheek* and *Boy In Da Corner* makes conspicuous the almost-total absence in the former of Reynolds' basic 'hardcore' parameters; *Tongue n' Cheek* is so striking as it appears to herald Dizzee Rascal's departure not just from his own earlier aesthetic, but from the lineage (or continuum) to which grime supposedly belongs. Rascal's 'beat-science' no longer 'seek[s] the intersection between "fucked up" and "groovy"', but abandons the former in favour of the latter, as the incredibly groovy and inoffensive 'Dance Wiv Me' illustrates.[17] Indeed, it must be mentioned that Rascal is no longer author of his own 'beat-science' – he is credited as a producer on only one song from *Tongue*

[17] Simon Reynolds, 'Simon Reynolds on the hardcore continuum: introduction', *The Wire* (2013) https://www.thewire.co.uk/in-writing/essays/the-wire-300_simon-reynolds-on-the-hardcore-continuum_introduction (accessed 1st September 2021).

n' Cheek's track list ('Money Money') – handing the reins instead (most notably) to EDM and electro-pop DJ/producers Armand Van Helden and Calvin Harris.[18] Dizzee Rascal is therefore left to MC over instrumentals that appear to eschew the rhythmic and timbral innovations of jungle music, Wiley's 'Eskibeat', and Rascal's own self-produced early work. While it must be said that a number of *Tongue n' Cheek*'s album tracks do avoid the pop-oriented tendencies of 'Bonkers' and 'Dance Wiv Me' ('Road Rage', for example), the album is largely void of the 'abrasive timbres [and] dark "minor" tonalities' that supposedly define Reynolds' hardcore continuum and, by extension, grime.

Yet, as has been established, the hardcore continuum as conceived by Reynolds, despite its often vague and wide-ranging parameters, remains insular and restricted. Given its origin in the British rave scene of the late '80s and early '90s, Reynolds' continuum must in some way allow for the inclusion of Harris and Van Helden's brand of EDM-influenced electro pop. Hardcore Rave emerged in London in the late 1980s as a 'distinctly northern European interpretation' of techno originating mainly from Detroit, which itself developed both out of and into other forms of (acid) house, 'post-soul', and various other forms of electronic dance productions.[19] If not directly related, then Harris and Van Helden's EDM and the musics contained in Reynolds' continuum can be said to share a common ancestor. That an admittedly crude shared lineage may be traced between the two apparently disparate musical cultures illustrates the arbitrary and subjective nature of Reynolds' conception. As Gilbert suggests, 'from a certain perspective, the abstraction of this set of styles from the broader matrix of black Atlantic culture amounts to an arbitrary gesture with little obvious empirical validity'.[20] Reynolds' position as a 'participant-observer' or 'critic-fanatic', getting 'involved in the tribe',

[18] https://www.discogs.com/release/5050753-Dizzee-Rascal-Tongue-NCheek (accessed 6th April 2022).
[19] Jeremy Gilbert, 'Break/Flow/Escape/Capture: The Energy and Impotence of the Hardcore Continuum', in Jon Stratton and Nabeel Zuberi (eds.) *Black Popular Music in Britain Since 1945* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016) 169-184, here 169.
[20] Ibid., 170.

naturally affects his objectivity (or compromises it 'more than a little').[21] Nabeel Zuberi highlights that 'underlying the hardcore continuum is Reynolds' own taste for machinic, electronic music, and his distaste in particular for "soul humanism"'.[22] Perhaps more importantly, Zuberi underlines the 'gendered and class-based division' maintained by Reynolds' continuum between what is deemed 'hardcore' and what is 'softcore'; 'the latter is presumed to be feminine, more mass cultural as opposed to subcultural, but also more aspirational and suburban, rather than working-class and located in the inner city'.[23] The division Zuberi identifies between 'hardcore' and 'softcore' in many ways encapsulates the tension or friction between *Boy In Da Corner* and *Tongue n' Cheek*'s respective sound worlds. The latter's mass-cultural appeal and materialistic messaging ("Eight hundred fifty pound jeans covering my shin/'coz my legs are skinny but my wallet ain't thin"), when compared to *Boy In Da Corner*'s documentation of working-class East London, does mark a move from 'hardcore' to 'softcore', from the inner city to not only the suburban, but – given Rascal's performance at the Olympic opening ceremony – the global.[24]

Yet aesthetically, *Tongue n' Cheek* does not wholly conform to the 'feminine' softcore characteristic outlined by Zuberi. While not as sonically brash as *Boy In Da Corner*, *Tongue* nonetheless exhibits what Mike D'Errico terms the 'relationship between synthesizers and masculinity'.[25] Writing on EDM music after the 2008 stock market crash, D'Errico frames the music as 'a sonic reflection of masculinity in crisis':

[21] Reynolds, 'Simon Reynolds on the hardcore continuum'.
[22] Nabeel Zuberi, 'New Throat Fe Chat: The Voices and Media of MC Culture', in Jon Stratton and Nabeel Zuberi (eds.) *Black Popular Music in Britain Since 1945* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016) 187-201, here 190.
[23] Ibid..
[24] Dizzee Rascal 'Money, Money' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ww1jlLBm-3U (accessed 24th August 2023).
[25] Mike D'Errico, 'The Biopolitics of Synthesizers', in Luis Manuel Garcia-Mispireta and Robin James (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Electronic Dance Music* (August 2021).

> EDM enacts sonic gestures of individual sounds rising above the collective mix, reflecting a historically gendered trope of men asserting their mastery and control over their surroundings in order to increase individual profits and resources.[26]

These 'sonic gestures' are found throughout *Tongue n' Cheek*, most notably in 'Bonkers'. The 'drops' that structurally underline 'Bonkers' are arguably demonstrative of EDM's 'masculine structure', favouring more immediate build-ups and drops 'vs. "feminine" disco, which values the construction of pleasure through more gradual changes in texture and timbre'.[27] Indeed, 'Bonkers' relies on 'the constant build up and release of tension', repeating 'polyrhythms and dense harmonic elements' at the end of each section that combine with a 'riser' effect 'to create an overwhelming crescendo'.[28] 'Bonkers' is fundamentally constructed around two 'drops' (1:02 & 2:21/2:36), as 'moments of maximal density' (1:56 - 2:20) result in 'moments of ecstatic release from a single track in the mix' (for example, the bass synthesiser patch that follows the drop at 1:02).[29]

While demonstrably masculine, under the terms of such binary distinctions, and thus arguably more aligned with the 'hardcore', in its approach to sound and structure, EDM nonetheless retains its 'aspirational' quality. Indeed, in D'Errico's account, EDM's masculine sonic quality is inextricably linked to its function as 'an agent of neoliberal capitalism'.[30] *Tongue n' Cheek* exemplifies this relationship in its pairing of Ibiza-electro-pop synthesizer timbres with Rascal's tales of *nouveau riche* opulence and conspicuous consumption, and as a result falls on the 'wrong side' of the hardcore/softcore division in its distinctly 'aspirational' character. Further, the masculine/feminine distinction that D'Errico theorises is in many ways

[26] Ibid..
[27] Ibid..
[28] Ibid..
[29] Ibid..
[30] Ibid. D'Errico's argument for EDM's inherent masculinity is tied also to the practices of consumption and commodity fetishism that surround synthesizers generally. Indeed the aim of his piece is to consider 'how the design of synthesizers and digital instruments in twenty-first-century EDM reflects a biopolitics of software that arises when sound and signal are analogized as dynamic bodies, and the core practices of music production center on the attempt to control, manipulate, and repair those bodies.'

a reformulation of the already problematic hardcore/softcore dichotomy implied by Reynolds' continuum. D'Errico's writing is invoked here not to endorse and reiterate such binary readings of electronic music, but to explore and highlight further the often arbitrary and rhetorical mechanisms by which music is deemed softcore/hardcore or masculine/feminine, something that will be explored later in relation to Little Simz (chapter six).

"Of course I do it for the payment, but I do it at my leisure"

An obvious subtext to the division between what is perceived as hardcore and softcore is the notion of authenticity i.e. the mass-produced-and-consumed softcore vs. the subcultural (and counter-cultural) hardcore. Whether real or perceived, Dizzee Rascal's move away from the hardcore continuum also represents a departure from authenticity, or 'selling out'. Dan Hancox's account of *Tongue n' Cheek*'s commercial success seems to suggest this move:

> They had finally made stars out of grime MCs; but with music that barely resembled grime. Dizzee's version of 'why the music changed' is pretty persuasive; he says it was primarily defined by his new audience and lifestyle […] The winning formula was simple: towering Ibiza electro-house synths, slower rapping and simple lyrics about cars and girls and holidays, and schmaltzy, sung (and often autotuned) choruses.[31]

Like much rap music, however, grime has always explicitly operated within a capitalist economy. As Gilbert notes, the production and circulation of commodities (e.g. records) has been 'the very medium in which many music scenes [including grime] have existed'.[32] Much like Hip Hop, grime's consumption rituals 'testify to the power of consumption as a means of cultural expression' as a 'sort of appropriation and critique via style', often expressed through 'exceptionally large "chunk" gold and diamond jewellery' which 'mocks, yet affirms, the gold

[31] Hancox, *Inner City Pressure*, 200.
[32] Jeremy Gilbert, 'The Energy and Impotence of the Hardcore Continuum', 177.

fetish in Western trade'.[33] Dizzee's aestheticization of consumption, both in the jet-set tales on *Tongue n' Cheek* ("If I laid my trainers out/I bet they stretch to Timbuktu/I got so many fitted hats/I don't know what the fuck to do") and the more plain-spoken tones of *Boy In Da Corner* ("I love females, money, and creps [shoes]"), is more of a challenge to, rather than an affirmation of, neoliberal imperatives, and highlights the relationship that grime (and indeed all rap music) has always had with the commodity system. Rascal's music and lyrics have always concerned themselves in some way with the aestheticization of consumption (either in the accumulation of wealth or ostentatious spending of that wealth) regardless of his audience or lifestyle, and characterises Tricia Rose's observation that rap music's relationship with consumption 'has frequently been mischaracterised as a movement *into* the commodity market [emphasis in original]'.[34] Indeed, the contexts for creation in grime 'were never fully outside or in opposition to commodities', and have always involved struggles over access to commodified materials (e.g. recording equipment, studio space, production software, record pressing and distribution spaces).[35] The notion that artists were never interested in monetary compensation for their work is naïve, deriving from a misconception that 'during the early days, [artists are] motivated by pleasure rather than profit, as if the two were incompatible'.[36] Dizzee Rascal, like both Kano and Wiley, explicitly states his aspirations to wealth in his early music; as their own lyrics detail, artistic creativity divorced from financial gain is a luxury simply not available to grime MCs, and listening to Dizzee's tales of inner-city poverty should dispel any notion of 'art for art's sake'.

Gilbert's contention that scenes must exist through the production and circulation of commodities comes with the corollary assertion that such exchanges 'are not necessarily geared towards the indefinite accumulation of capital', operating 'at profit margins which were only

[33] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise*, 36-38.
[34] Ibid..
[35] Ibid., 40.
[36] Ibid..

sufficient to provide […] owners and operators [of record companies, shops and radio stations] with a modest income'.[37] Gilbert notes that where actors (usually major record companies) have made significant returns, 'these have often been generated through the time-honoured practice of selling records which deploy some of the distinctive sonic techniques typical of the output of this music scene, using them to add tonal colour to largely traditional and widely recognisable pop song forms, thus depriving those experimental techniques of much of their affective impact (compare to Dane Bowers and Victoria Beckham's 2000 single 'Out of Your Mind')'.[38] 'Bonkers' and 'Dance Wiv Me' both appear to deploy the industry practices identified by Gilbert; 'widely recognisable pop song forms', though void of any significantly experimental quality, are superficially coloured by arguably the most distinctive sonic technique in grime's arsenal – the voice of highly-respected MC Dizzee Rascal.

Yet Dizzee's first and 'authentically experimental' album *Boy In Da Corner* was released by XL Recordings, home to Adele, Radiohead, and the White Stripes, while *Tongue n' Cheek* was released through Rascal's own record label Dirtee Skank, and as such is a self-released work. *Tongue* was, in fact, Dizzee's first independent release after parting company with XL, who felt his divergence into dance-pop was a potential misstep. Rose argues that what is more important is not rap music's 'shift from precommodity (*sic*) to commodity', but rather the shift in control over 'the scope and direction of the profit-making process', out of the hands of the artists and local black entrepreneurs and into the hands of 'larger white-owned, multinational businesses'.[39] In Dizzee Rascal's case, however, this latter shift is reversed. *Tongue n' Cheek* is the moment that the profit-making process attached to the music is seized from the hands of white-owned businesses and delivered directly and solely into those of Rascal, artist and entrepreneur. Further, as Jonathan Ilan has highlighted, MCs have always had

[37] Gilbert, 'The Energy and Impotence of the Hardcore Continuum', 178.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid..

a measure of agency in commodifying themselves and their work, and though conspicuous consumption is a prevalent theme in rap, 'work ethic, business skills and education' are simultaneously emphasised as ways in which to achieve 'economic mobility' – Wiley's motivational and aspirational 'Pick U R Self Up' is demonstrative of this ("Where's your will to survive and to be/Someone, somewhere/Doing something").[40] The independent release of *Tongue n' Cheek*, embodies this economic mobility and emphasis on work ethic and business savvy, and appeals to the essentially self-sustaining and highly independent distributional models characteristic of the hardcore continuum. As Dizzee himself has complained: 'people talk about the pop part – they don't talk about me being an independent artist'.[41]

"They're tryin' to see if Dizzee stays true to his grammar"

Dizzee Rascal's trajectory through the century's first decade is demonstrative of the broader developments in grime as a genre in its early years, or first 'era'. As grime emerged and distinguished itself, it drew upon the unadorned, 'raw', and intense sound worlds of its direct musical ancestors – as Dizzee himself has stated, Jungle directly inspired *Boy In Da Corner*'s sound palette. It was the use of this inherited palette in a distinctive and innovative way that allowed grime artists to delineate their own specific sound while retaining enough sonic elements from earlier genres to bind them to their 'hardcore' roots, and thus legitimate their music as authentic. By 'working in the red', employing abrasive timbres and sparse musical textures, and deploying MCing techniques associated with pirate radio and other earlier forms of 'hardcore' live performance (Dizzee Rascal was a member of Wiley's Roll Deep crew and at 18 already a veteran of pirate radio), early grime artists were able not only to craft their own

[40] Jonathan Ilan quoted in Zuberi, 'New Throat Fe Chat', 200; 'Pick U R Self Up' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LPcjsRUSyb8 (accessed 23rd August 2023).
[41] Dizzee Rascal quoted in Dan Hancox, 'No grime at the Brits? No change there', *The Guardian* https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/jan/15/grime-brit-awards-black-british-skepta-stormzy-lady-leshurr (accessed 15th August 2023).

musical space but also to embed themselves in a clear and traceable cultural tradition. In this way early grime artists appeal to what Allan Moore describes as 'authenticity as primality', or 'the tracing back to an original which validates the contemporary'.[42] While these early artists' appeals to tradition are to a large extent unconscious and 'natural', given their active participation in these earlier scenes, in the genre's later years this process becomes somewhat more deliberate and considered, as the examples of Skepta and Stormzy demonstrate (chapters seven and nine).

Moore highlights that the importance of retaining a point of cultural and musical origin is particularly exemplified in Paul Gilroy's conceptualisation of 'the equation for black listeners of local ('original') expressions of culture with authenticity, and more global manifestations with cultural dilution (or lack of aesthetic appeal […])'.[43] A cursory comparison between *Boy In Da Corner* and *Tongue n' Cheek* appears to illustrate this movement from grime music's local expression to EDM's more globally manifested appeal. The aesthetic difference between the two albums is characterised by Dizzee's abandonment of grime's local and original expression in favour of a more globally-oriented sound, as well as to some extent the first-person authenticity that 'demands that the performer have a real relation to his or her audience'.[44] Dizzee's debut album ties itself musically to a traceable cultural tradition (sound system culture/the hardcore continuum) and lyrically to a socio-economic environment (inner city London), and thus constructs both an imagined and implied community to and for which the music speaks. *Boy In Da Corner* is valued because its production 'appears to rest on the integrity of [its] performer, an integrity that is read as secure'.[45] *Tongue n' Cheek*, however, effects a break both musically and lyrically from *Boy*'s cultural heritage and imagined

[42] Allan Moore, 'Authenticity as authentication', *Popular Music* 21, No. 2 (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 209-223, here 215.
[43] Ibid..
[44] Grossberg quoted in Moore, 'Authenticity as authentication', 216.
[45] Moore, *Song Means*, 262.

community, and neglects what Bohlman terms a 'purity of practice', or the 'consistent representation of the origins of a […] style'.[46] Dizzee in 2009 has 'gone pop', with a sound defined by a new lifestyle and a new audience. *Tongue* is thus denigrated because Dizzee's integrity 'appears, from the viewpoint of the critic, to have been compromised (whether by the unacceptable face of capitalism, or just by too much thinking)'.[47]

The comparison drawn above is, however, a simplified one. Grime as an underground and essentially self-taught art form is resistant to static constructions of tradition, and attempts to strictly define and contain the genre's sound world and cultural lineage, especially in the music's early years, limit an appreciation of grime's aesthetics. While Reynolds' hardcore continuum is useful in tracing grime's primary musical antecedents, the formulation should not necessarily serve as a definitive tradition in which grime artists must embed themselves and their music. Indeed, Reynold's construction in many ways allows for the inclusion of *Tongue n' Cheek*'s particular brand of EDM-influenced electro pop in the hardcore continuum, given that the continuum and EDM share a common ancestor in 1970s and 80s Detroit techno. Rather than abandoning the traditions to which he is seemingly attached, therefore, Rascal is instead effecting an expansion of grime's cultural lineage, tracing its roots through an alternative history of (acid) house, 'post-soul', and various other forms of electronic dance productions.

Many of the apparently pop-oriented musical features of *Tongue n' Cheek* find a precedent in the 'envelope pushing' sound world of *Boy In Da Corner*. The anthemic verses and choruses in 'Dance Wiv Me' and 'Bonkers' are in many ways iterations of the same MC stylings of a younger Dizzee, as well as those of Kano and Wiley. The singalong choruses in *Tongue* embody the crowd-guiding and interactive practices expected in MC culture, and echo the "Boys, girls, start movin'" motif in 'Stop That', as well as the "Everybody who likes this

[46] Bohlman quoted in Moore, 'Authenticity as authentication', 213.
[47] Moore, *Song Means*, 262.

come this way" lyrics in Wiley's 'Wot Do U Call It?'. Similarly, those elements of *Tongue n' Cheek*'s sound world that seemingly derive from traditions unrelated to grime's are arguably no more divergent than those found in *Boy In Da Corner*, particularly the use of Billy Squire's 'The Big Beat' in 'Fix Up Look Sharp', or than Kano's eclectic sampling of Black Sabbath on *Home Sweet Home*.

Like Kano, Dizzee Rascal demonstrates the MC's ability to operate across diverse musical styles. The unifying principle between *Boy In Da Corner* and *Tongue n' Cheek* proposed at the beginning of this chapter can be found, most obviously, in the voice of the MC. Whether or not *Boy* and *Tongue* can be categorised into the same genre or musical lineage, they are both undoubtedly Dizzee Rascal albums. As Boakye says of *Boy*: 'it's not a grime album, or an Eski album, or a UK rap album, or a hip hop album, or an electro album. It's a Dizzee Rascal album'.[48] Zuberi notes that the 'specificities of the MC's voice and persona are reminders of black subjectivities in a world in which ethnically marked and racialised citizens and migrants are imagined in collective and often homogeneous terms'.[49] Yet the fact that *Boy In Da Corner* and *Tongue n' Cheek* are considered to be so aesthetically and culturally different speaks to the limitations of the conception of the MC as a non-genre-bound and fluid actor, and the homogenising forces to which MCs are nonetheless subjected. Given that Dizzee Rascal cannot operate within genres or across traditions outside of grime's direct lineage without accusations of 'selling out', there has to be a limit to the diversity of musical styles across which an MC may operate before their authenticity and cultural belonging are called into question. While Dizzee undoubtedly enjoyed success with *Tongue n' Cheek*, both critically and commercially, there is a sense in which this came at a cost in terms of his grime credentials.

[48] Jeffrey Boakye, *Hold Tight* (London: Influx Press, 2018), 91.
[49] Zuberi, 'New Throat Fe Chat', 191.

"I dominated the underground and then I dominated the overground"

Dizzee Rascal's 'British Male Solo Artist' win at the 2010 BRIT Awards, as well as the performance he gave, encapsulates in many ways his complex mainstream breakthrough. Seven years after his Mercury Prize win, Dizzee's victory at the BRITs represents at once the culmination of his rise to mainstream stardom and, given the other nominees (Calvin Harris, Paolo Nutini, Mika, and Robbie Williams), the nadir of his authentic grime credentials. Dizzee's perceived abandonment of grime and the British underground music scene was further underlined by his performance at the awards show, joining Florence Welch (of indie-pop band Florence And The Machine) for a performance of 'You've Got The Dirtee Love', a mash-up of Florence's 'You've Got The Love' and Dizzee's 'Dirtee Cash'. By Dizzee's own reckoning, *Tongue n' Cheek* is 'straight-up pop', and the album effected his transition from 'critically acclaimed chronicler of urban blight to mainstream chart-topper'.[50] Yet to draw a simplified and binary distinction between *Boy In Da Corner*'s intense brand of blueprint grime and *Tongue n' Cheek*'s dance-pop stylings is to ignore the questions that lie at the intersection of the two albums. Boakye has highlighted grime's complex relationship with such binary distinctions:

> Grime, consciously or not, operates within [a] pop/underground dichotomy. It's a genre that is undoubtedly connected to the streets but catering wholeheartedly to the clubs. It's dance music, built out of grooves and audio hooks wholly intended to hype crowds.[…] It must be remembered that even the most roadman MC comes from a lineage of soundboys whose primary function is to start parties. Like Jungle, Grime is dance music that is relatable due to its sonic energy, often edgy in content but always embraceable in execution.[51]

[50] Ben Thompson, 'Dizzee heights for Dizzee Rascal', *The Telegraph* https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/rockandpopfeatures/5979189/Dizzee-heights-for-Dizzee-Rascal.html (accessed 27th August 2023).
[51] Boakye, *Hold Tight*, 37.

Dizzee Rascal is perhaps the only figure in grime's history to represent wholeheartedly each side of this pop/underground dichotomy. Dizzee's career trajectory challenges the dichotomous discourses surrounding genre and authenticity, as well as problematic and short-sighted constructions of musical lineage like Reynolds' hardcore continuum. A considered and nuanced examination of the various differences between *Boy In Da Corner* and *Tongue n' Cheek* is demonstrative not so much of Dizzee Rascal's abandonment of grime's aesthetic tenets than it is illustrative of the often arbitrary cultural and social biases that underline distinctions between 'hardcore' and 'softcore', or underground and mainstream.

Dizzee's course from underground to mainstream is marked as much economically as it is aesthetically. There is a degree to which formulations such as Reynolds' equate what is mainstream with what is profitable. Indeed, the commodification of subcultural forms of expression by (often) white-owned, multinational businesses into successful and mass-cultural products has historically proven to blunt the anti-establishment force of those phenomena, and by extension their underground or 'hardcore', credentials. Yet Dizzee Rascal reverses this trend, independently releasing his commercial hits to become the first British artist to have two successive number one singles on his own label. Dizzee's independent release of *Tongue n' Cheek* is not only reminiscent of early grime's independent and 'wheeler and dealer' market practices, but establishes a trend echoed in independent releases from later grime artists Little Simz, Skepta, and Stormzy (chapters six, seven, and nine).

It is important also to mention that Dizzee's 'Dance Wiv Me' gave Calvin Harris his first UK number one, and that the song was entirely Dizzee's idea (Rascal texted Harris asking him to write an instrumental for a verse he had recorded). Dizzee's chart success is owed arguably as much to the force of his personality and cultural popularity as it is to a switch in musical style. It is this same force of personality, a foundational tenet of MC culture, that behaves as a powerful unifying force not only for Dizzee Rascal's music but, as the chapters

that follow will show, for grime music generally. Importantly, however, while *Boy In Da Corner* and *Tongue n' Cheek* illustrate to some extent the ways in which the voice of the MC may connect disparate musical utterances, they also trace the limits within which an MC may operate and retain their authentic 'hardcore' status.

Dizzee Rascal's rise to the top of the UK charts marked in many ways the end of grime's first wave, or 'era'. As the chapter that follows explores, Dizzee's movement into the mainstream was followed by a string of chart entries from grime MCs Chipmunk, Skepta, Tinie Tempah, and Tinchy Stryder, but with music that was felt to barely resemble grime. As the scene began to regather and re-emerge in the 2010s, it did so by reviving and re-inventing many of the key aesthetic tenets that underpin *Boy In Da Corner* (as well as *Treddin' On Thin Ice* and other now-classic grime releases), and promoted the independent release strategies pioneered by artists like Dizzee Rascal and Wiley. Rascal is in so many ways a pioneering figure in the grime scene, and has done much to substantiate his claim that begins this section: 'I dominated the underground and then I dominated the overground'.[52] His debut *Boy In Da Corner* outperformed Wiley's *Treddin'* both commercially and critically and, as evidenced by the attempts of several grime MCs to replicate the formula, the switch from underground pioneer to mainstream star is not an easy one to make. Dizzee Rascal spearheaded grime's emergence, developing aesthetic principles that continue to underpin the music's production, before pioneering a course into mainstream and industry acceptance that grime has only recently replicated. Rascal is in many ways grime's 'greatest star, and departed hero'.[53]

[52] Dizzee Rascal quoted in Luke Morgan Britton, 'Dizzee Rascal criticises Kanye West over grime-inspired Brits performance', *NME* https://www.nme.com/news/music/dizzee-rascal-8-1202622 (accessed 29th August 2023).
[53] Dan Hancox, 'No grime at the Brits? No change there', *The Guardian* https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/jan/15/grime-brit-awards-black-british-skepta-stormzy-lady-leshurr (accessed 29th August 2023).

Chapter Five – 'grime is dead'

The commercial success of *Tongue n' Cheek* marked a significant milestone for grime, albeit not necessarily a celebratory one. While 2009 saw MCs Dizzee Rascal, Chipmunk, Tinie Tempah, and Tinchy Stryder all release UK Top 10 singles, the music itself scarcely resembled the 'fresh and bizarre' sound world of grime's first wave.[1] Logan Sama's 'grime is dead' proclamation in 2007 captures the mood of frustration and dissatisfaction surrounding the music's first flirtation with mainstream success:

> Grime is dead. If you don't love it, don't try and make it. Don't try and get into it. There's no money for you here. Piss off. We'll keep it our secret until such time that we are ready to bring it to the wider world on our own terms. When it will get played on daytime radio as it is, without having to sample 80s pop records or bring in someone else to give it credibility to middle of the road out of touch playlist execs.[2]

Sama's analysis of the scene reflects the growing separation between grime's mainstream and its underground in the late 2000s, and speaks for a purist community within the grime scene to whom albums like *Tongue n' Cheek* represented an almost total abandonment of the music's key artistic and aesthetic principles. 'London Town', the title track from Kano's 2007 follow-up to *Home Sweet Home*, sees the MC, now "a lot wiser, a little older", making music that "sounds like grime, but a little slower". For Angus Batey, *London Town* employs grime – a 'mutant genre' – as 'a spice that peps up some fairly straightforward pop music, rather than an end in itself', echoing the hardcore-as-tonal-colour industry approach outlined by Gilbert.[3] Batey's article itself opens with a contentious statement: 'No matter what anyone might say,

[1] Hua Hsu, 'The Surprising Survival of Grime', *The New York Times* https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/10/01/the-surprising-survival-of-grime (accessed 1st September 2021).
[2] Logan Sama, https://www.grimeforum.com/threads/19547-Grime-is-dead (accessed 21st February 2022).
[3] Angus Batey, 'Kano, Jazz Café London', *The Guardian* https://www.theguardian.com/music/2007/oct/29/urban.popandrock (accessed 10th May 2022).

grime – the London-bred bastard child of hip-hop, ragga and garage – is a stylistic dead end'.[4] Reviewing Kano's late-2007 performance of *London Town* as part of the BBC Electric Proms, Batey's assertion reads as complacent in its outright (and premature) dismissal of grime's development; while Kano 'may have what it takes to make aspects of [grime] genuinely popular', the genre remains an 'insular music […] pacing itself around its own self-made prison cell'.[5] Though perhaps a little hasty, Batey's assertion is made in response to a tangible sense of finality to grime's fall from the UK music scene in the late 2000s. Established MCs like Scorcher, Devlin, Dot Rotten, Skepta, and Griminal followed Dizzee Rascal's example and had their own electro-pop crossover efforts signed for label release, all following what Dan Hancox tauntingly calls a 'winning formula' – 'towering Ibiza electro-house synths, slower rapping and simple lyrics'.[6] While Dizzee Rascal likened fans' resentment to 'being angry with David Beckham for leaving the youth team', the purist argument nonetheless carried some weight; albums like *London Town* and *Tongue n' Cheek*, in their apparent abandonment of grime's core aesthetic principles in favour of more pop-oriented sensibilities, appear to share Batey's feeling of the genre representing a 'stylistic dead end'.[7]

Only five years after Wiley sought to delineate "the Eskimo sound" from other contemporaneous underground music genres, that sound appeared to have exhausted its creative potential. Yet as Zuberi indicates, 'even if only a few MCs have had pop chart hits with more commercially oriented recordings', grime music itself has been sustained by the internet.[8] While chart success naturally forms a component of the criteria by which a genre's popularity, influence, and importance may be measured, the growth of grime as a music culture

[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Dan Hancox, *Inner City Pressure*, (London: William Collins, 2018), 200.
[7] Dizzee Rascal quoted in Hancox, *Inner City Pressure*, 201; Batey, 'Kano'.
[8] Nabeel Zuberi, 'New Throat Fe Chat: The Voices and Media of MC Culture', in Jon Stratton and Nabeel Zuberi (eds.) *Black Popular Music in Britain Since 1945* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016) 187-201, here 198.

coincided with 'low-budget music video production, user-generated content and Internet music distribution'.[9] Early forums such as *Dissensus*, *Grimetapes*, and *Grime Forum* provided space for 'news, argument, and the dissemination of digital files of old radio shows for download', and sustained and supported grime culture through its flirtation with major labels and the cultural mainstream, and followed the development in the music's new distribution methods, as official single releases and dubplates were replaced by mix CDs, iTunes, pirated or leaked digital files, and streaming/download platforms like Soundcloud.[10] Wiley's ongoing involvement with this 'niche economy' is illustrative of its importance; the Eski-Boy released over 200 tracks on 11 zip files for free all in one online data dump in 2011.[11] While Wiley's not-for-profit release is in many ways at odds with the 'individualist and neoliberal work ethic' associated with these new means of production, distribution, and consumption, the example demonstrates nonetheless the ways in which the internet provided artists with a means of existence that does not oppose the mainstream music industry, but 'operates in parallel but distinctive ways'.[12] This new internet-based economy is in many ways simply a continuation of the economic infrastructure that characterised grime's early years. The same independent spirit of pirate radio, independent record shops, white labels and dubplates, and live events has been transposed onto the internet. Indeed, the internet has rendered many of these early avenues of promotion and distribution unnecessary, yet their aesthetic and cultural power has continued to inform constructions of authenticity in the grime scene, a point that will be explored later in relation to Stormzy (chapter nine).

Grime's relationship with the internet explains its seemingly rapid rise and fall from the UK music scene. Zuberi highlights that, though by 2010 grime was a 'relatively young

[9] Ibid..
[10] Ibid..
[11] Ibid., 199 ; Dan Hancox, 'Wiley's Grime Giveaway', *The Guardian* https://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/jul/14/wiley-zip-files-free-downloads (accessed 26th May 2022).
[12] Zuberi, 'New Throat Fe Chat', 199.

genre', the internet rapidly accumulated 'a substantial sedimentation of documents or a grime archive in a matrix of media'.[13] The existence of internet chat rooms and forums meant that each new development in grime was digitally documented, disseminated, and discussed at a faster pace and across a wider audience than earlier 'underground' music cultures, which relied on word-of-mouth transmission and the circulation of physical media (CDs, vinyl, tapes, etc.). As a result of this rapid information accumulation, grime's 'cumulative weight' through the 2000s generated a measure of 'nostalgia and reassessment' towards the music by the end of the decade, and lent the genre 'both a curatorial and hauntological dimension'.[14] Zuberi points to instrumental grime artists like Logos, Visionist, and Wen, whose 'cavernous tracks' feature sampled vocal fragments from MCs, recalling the 'sonic palette of a decade ago [c.2003/4]' in a way that not only situates their own music within a particular tradition (i.e. the hardcore continuum), but positions grime as an established musical-aesthetic point of reference.[15] The term 'hauntology' entered music criticism in the mid-2000s, employed to describe electronic music producers whose aesthetic was marked by 'a sense of nostalgia, melancholia, or the uncanny'.[16] Campbell-Rowntree argues that the concept served as a 'useful critical tool in diagnosing the cultural stagnation brought about by late capitalism, symptoms of which included the imitation of "dead" styles, […] obsolete formats and technologies, and a reimagining of the past'.[17] While instrumental grime producers working in 2010 would perhaps hesitate to call grime a 'dead' style, there is a sense in which their music, which both implies the presence and underlines the absence of an MC, mourns a lost future in which grime's MCs had not been corrupted by capitalist forces (or the music industry).[18]

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[13] Ibid..
[14] Ibid..
[15] Ibid..
[16] Edward Campbell-Rowntree, 'Like a Ghost Touched Your Heart: Burial's Sonic Hauntology', *New Critique* https://newcritique.co.uk/2021/04/16/essay-like-a-ghost-touched-your-heart-burials-sonic-hauntology-edward-campbell-rowntree/ (accessed 19th August 2023).
[17] Ibid..
[18] Burial's 2007 album *Untrue* is perhaps the best example of 'sonic hauntology', capturing as it does a sense of malaise at the perceived death of the hardcore continuum.

Grime's hauntological quality, or hauntological potential, also points to the ongoing influence of the pioneers behind grime's first wave.[19] Artists like Wiley, Kano, and Dizzee Rascal contributed hugely to the cumulation of grime's cultural weight throughout the 2000s, leaving (arguably with their respective full-length debuts alone) a body of work between, with, and against which artists and audiences could situate their own creations and curations. Writing in 2013 on the emergence of the instrumental grime producers that Zuberi mentions, Joe Moynihan captures many of the anxieties felt by grime practitioners and fans at the time:

> Grime has hardly been a steady ride. Its inherent unpredictability is what has often made the sound so vital and exciting of course, but its volatile nature means it has undergone more visible ebbs and flows than most of the UK's dance music offshoots. Be it because of the best voices sacrificing their potency for major labels, getting swept away by lifestyle choices or whatever this was, you could understand how appreciation from its listeners during these 'ebbs' proved to be just as fickle. How many times have you revisited a Risky Roadz freestyle [an early grime DVD series] or an old pirate radio set on YouTube and the only sentiment in the comments is something along the lines of "before grime was dead" or "when grime was good"?[20]

Moynihan points to the ignorance of such comments, given that grime 'is arguably as crucial as it has been for years [in 2013]'.[21] More significant than Moynihan's defence of grime, however, are his references to grime's 'most recognisable signifiers', 'core components', and 'key identifiers'.[22] While never properly outlined in the article – though Moynihan does venture 'makeshift production values, busy/spacious dynamic and run-down metropolis synths' – these signifiers or components are felt to at least exist in a palpable (albeit indefinite) sense.[23]

[19] Grime as a 'hauntological' music is fertile ground for further study. While beyond the scope of the present project, it is the author's hope to pursue this topic further in coming publications.
[20] Joe Moynihan, 'Unboxed: an introduction to instrumental grime's new wave'. *FactMag.com* https://www.factmag.com/2013/08/08/unboxed-an-introduction-to-instrumental-grimes-new-wave/ (accessed 31st May 2022).
[21] Ibid..
[22] Ibid..
[23] Ibid..

Grime's first wave then, while perhaps ending disappointingly in the abandonment of its core aesthetic principles by some of its chief actors, nonetheless provided a tangible musical foundation for its ongoing evolution. As the chapter that follows explores in relation to Little Simz, artists working in the 2010s represent the first generation of musicians who grew up listening to grime. As such, grime is for these artists not the unstable, indefinite, and mercurial style that characterised its early years, but an established style with more-or-less settled and consensual parameters. As grime sought to reinvent itself, these parameters and style markers, through and against which artists could build their sound, became clearer (see chapter seven).

"They could never control how man are doing it"

The growth of grime's internet-based niche economy provided an important avenue for the music's development both artistically and, importantly, commercially. Increased access to the internet afforded artists total control over the distribution and marketing of their work. This agency over distribution and marketing, alongside the availability of DAWs (whether legally purchased or illegally torrented), offered practitioners autonomy from record-label involvement, and provided an alternative and self-sustaining eco-system for the production and consumption of grime culture, divorced from the machinations of the mainstream music industry. Indeed, given the apparently underwhelming and damaging nature of grime's first encounter with mainstream labels, this greater independence was favourable both to artists and to grime culture itself. Without 'middle of the road out of touch […] execs' to placate, artists could now 'bring [grime] to the wider world on [their] own terms'.[24]

For Christabel Stirling, grime's 'wholesale migration online' initially rendered the grime MC as somewhat impotent, as the internet 'simply did not appear to support the meeting

[24] Logan Sama, https://www.grimeforum.com/threads/19547-Grime-is-dead (accessed 21st February 2022).

and competing of MCs in the same way that clubs and physical spaces had'.[25] As the genre adapted, however, MCs reaped the benefits of grime's online presence:

> "Clashing" has taken on a new existence via the synchronized uploading of user-generated content to YouTube; websites like *GRM Daily* provide platforms for debate, interviews, and the digital distribution of old mixtapes; Soundcloud and other personal artist pages have helped ease commercial pressures and dissipate former struggles to get heard; and the increasing focus on grime by radio/TV platforms such as BBC 1Xtra, Channel AKA (formerly U), Mode, Flex, and more has given a new generation of MCs the opportunity to "spit" their bars live in the studio, and make them available for download too.[26]

Indeed, grime's online presence has provided something of an alternative history to the 'grime is dead' narrative outlined above, and has afforded younger grime artists an opportunity to more directly promote themselves, precluding the need for the often gruelling journey through pirate radio, live clashes, and white label releases that was mandatory for early grime practitioners. Veterans of these earlier scenes continued to release music through grime's 'dead' years to an online audience. Tempa T's 'Next Hype' (2009), Boy Better Know's 'Too Many Man' (2009), and D Double E's 'Streetfighter Riddim' (2010), all of which employ the aesthetic tenets of grime's first era, enjoyed successful releases through online platforms (primarily YouTube), allowing these artists to distribute directly to an online audience outside of the commercial pressures and aesthetic expectations of the mainstream music industry. Boakye highlights a 'confusing irony' in grime's shift towards the mainstream, that a step 'towards industry legitimacy comes at the expense of its pirate-rooted illegitimacy, which actually lent it authenticity in the first place'.[27] This shift towards the mainstream was, however, not wholesale,

[25] Christabel Stirling, 'Crowds, Cordons, and Computers Rethinking Density through London's Grime Scene', in Anamarija Batista, Szilvia Kovács, Carina Lesky (eds.), *Rethinking Density: Art, Culture, and Urban Practices* (Sterberg Press, 2017), 223.
[26] Ibid., 227.
[27] Jeffrey Boakye, *Hold Tight* (London: Influx Press, 2018), 326.

and YouTube and other online visual media platforms offered an alternative space where grime's established promotional practices could thrive, free of the limitations and illegality of pirate radio as well as the cultural disempowerment and creative stagnation brought on by industry involvement. Live events, MC clashes, and pirate radio are replaced by YouTube and Soundcloud uploads, and old grime videos (*Lord of the Mics*, *Risky Roads* etc.) and recorded pirate radio sets are uploaded to these platforms to form an online grime archive that appears to be building from both ends of the scene's history. By creating this digital archive and establishing a digital relationship with its target audience, grime also removes the need for the kind of hands-on participation in the scene that was demanded in its realisation phase. Grime's online migration thus allows both for artists to 'enjoy ultimate control over their output, delivering direct to audience, unfiltered and unchallenged', and for the music to reach a wider audience.[28] As Boakye notes: 'You don't have to look like or sound like or talk like the creators of grime to participate in the culture; you just need to have the volition to take part'.[29] With grime now open and accessible to all, the scene ceased to be a self-serving and parochial community focused around highly localised centres of creation (primarily East London), but established itself as a national (and later international) youth culture.

Grime's online migration not only kept the genre 'alive' during its perceived creative slump, but facilitated its rise to legitimate mainstream acceptance in the 2010s. The DIY attitude that characterised the genre's early years was once again encouraged by the apparently democratic, autonomous, and immediate mediums of YouTube, Soundcloud, and social media generally. As the chapters that follow demonstrate, this return to grime's early independent promotional and distributive spirit was matched by the music's sonic qualities, as the genre began to lean back into its early years. Artists like Skepta, who was among the high-profile

[28] Ibid., 324.
[29] Ibid..

MCs to dabble in 'grime-pop', returned musically to grime's aesthetic tenets in a back-to-basics approach, and 'new faces emerged with a vintage hue'.[30] Figures such as Skepta and Stormzy (chapters seven and nine) demonstrate grime's 'nostalgic ability' to rebuild careers and forge new ones 'on a throwback attitude', re-instating the principles of classic MC culture over instrumentals either taken from or evoking grime's early years (Stormzy's 'Shut Up', Skepta's 'That's Not Me') – repackaging grime's perceived 'golden era' for younger audiences.[31]

"That's a permanent mark, they can't smudge me"

Grime's relatively unsuccessful attempts to play the insider game led to a perceived slump in the genre's artistic possibilities and creative future. Dizzee Rascal's BRITs win in 2010 signalled the end of grime's first wave, or era. With Dizzee and Wiley's pioneering albums, the century's first decade sees grime cleave itself definitively from garage and other underground musics, pairing sounds incubated in Jungle, Drum 'n' Bass, and garage with a distinct MC culture forged through soundclash/sound system culture and pirate radio. As grime and the artists associated with it progress through the decade, and as industry interest in the scene peaks, the relationship between the music and its cultural origins becomes more strained. Grime shifts towards the mainstream industry at the expense of its artistic and cultural legitimacy. Dizzee Rascal duets with Robbie Williams. Grime is dead.

This narrative is, of course, oversimplified. While grime's pioneering artists did appear to abandon the genre in their attempts at chart success, grime's online relocation ensured a space for its ongoing development outside of industry pressures and the illicit operations of pirate radio. Further, while grime's creative force was perhaps blunted by its first flirtation with the mainstream, the accumulation of a grime archive through a matrix of online media solidified

[30] Ibid., 328.
[31] Ibid..

the genre's cumulative cultural weight. Thus while its biggest stars 'went pop', grime's digital archive preserved the genre's foundational aesthetic and cultural tenets by documenting and disseminating its key 'texts' (e.g. *Lord of the Mics* episodes, recordings of pirate radio and soundclash events, digitising dub plate recordings of classic grime instrumentals, etc.).

As the chapters that follow demonstrate, the preservation of grime's foundational tenets becomes essential for artists who wish to situate their music both with and against the genre's aesthetic expectations. Little Simz and Dave (chapters six and eight) both challenge and depart from grime's stylistic expectations to interrogate questions of identity and gender, genre boundaries, cultural belonging, and the social environment in which their music is made. Skepta and Stormzy (chapters seven and nine) both illustrate the importance of grime's archive and its preservation of foundational texts to ongoing reinventions and revivals of the music, situating their music within grime's lineage in a way that both recalls the genre's golden era while pioneering novel spaces and styles for its development.

As such, 2010 ultimately serves as a useful landmark for this project. It is both a moment of reflection as grime's founding members move away from the genre they pioneered, and marks a clear distinction between grime's vanguard and its second generation. By 2010 grime had accumulated enough musical and cultural weight to stand as a defined and discernible style, and the music that followed grime's perceived lull cemented this by continually reviving, challenging, recalling, and reimagining the sonic and stylistic features of this first wave.

Chapter Six – Style and Statement in Little Simz's *A Curious Tale of Trials + Persons* (2015)

After releasing eight mixtapes between 2013 and 2015, North London MC Little Simz released her full-length debut *A Curious Tale of Trials + Persons* in autumn of 2015. These self-released mixtapes demonstrate the power of grime's niche economy, as Simz was able to create and disseminate music without help from a label, and to build and communicate directly with her audience, which by 2013 included American superstars Jay-Z (whose website *Life + Times* debuted Simz's *Black Canvas* mixtape) and Kendrick Lamar. Shunning label involvement entirely, *A Curious Tale* was released on Little Simz's own label, Age 101 Music, and the entire album was recorded for free at London Red Bull Studio. While Red Bull retain the publishing rights to the album, Simz's deal with the company (free studio time in exchange for publishing rights, and of course stealthy advertising) is nonetheless preferable to working with major labels. As Simz relates: "They just let me do my own thing – no interfering with the music at all. It was very kind".[1]

A Curious Tale of Trials + Persons is a concept album. Each of its ten tracks is a response to Simz's opening statement: "A tale of gain and loss/Trials and persons will be explained". At thirty five minutes, the album is tense and terse: 'The tracks roll forward in one dark, uniform palette, each providing a different answer to a single line of questioning'.[2] Sonically, *A Curious Tale* occupies a contentious place in this study. Indeed, Little Simz herself has stated:

> I'm not a grime MC, but I have roots there. Grime definitely influenced my style of writing in terms of like my flows and cadences. You can tell I've listened to grime. I

[1] Alexi Duggins, 'Little Simz: 'I'm not a UK female MC, I'm an artist'", *The Guardian* https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/sep/07/islington-mc-little-simz (accessed 4th June 2022).
[2] Jia Tolentino, 'A Curious Tale of Trials + Persons – Little Simz', *Pitchfork* https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/21107-a-curious-tale-of-trials-persons/ (accessed 4th June 2022).

> think I've found a way to like bring those elements into other styles of music. I can have a grime-like flow over a jazz instrument or like something funk-based. I think I've managed to merge and weld it together through my music.[3]

Simz's own description of her relationship with grime, however, is in many ways illustrative of a wider trend in music made by British MCs through the 2010s, including the artists that will be explored later in this project. Whether declared by the respective artists or not, the development of grime and its associated subgenres saw a gradual departure from the sonic world of the music's first wave. Further, Little Simz's position as a female MC cannot be disregarded when considering genre boundaries; though Simz has somewhat distanced herself from such gender politics, stating she 'is not a UK female MC, [but] an artist' (in a similar vein to Wiley's MC/artist distinction made a decade earlier), grime's position and reputation as an incredibly male-dominated space must factor into considerations of genre designation, and the ways in which artists describe their own music.[4]

A Curious Tale of Trials + Persons is thus an opportunity to explore both the initial development of grime's sonic palette after its first wave, and the relationship between grime and gender. Though not strictly 'a grime MC', Little Simz has credited the music as a powerful influence on her musical development and, as I show, the sound world she occupies, undoubtedly ties Simz and her music to the same musical lineage as the other artists explored in this study. Further, her position as one of only a few British female rappers in the public eye is significant, and *A Curious Tale* provides an opportunity to consider the potential significance, consequences, and implications of this.

[3] Mark Elibert, 'Little Simz Talks 'GREY Area,' Kendrick Lamar & Lauryn Hill Co-Signs and Making Her Presence Felt in the U.S.', *billboard* https://www.billboard.com/music/rb-hip-hop/little-simz-interview-grey-area-kendrick-lamar-lauryn-hill-8500665/ (accessed 4th June 2022).
[4] Duggins, 'Little Simz'.

Style

A Curious Tale's opening track 'Persons' establishes the album's climate, both musically and lyrically. Over a distorted and tonally ambiguous synth line (0:00-0:20), moving from a single note (D) to a dyad (B flat and D), Simz speaks:

> A tale of gain and loss
> Trials and persons will be explained
> Don't be intimidated but it's OK to be confused
> All will make sense in the end
> They took her wings and told her flying was impossible
> They told her women cannot call themselves kings
> They told her fame is not made for everyone
> Trials and persons will be explained
> Women can be kings

The spoken-word nature of this opening verse, underlined by the lack of any rhyme scheme and its free-time delivery, is immediately followed by the voice of a more insistent male speaker (0:21-0:38):

> Yo, what they fucking mean she's nuh a king?
> All these backwards bitches need to realise it's 2015
> We redefining the very definition
> All these pussies walking around scared, they're scared I'm a pioneer
> They're scared I'm a revolutionary, they're scared of authenticity
> I don't even know when they're gonna stop fucking about and embrace their rightful leader
> Woman or not, Simz a bloodclart king!

The introduction of a slight rhyming scheme in the male speaker's verse, generated largely by pronunciation ("king"/"2015", "scared"/"pioneer"), as well as an increased rhythmic rate of delivery, serve to drive the song toward its first 'drop', signalled by the re-entry of Simz's voice

("Oh everybody should know that I'm king now") and underscored by the entry of a kick drum (0:41). As well as guiding the song structurally, these opening exchanges between Little Simz and the male speaker immediately illustrate the confluence of styles and influences on the music. The male speaker's verse is given the sense of a rhyming scheme only by virtue of his Caribbean accent, a detail further highlighted by the use of language itself (substituting "nuh" for "not", and use of "bloodclart", a Jamaican slang term used here for emphatic purpose). Further, the style of delivery, when considered in tandem with the speaker's accent, is reminiscent of Jamaican dancehall events, in which MCs instruct audiences 'both in the immediacy of the event and […] on the subjects of the day' (in this case, Simz's regal status).[5] The male verse behaves therefore as a kind of aesthetic signifier, linking the song to a musical lineage shared with grime (i.e. Jamaican sound system culture), and which, when juxtaposed with Little Simz's spoken-word, poetic verse, illustrates the experimental and somewhat referential quality of 'Persons', and the album as a whole.

The male verse in 'Persons', in other words, behaves as what Philip Tagg terms a 'style marker'.[6] Moore defines style markers as: 'a particular musical detail [that] tells us what sort of style we are listening to, or how to relate this particular listening to other listenings – what sort of norms to bring into play'.[7] For suitably enculturated listeners, specifically here audiences familiar with the norms associated with sound system culture, this verse establishes a connection (or relation) between 'Persons' and other musics associated with this culture, including grime. Establishing this connection between her own music and with sound system culture (or the hardcore continuum) allows Simz to relate her sound world to this lineage without completely committing to the aesthetic parameters it may dictate. In other words, Simz

[5] Nabeel Zuberi, 'New Throat Fe Chat: The Voices and Media of MC Culture', in Jon Stratton and Nabeel Zuberi (eds.) *Black Popular Music in Britain Since 1945* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016) 187-201, here 185.
[6] Philip Tagg, quoted in Allan Moore, *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 223.
[7] Moore, *Song Means*, 223.

can direct listeners to the wider aesthetic palette she draws from for inspiration, while at the same time developing and expanding her own sonic language.

Arguably, it is only through these 'style markers' that *A Curious Tale*, an otherwise experimental and sonically eclectic album, may be related to grime music at all. Moments of heavy and abrasive synth textures ('Persons', 'Dead Body', 'This Is Not An Outro', 'Fallen') and drum-machine beats with sub-infused kick hits ('Persons', 'Tainted', 'Gratitude', 'Dead Body', 'This Is Not An Outro') betray the influence of the hardcore continuum, though even these timbral style markers are often married with guitar and piano-driven textures which pertain more to North-American Hip Hop ('God Bless Mary') or RnB ('Wings') than to grime and its predecessors. Indeed, perhaps the only consistent 'musical [or sonic] detail' pertaining to grime that guides listeners' expectations with regard to style, or 'what sort of norms to bring into play', is the fact that Little Simz is (1) rapping (2) in a British accent.[8] Given *A Curious Tale*'s often varied and multifarious musical character, the grounds for tying the album to grime at all appear to be more social than aesthetic; North-London-based Simz's geographical proximity to grime's birthplace, as well as anecdotal claims of 'influence', position her within the genre much more convincingly than her music does.

That Simz is a North London MC, however, is significant. The fact that grime's first wave spanned the majority of the 21st century's first decade means that artists working in the 2010s represent the first generation of musicians who grew up listening to the genre. As Kano has stated in a YouTube interview for *Genius*:

> I think for […] a long time, where music was in the UK, especially hip hop, they [were] looking at America so much that they were emulating what Americans were doing. For some years now, people have […] been telling their own stories and […] putting their own spin on it. And […] we've created our own thing […] What's quite interesting to me is, it's probably the first generation that grew up on artists that were from England […] You turn on the radio

[8] Ibid..

> now, before it used to be a bunch of mostly American music and you might hear the one Dizzee Rascal or whatever, but now it's […] English artists [who] are actually flooding it.[9]

Kano's observations are significant here, in that they highlight the presence of grime in at least part of the collective cultural consciousness of Little Simz's generation, and bolster Simz's own comments on grime's influence on her music, and of her having 'roots' in the genre. It is both these 'roots' and Little Simz's historical and geographical proximity that tie her music to grime, or through which Simz's relation to the genre may be best understood. Moore's writing on style highlights the relevance of geographical and historical information in grouping or delineating musicians with regard to the musical style to which they belong.[10] Employing astronomical imagery, Moore writes that a style 'consists of individual stars, and everyone can see the same stars, but how they draw the constellation will depend on their perspective'.[11] As Moore highlights, style operates for different writers 'at various levels, from grouping musicians who share large geographical and historical locations […], down to local levels (1920s Mississippi), down to the level of individual musicians'.[12] Grime's particular constellation groups artists such as Little Simz with other artists like Kano, Wiley, Dizzee Rascal (etc.) primarily through geographical and historical association – in this case early-twenty-first-century, inner-city London.

The musical or sonic differences between Simz and these other artists may be explained through a more focused consideration of their historical proximity. Moore suggests that in the early days of a style, musicians 'sense a need "to explain" a style's possibilities and probabilities, either through exploring them in recordings, or through other media (particularly

[9] Kano Reacts to New UK Rappers, *Genius*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WHamQXbGpSM (accessed 6th July 2022).
[10] Moore, *Song Means*, 120.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.

journalism)'.[13] The music by Wiley, Kano, and Dizzee Rascal discussed in this study, as well as other music produced by practitioners involved in grime's first wave, exhibit this trend, as do the various interviews given by the same artists (in particular Wiley's early musings on the difference between grime and other 'underground' genres, and on grime's 'cold' sonic character). By the end of its first wave, grime's aesthetic parameters, or style, had become more settled and consensual. It is this point in a style's history, Moore argues, that 'enables producers to use the "language" creatively […] As a style becomes thoroughly absorbed, producers will often seek to move away from its basic paradigms, or to leave their own idiosyncratic mark on the style'.[14] Positioning Little Simz as an artist using grime's 'language' (elements of the genre's classic sonic palette and vocal techniques derived from classic MC culture) creatively, and *A Curious Tale* as an effort to move away from the genre's basic stylistic 'paradigms', allows for the former's place in the grime 'canon', and explains the latter's apparent aesthetic and stylistic divergences.

In light of this, the style markers throughout *A Curious Tale* thus become an important mechanism for managing listeners' expectations, given that style and style markers function so that 'we [the listener] recognise the style limits within which we're interpreting'.[15] If style provides 'the primary condition for musical production and reception', then both the extra-musical factors that inform the formation and designation of style (i.e. Simz's historical and geographical proximity to the genre) and the style markers that perfuse the album's tracks position *A Curious Tale* within grime's constellation, certainly for listeners if not necessarily for Simz herself.[16] It is important, however, to consider that style ascriptions are often 'means of categorization present only as they are employed, that they are resident in the listeners and

[13] Ibid., 120-1.
[14] Ibid.,121.
[15] Ibid., 233.
[16] Ibid.,119.

not in the track itself'.[17] Further, as Moore highlights, it is important 'to note that a listener's *competence* with the style is relevant; listeners with a high degree of competence or experience will tend to agree on the specifics of the style […] of a particular track […], while those with less familiarity will identify a style less precisely'.[18] While it is not a stretch to assume that most listeners who engage with *A Curious Tale* will be aware that they are listening to rap music (and may also be aware that Simz is rapping in a British accent), it may not be assumed that they have the necessary competence or experience to question or debate (or care about) its position specifically within the grime genre. Nonetheless, for the purposes of this study, the criteria for style ascription as outlined by Moore are useful in framing *A Curious Tale* as an instance of grime music, and an assumed level of listener competence is implied throughout both this chapter and the project in its entirety.

Another of Moore's terms is useful in both framing *A Curious Tale* as an instance of grime music, and considering its stylistic and aesthetic experimentalism in relation to the genre; that of *idiolect*.[19] As Moore indicates, 'idiolect as a concept is frequently conceived to be subsidiary to style', and is most helpfully understood as referring to the stylistic idiosyncrasies associated with an individual artist (e.g. Dolly Parton), as opposed to more general styles (e.g. Country).[20] Of importance in considering the relevance of a particular track to a certain style, and the expectations therefore implied for listeners, is the relationship 'between the *style* of the track and the *idiolect* of the performers'.[21] Moore continues:

> If *style* is the manner of articulation of musical content, then *idiolect* refers to the individual stylistic fingerprints (perhaps the tone of the voice, perhaps the way the kit and the bass interlock, perhaps the particular guitar tone) of a performer or group [emphasis in original].[22]

[17] Ibid., 166.
[18] Ibid..
[19] Ibid., 120.
[20] Ibid..
[21] Ibid., 166.
[22] Ibid..

Assuming that grime influenced the composition of *A Curious Tale*, or influenced the manner in which Little Simz articulates the musical content of the album, the notion of idiolect facilitates an understanding of the ways in which Simz situates herself within and develops the genre. 'This Is Not An Outro', *A Curious Tale*'s penultimate track, is an entirely instrumental piece of music. While the inclusion of instrumental tracks in otherwise vocal-heavy rap albums is a phenomenon found across a number of genres and scenes (e.g. J Dilla's *The Shining*, or Dr. Dre's *2001 Instrumental* release), Simz's geographical and historical proximity to grime music, according to the criteria outlined by Moore, positions both her and her music within grime's style boundaries, and thus facilitates a reading of the track in relation to 'instrumental grime' (à la Wiley, Logos, Footsie, Mumdance, Ruff Sqwad, etc.). In many ways, 'This Is Not An Outro' shares many superficial aesthetic traits present in the instrumental tracks (or interludes) on Wiley's *Treddin' On Thin Ice*: (largely) electronic textures, featuring heavy (sub-)bass frequencies and drum-machine-produced beats, that encapsulate and reflect the album's general sonic 'mood'. Beyond these surface-level observations, however, 'This Is Not An Outro' differs significantly from Wiley's Eskibeat interludes: where Wiley favours solely electronic 'glacial' and abrasive synth textures and irregular rhythmic stabs, 'This Is Not An Outro' features acoustic string textures (a rarity in first-wave grime) that blend with electronic sounds in a comparatively smoother, groove-heavy compositional style. Rather than operating completely outside of grime's genre boundaries, however, Little Simz's instrumental venture may be framed as both a creative use of grime's existing 'language', and exemplary of her particular artistic idiolect. As discussed in chapter one, Wiley's Eskibeat instrumentals represent grime's 'early days', a time in which the genre had to distinguish itself from other forms of British electronic music, and as a result exhibit the 'explanatory' stylistic character outlined by Moore. Released more than a decade after Wiley's *Treddin'* instrumentals, 'This Is Not An Outro'

moves away from (what by 2015 were) grime's established and settled aesthetic parameters, and seeks to develop these parameters, using grime's 'language' creatively to explore other sonic possibilities. If the musical content of 'This Is Not An Outro' may be said to be articulated in a manner that pertains to grime as a *style*, then the divergences throughout both this track and *A Curious Tale* in its entirety (use of unexpected/novel textures and timbres, favouring groove over rhythmic unpredictability) represent Little Simz's *idiolect*. As Moore states, it is 'on the basis of amassed idiolects that we recognise the norms of a style'.[23] Perhaps nowhere is this more true than in the case of grime music in which, as the chapters of this project illustrate, stylistic divergences are myriad not only between artists, but often between the tracks on a single album.

This stylistic heterogeneity can be understood as something positive and productive, as opposed to simply a lack of focus, by considering Bakhtin's notion of dialogism, as applied to popular music by George Lipsitz:

> [P]opular music is nothing if not dialogic, the product of an ongoing historical conversation in which no one has the first or last word. The traces of the past that pervade the popular music of the present amount to more than mere chance: they are not simply juxtapositions of incompatible realities. They reflect a dialogic process, one embedded in collective history and nurtured by the ingenuity of artists interested in fashioning icons of opposition.[24]

Lipsitz's interpretation of Bakhtin's dialogism grounds cultural production historically and frames music as a social and historical dialogue, and in doing so resists more traditional, formalist interpretations of music.[25] Indeed, as a genre in which language performs such an important role (i.e. in the utterances of the MC), Bakhtin's dialogic theory can help in

[23] Ibid., 167.
[24] George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 99.
[25] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise* (Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 148.

considering coherence and relation across and between individual artists and albums that share few obvious formal characteristics. The self is, for Bakhtin, rooted in language, and as such is inevitably intertwined with the social world. Importantly, however, the self is not entirely socially determined: each social actor has the ability to shape themselves – one can achieve moments of self-definition, and avoid being completely defined by social discourse, though importantly this self is never static, but constantly evolving. Charles Hersch frames jazz as a 'dialogic art form', and in particular improvisation as 'a struggle to differentiate one's own voice from others'.[26] He argues that one can only find one's own voice 'in relation to others through a variety of kinds of dialog (*sic.*)'.[27] Hersch's description of jazz improvisation's dialogic quality is easily transposed to grime music, in which individual utterance and collective conversation are so closely connected. In framing grime as a dialogic music, Simz's idiosyncratic utterances are easier to consolidate with the genre; both the words and sounds by which Simz constructs her musical identity are not necessarily her own. The heavy bass frequencies and drum-machine-produced beats, as well as the vocal flow and vocabulary, present in *A Curious Tale* can be framed as assimilations, reworkings, or reaccentuations of previous utterances made by previous grime artists, creating a dialogic relationship between Simz's music and what has come before.[28] Simz, in other words, is finding her voice 'in the vocabulary of the other[s]' (in this case sometimes literally).[29] As Bakhtin notes, utterances are never simply self-expression as they are always 'overpopulated', every word 'tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life'.[30]

Applied to music, Bakhtin's notion of 'overpopulation' is helpful in exploring the relationships between musics in a manner that goes beyond vague notions of 'influence', and

[26] Charles Hersch, 'Unfinalizable: Dialog and Self-Expression in Jazz' in *The Routledge Companion to Jazz Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 367-376, here 367.
[27] Ibid..
[28] Ibid., 368.
[29] Ibid..
[30] Bakhtin quoted in Hersch, 'Unfinalizable', 368.

is perhaps what Lipsitz implies when he notes that 'traces of the past' pervade the music of the present. Indeed, dialogism may here be set in opposition to Harold Bloom's 'anxiety of influence': while for Bloom, each artist or poet is 'aware of the need to pay homage to the great writers of the past whilst also struggling against any danger of mimicry', dialogism allows space for a form of self-expression free from 'anxiety' that nonetheless remains tied to what has come before.[31] While grime artists may still struggle against the 'danger of mimicry' – a salient feature of MC culture is each artists' preoccupation with individuality – and a felt need to respect one's forebearers, grime's relative youth as a genre in many ways precludes the existence of the historical weight implicated within Bloom's 'anxiety'. Bloom argues that artists revise and 'misread' earlier works in order to negotiate their own space within a tradition in a way that frames artistic influence as something to disguise rather than an organic creative inevitability, and promotes invention and individuality as central to the creative process. While grime culture ostensibly promotes this same focus on individuality (as arguably all cultural production does under capitalism), artists nonetheless often openly acknowledge and underline the influence of both their peers and 'elders'. Indeed, in combination with Moore's 'style markers', Bakhtinian dialogism offers at times a quite literal description of grime's compositional practices (e.g. Skepta's song 'Lyrics', which opens with an older recording of Wiley's voice before using his speech as a central lyrical motif – see chapter seven), and provides a framework within which musical and cultural connections between otherwise sonically disparate grime artists can be considered. The male verse in 'Persons', for example, is quite literally a trace of the past. For suitably enculturated listeners, this verse not only evokes sound system culture and Jamaican dancehall events, but includes Little Simz in a dialogic

[31] Benjamin Earl, 'The reformer's charter: setting Bloom's Anxiety of Influence in the context of melodic rock', *Popular Music* 29, No. 1 (2010), 131-142, here 131.

process, embedded in the 'collective history' of grime, and indeed black British music as a whole.

The notion of dialogism not only intensifies Simz's connection to grime's musical and cultural lineage, but can perform an important role in understanding the aesthetic divergences from the 'first wave' found in much post-2010 grime music. Simz's relationship with grime, both sonically and anecdotally (i.e. her account of the genre's influence), is illustrative of a wider trend in British rap music made throughout the 2010s. As British MCs began to reach audiences outside of the UK, most notably in the U.S., and as they began to collaborate with artists outside the 'scene' (a trend arguably begun with Dizzee Rascal, and one which will be explored further in relation to Skepta's *Konnichiwa*), the sound of the music accordingly and expectedly altered. Though artists such as Simz began to break with the 'traditional' aesthetics of grime's first wave, both Moore and Lipsitz's writing on style and dialogism respectively can help in understanding how these artists remain inextricably tied to grime's 'ongoing historical conversation'.[32]

Statement

Tricia Rose has employed Lipsitz's application of Bakhtin's dialogism specifically in relation to black women rappers. As Rose writes: 'Negotiating multiple social boundaries and identities, black women rappers are in dialogue with one another, with male rappers, with other popular musicians (through sampling and other revisionary practices), with black women fans, and with […] fans in general'.[33] Rose's application of dialogism is useful not only in understanding how Little Simz's music can be seen to interact with grime's music-aesthetic language, but also how

[32] Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, 99.
[33] Rose, *Black Noise*, 148.

Simz negotiates her position as a female MC in a male-dominated musical genre, and a scene 'notoriously difficult for women to penetrate'.[34]

Yomi Adegoke highlights the importance of race in any discussion around women's participation in grime, emphasising that 'racial imbalance is as crucial as gender disparity in the industry:

> Black women have a presence in the [grime] scene – often appearing as adjuncts in music videos – but misogynoir (misogyny directed at black women) remains an issue. With its roots in the black working class, grime frequently reinforces damaging, colourist stereotypes and notorious anti-woman anthems such as P Money's Jezebel and Dizzee Rascal's I Luv You? are implicitly aimed at the women in these communities.[35]

Adegoke's observations on the UK grime scene echo Rose's assertion that the 'marginalisation, deletion, and mischaracterisation of women's role in black cultural production is routine practice'.[36] Writing on American Hip Hop, Rose's writing on black women rappers and rap music's sexual politics is nonetheless relevant to grime music, a genre in which female artists also 'interpret and articulate the fears, pleasure, and promises of young black women whose voices have been relegated to the margins of public discourse'.[37] Despite their geographic, historical, and cultural distance, parallels between the two genres are myriad, and nowhere is this more prevalent than in the arena of sexual politics. Both may be said, for example, to represent a reaction to existing 'feminine' black musics; American rap music's emergence has been explained as, in part, a 'resentment of disco culture and a reassertion of black manhood', in the same way that grime's hardcore sonic harshness was in many ways a reaction to the

[34] Yomi Adegoke, 'Why black women are still a minority in the grime scene', *The Guardian* https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/feb/09/black-women-still-minority-grime-scene (accessed 29th August 2022).
[35] Ibid..
[36] Rose, *Black Noise*, 152.
[37] Ibid., 146.

softcore danceability of UK garage (a genre in which female participation was demonstrably greater).[38] To some extent, then, both musics display a 'total absence of women at the conceptual level', leading to the 'sexist exclusion or mischaracterisation of black women's participation in rap music [which] devalues women's significance and must be countered by the evidence of women's contributions'.[39] This exclusion is one of two cultural and academic approaches taken towards black women rappers identified by Rose, one in which analyses of rap 'are aggressively masculine and render women rappers invisible'.[40] The other approach outlined by Rose positions women rappers as 'feminist voices who combat sexism in rap', and as a result places them 'in a totalising oppositional relationship to male rappers' ('that is not to say that women rappers do not directly criticise sexist male rap lyrics, but their relationship to male rappers cannot be characterised as one of complete opposition').[41]

In response to these simplistic and problematic attitudes, Rose calls for an approach that accounts for 'the complexity and contradictory nature of the sexual dialogues in rap', and repositions women as 'part of a dialogic process with male rappers (and others), rather than in complete opposition to them'.[42] Specifically, black women rappers are seen to be in dialogue with male rappers' dialogues, and with larger social discourses, including feminism. It is within these dialogues that women rappers contextualise the thematic content of their music, where for Rose three central themes predominate: 'heterosexual courtship, the importance of the female voice, and mastery in women's rap and black female public displays of physical and sexual freedom'.[43]

At least two of these themes can be heard in *A Curious Tale*; while heterosexual courtship does not appear to concern Simz at any point in the album, the importance of the

[38] Houston Baker 'Hybridity, the Rap Race and Pedagogy for the 1990s', quoted in Rose, *Black Noise*, 151.
[39] Rose, *Black Noise*, 149-51.
[40] Ibid., 151.
[41] Ibid., 149.
[42] Ibid., 147-50.
[43] Ibid., 147.

female – or at least her own – voice, technical mastery, and displays of female freedom are all thematically important. 'Persons' opens with an overtly feminist message:

> They took her wings and told her flying was impossible
> They told her women cannot call themselves kings
> They told her fame is not made for everyone
> Trials and persons will be explained
> Women can be kings

The women/kings lyrical motif that runs throughout the song ("Women can be kings"/"what they fucking mean she's nuh a king?"/"Simz a bloodclart king!"/"Everybody knows that I'm king now"/"Do you hear that? Women can be kings"/"Oh, everybody should know that I'm king now") is coupled with declarations of mastery and skill ("still the person, that's for certain/I deserve it, shit is wavy, watch me surfing/You should know I'm not an earthling, alien in me from birth"), as well as assertions of female (Simz's) freedom ("What you think is yours but is mine, everything is mine for the taking"). This imagery in combination endows 'Persons' with a determined and sustained feminist message, and as a result positions Simz as a black female rapper in dialogue with both the male-dominated rap scene and larger social discourses, here female empowerment in particular.

Significantly, the women/kings motif that runs through 'Persons' suggests an appeal on Simz's part to a 'politics of irreverence', or a 'subversion of […] hegemonic ideals, behaviours, and aspirations'.[44] While the subversion of traditional gender roles present in 'Persons' (i.e. "women can be kings") is perhaps only a marginal venture into the politics of irreverence, it nonetheless positions Simz's music as 'a site of alternative traditions', or a 'liberating cultural space […]', creating 'new conceptions of black womanhood that challenge traditional models

[44] Valerie Chepp, 'Black feminist theory and the politics of irreverence: The case of women's rap', *Feminist Theory* 16, No.2 (2015) 207-226, here 209-14.

rooted in racist and sexist stereotypes' and undermine 'traditional phallic authority'.[45] Valerie Chepp has noted the relevance of the 'politics of irreverence' to 'the case of women's rap', and the ways in which black women rappers employ 'dichotomous Western logic around respectability and irreverence' in negotiating and articulating 'alternative representations of black female sexuality'.[46] Respectability here pertains to a strategy deployed by black women in response to societal racism and sexism, entailing the privileging of white, bourgeois, heteronormative, and patriarchal ideals in an attempt to claim 'respectable' citizenship. In appealing to such ideals and aspirations (sexual purity, domesticity, and Puritan morality), black women aim to demonstrate the 'unjustifiability of racist behaviours, institutions, and laws'.[47] As Chepp notes, black feminist theory highlights how this strategy resulted in an 'unintended and problematic silence', leading black women to 'lose the ability to express knowledge about their own sexuality, on their own terms'.[48] Representations of black female sexuality, such as those in black women's popular music, that, by comparison to heteronormative respectability, appear more unapologetic, agential, vocal, desiring, and 'irreverent', have been framed by black feminist scholarship as a reactive alternative to this silence.

Chepp interrogates the oppositional structural logic of respectability and irreverence, in particular its function as an analytic framework in black feminist theory and the ways in which it has shaped African American art, culture, and politics. Following from Hall's assertion that 'black popular culture is a contradictory space […] a site of strategic contestation', Chepp calls for a 'more dialectical understanding of the relationship between respectability and irreverence' that can provide the analytic space needed to consider 'cultural representations of blackness – not to mention lived realities' that escape this binary framework.[49] Women's rap is, for Chepp,

[45] Stuart Hall (1996) quoted in Chepp, 'Black feminist theory and the politics of irreverence', 209.
[46] Chepp, 'Black feminist theory and the politics of irreverence', 208-14.
[47] Ibid., 208.
[48] Ibid..
[49] Ibid., 210.

a profitable space in which to explore these alternative analytic frameworks, and she highlights three discursive strategies 'whereby women rappers render the respectability/irreverence binary problematic: (1) using irreverence to claim respectability, (2) 'claiming both' or, embracing contradiction, and (3) beating to the punch'.[50] *A Curious Tale* can be shown to demonstrate at least two of these strategies, namely using irreverence to claim respectability, and 'claiming both' or embracing contradiction. Chepp draws upon the examples of US artists Foxy Brown and Lil' Kim to outline her argument, arguing that both artists 'use irreverence to claim respectability in their representations of heterosexual relationships'.[51] It is important to highlight that Chepp's argument, and indeed wider discourse on the irreverence/respectability binary, centres on black female sexuality and the ways in which Foxy Brown and Lil' Kim deploy the above strategies in response to public accusations of unrespectability, denying others the power to control their sexual subjectivity, and complicating discourses 'organised around dichotomous understanding of sexually explicit – i.e. irreverent – women and respectable women'.[52] As has been stated, Little Simz is largely unconcerned with courtship or sexuality (her own or otherwise) throughout *A Curious Tale*. Rather, Simz devotes much of the album to the assertion of her own position and importance (presumably in the music scene) and in detailing the struggles (or 'trials') involved in her life and career.

In addressing these themes, however, Simz nonetheless engages in some form with the 'politics of irreverence' outlined by Chepp. 'Persons' exhibits at least one of the strategies outlined by Chepp, namely 'using irreverence to claim respectability'.[53] Simz's obvious subversion of gender roles throughout the song ("Women can be kings", "everybody should know that I'm king now") is a challenge not only to traditional monarchical structures but also in many ways to honorific nicknames given historically to musical figures (e.g. Elvis Presley

[50] Ibid., 215-22.
[51] Ibid., 217.
[52] Ibid., 221.
[53] Ibid., 216.

as ‘The King of Rock ‘n’ Roll’ or Aretha Franklin as ‘The Queen of Soul’), and as such represents a direct claim for respect effected through irreverence. While the majority of *A Curious Tale* does not demonstrate the same blatant flippancy towards traditional heteronormative/hegemonic ideals, Simz continues to demand artistic respect throughout the album. These calls for respect are ‘embedded in an aggressive self-possessed identity that exudes confidence and power’, and as such are realised through a discourse of irreverence, one presumably directed towards conventional power structures both within and outside of the music industry.[54] In her verses, Simz projects a representation of herself not exclusively rooted in irreverence or respectability. Rather, *A Curious Tale* articulates a model of black womanhood that simultaneously claims to be respectable and irreverent (“How the fuck you feeling?/This is hurtful, won't apologise but demoralise/You don't have to like it, you don't have to play it, still amazing” (‘Persons’)).[55] *A Curious Tale* employs ‘irreverent language’ throughout, yet Simz’s claims for respect are as pervasive as is her profanity: “Always knew I'd be in this position where I'm killing it/Yeah, I'm bragging and I tell 'em how the fuck I'm feeling” (‘Tainted’).[56] Simz’s lyrics are at times also laced with traces of self-doubt (“I guess I'll work it out in due time, look at the moonlight/I've seen my options, I'm just hoping that I choose right” – (‘Full or Empty’)), interrupting the otherwise braggadocio tone for moments of self-reflection and contemplation, even while these points of introspection are ‘delivered with edgy self-possession’.[57] It is this self-possession that sustains the album’s irreverent tone, as Simz is able both to soul search and self-congratulate in equal measure while retaining the same demonstration of confidence and power.

The self-possession that Simz demonstrates and expresses throughout *A Curious Tale* is evocative of Audre Lorde’s formulation of ‘the erotic’; ‘an assertion of the lifeforce of

[54] Rose, *Black Noise*, 163.
[55] Chepp, ‘Black feminist theory and the politics of irreverence’, 218.
[56] Ibid., 216.
[57] Rose, *Black Noise*, 163.

women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives'.[58] Lorde's use of the erotic is inclusive of sexuality and sexual experiences, but her definition is more expansive, connected to feeling as well as to physical sensation. It may be experienced 'in the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea'.[59] Further, it is a specifically feminine power , a 'resource […] that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling'.[60] Particularly relevant to rap music is Lorde's conception of the erotic as an empowering creative energy, echoing Rose's assertion that rap can behave as a 'free-play zone where [women can] creatively address questions of sexual power, the reality of truncated economic opportunity, and the pain of racism and sexism'.[61]

Lorde's argument seeks to reconnect the erotic to 'true feeling', as an 'assertion of the lifeforce of women', and calls for women to reclaim the erotic as a source of feminine power, pleasure, and knowledge from dominant patriarchal misconceptions and distortions that limited the erotic to the pornographic. As such, Lorde's erotic includes any and all actions that in some way bring women 'closest to that fullness [of feeling]', a celebration of the erotic 'in all [female] endeavours'; Lorde's characterisation of the erotic is extremely (and purposefully) broad.[62] This breadth of scope renders the direct application of Lorde's erotic here as potentially and problematically empty: Simz's self-possession, framed as an erotic act, is no more or less remarkable than building a bookcase. Invoked as an analytic framework for the consideration

[58] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: The Crossing Press, 1984), 7.
[59] Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 56.
[60] Ibid..
[61] Rose, *Black Noise*, 146.
[62] Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 54-5..

of instances of black female expression, however, the advantages of Lorde's formulation of the erotic are twofold: a more expansive reading of the erotic ties Simz more closely to existing literature on female expression in rap music, while simultaneously exposing a critical gap in this same literature, specifically its inability to account for instances of black female expression that are not explicitly sexual.

Lorde's erotic is valuable, for example, in aligning Little Simz's particular articulation of the politics of irreverence with Chepp's writing. Chepp's argument is relevant and applicable to much music made by women rappers, but it does not necessarily account for instances of black female expression that fall outside of the sexual arena. While Little Simz's music does not exhibit the same explicit 'sexuality' as that of Lil' Kim or Foxy Brown, her music nonetheless expresses the same celebration of, and demands the same right to, female pleasure. In the case of Little Simz, however, this 'pleasure' is not necessarily the 'sexual pleasure and fun' that Chepp outlines, but a '"lust" for the pleasure of self-definition and expression' that Lorde alludes to.[63] This 'lust' is, for Christina Baker, analogous to the desire that drives many black women's creative work.[64] Discussing black female filmmakers, Baker argues that the creative process 'is, at least partly, an act of self-definition that resists external hegemonic cultural narratives', citing filmmaking as 'an empowering endeavour that engages the feeling and knowledge that stem from the erotic' and these filmmakers' creative works as 'expressions of that erotic feeling, knowledge, and power'.[65] For Baker, therefore, the self-definition involved in black female creativity is in many ways analogous to the politics of irreverence outlined by Chepp, in that it effects the same resistance to and subversion of hegemonic cultural ideals and narratives. The self-possessed verses throughout *A Curious Tale* arguably represent

[63] Chepp, 'Black feminist theory and the politics of irreverence', 221; Christina N. Baker, 'Revisiting Audre Lorde's *Uses of the Erotic* through Contemporary Film', *Women's Studies in Communication* 44, No. 4 (2021) 470-476, here 472.
[64] Baker, 'Revisiting Audre Lorde's *Uses of the Erotic*', 472.
[65] Ibid..

a similar empowering act of self-definition, and thus an erotic experience, in this case 'the erotic experience of knowing yourself'.[66] A work of black female creativity, the album is almost entirely an act of self-definition on the part of Simz, who devotes much of her verses to herself, her story, her artistic development, and her ambitions: 'Wings' and 'Gratitude' are perhaps the most obvious examples of this. As such, *A Curious Tale* effects the same claim to self-representation as the rappers discussed by Chepp. By publicly and irreverently asserting her identity and demanding respect as an artist, Simz denies others the power to control her subjectivity in the same act of self-definition employed by the more sexually explicit Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown. Simz's musical self-definition echoes asserts her position as an 'artist' and not a 'female grime MC'; claiming a politics of the erotic affords Simz a space in which to define herself outside of grime culture's largely patriarchal lineage. Lorde's expansive reading of the erotic affords Simz a closer relation to the rappers discussed in Chepp's work, and offers potential analytic avenues for instances of black female creative expression that are not explicitly sexual, particularly within rap studies. Broadening the parameters within which female pleasure is understood and defined allows for a more inclusive discussion of gendered cultural experience, and creates an analytic space that can accommodate and critically engage with complex and nuanced forms of representation and sexuality in art and culture.

As Rose notes, women rappers who 'seize the public stage' and move audiences under rap music's highly competitive, and masculine, conditions 'represent a substantial intervention in contemporary women's performance and popular cultural identities'.[67] Throughout *A Curious Tale*, Simz is influenced by the same pressures associated with MC culture as the other male rappers included in this study. Like any MC, Simz is compelled to exhibit her lyrical and vocal craftsmanship, mastery of delivery, and creative skill in order to establish herself as a

[66] Ibid., 474.
[67] Ibid., 472.

successful artist. Indeed, much of the irreverence present in *A Curious Tale* may be likened to the swaggering and confrontational character of Kano's prosody and delivery already discussed; Simz's defiant tone represents in many ways the same form of irreverence employed by almost all male rappers. As a female MC, however, Little Simz is necessarily in dialogue with the discourses outlined above. As Murray Forman notes, while autonomy and power are more readily available to male rappers, female rappers are 'confronted with new contexts of oppression'.[68]

Writing in 1994 on American Hip Hop, Forman notes that 'due to women's presence in Rap, however, the music is changing in ways pertaining to both its stylistic and discursive character'.[69] Forman's optimism about rap's affirmative potential for women ('Women's enhanced profile in management positions and in recording production roles will undoubtedly continue to affect the evolution of Rap') has since proven to have been somewhat naïve, though the changes he notes in rap's stylistic and discursive character are relevant here. Indeed, as Rose notes, 'sampling and other revisionary practices' represents one of the ways in which black female rappers engage in dialogue with other musicians.[70] Both Forman's comments on rap's shifting stylistic character as a result of female participation, as well as Rose's reading of Bakhtinian dialogism, are useful in considering *A Curious Tale*'s aesthetic divergences from grime's first wave. Simz's geographical and historical proximity to grime music and culture ties her to the genre, and Moore's writing on style frames Simz as an artist using grime's language creatively, articulating grime's musical style through her own particular idiolect. Yet these points do not account for Simz's position as a black woman working within a hyper-masculine genre. Both grime and its hardcore-continuum relatives are routinely described in terms that highlight their sonic aggression and the cold-heartedness of their practitioners, most

[68] Murray Forman, '"Movin' closer to an independent funk": Black Feminist Theory, Standpoint, and Women in Rap', *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 23, No. 1 (1994) 35-55, here 53.
[69] Ibid..
[70] Rose, *Black Noise*, 148.

obviously in the case of Wiley: as Son Raw notes, 'Eskibeat, and early grime generally, is often described as cold, mechanical, strange, and various other inhuman qualities'.[71] It is relevant to revisit Zuberi's work on the characterisation of sound in electronic music, and the tension that exists between what is 'masculine' and what is 'feminine':

> The 'hardcore' aspect of the continuum also maintains a gendered and class-based division between what is deemed 'hardcore' and what is 'softcore'. The latter is presumed to be feminine, more mass cultural as opposed to subcultural, but also more aspirational and suburban, rather than working-class and located in the inner city.[72]

Working within a scene in which such dichotomies remain prevalent, Simz's music can be framed as an attempt to carve out a cultural space in which she can express and establish her identity, opposing grime culture's proclivity for hardcore sonic masculinity. Indeed, her preference for acoustic string layering and groove-based beat construction over the more glacial, synthesized textures and un-danceable rhythmic stabs of first-wave grime may reflect an attempt to seek alternative, less masculine/hardcore, forms of sonic expression. That Simz pairs this form of beat science with the irreverent, self-assured, and self-possessed microphone presence outlined above, however, indicates another approach towards music making, one that renders masculine/feminine dichotomies of sound both problematic and irrelevant.

"But through these walls, I know you hear my vocal"

A Curious Tale of Trials + Persons demands an expansion of the frameworks within which grime music, and indeed female expression within grime music itself, are considered. Simz's music demonstrates an obvious departure from the sound world of grime's first wave, and is by

[71] Son Raw, 'A Journey Through Wiley's Eskibeat', *Complex UK* https://www.complex.com/music/2019/08/a-journey-through-wiley-eskibeat/ (accessed 5th May 2020).
[72] Nabeel Zuberi, 'New Throat Fe Chat: The Voices and Media of MC Culture', in Jon Stratton and Nabeel Zuberi (eds.) *Black Popular Music in Britain Since 1945* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016) 187-201, here 190.

her own admission not a grime MC, yet betrays an obvious influence of grime both sonically and culturally through the style markers that permeate *A Curious Tale*: the male speaker in 'Persons' whose delivery and accent powerfully evokes the Jamaican dancehall and sound system events from which grime developed; and the deployment of heavy and abrasive synthesised textures that recall grime's classic sound palette. It is also Simz's geographical and historical proximity to grime music and culture that ties her to the genre, and Moore's writing on style frames Simz as an artist using grime's language creatively, articulating grime's musical style through her own idiolect. Little Simz, like Dave and to some extent Skepta (chapters seven and eight), is representative of a generation of artists who use grime's influence to create music that expands the genre's boundaries, deploying grime's classic palette in combination with more disparate influences to explore alternative sonic possibilities.

The heavy bass frequencies and drum-machine-produced beats, as well as the vocal flow and vocabulary, present in *A Curious Tale* can be framed as assimilations, reworkings, or reaccentuations of previous utterances made by previous grime artists, creating a dialogic relationship between Simz's music and what has come before. As the following chapter on Skepta explores, dialogism offers a useful framework for considering and exploring notions of influence, lineage, and cultural cohesion. Considering grime through a dialogic lens not only intensifies Simz's specific connection to grime's musical and cultural lineage, but helps in building an understanding of the aesthetic divergences from the 'first wave' found in much post-2010 grime music.

Tricia Rose's employment of dialogism also ties Little Simz to a lineage of black women rappers, and is useful not only in understanding how Little Simz's music can be seen to interact with grime's music-aesthetic language, but also how Simz negotiates her position as a female MC in a male-dominated musical genre. *A Curious Tale* is an act of both self-representation and self-definition, one that interrogates the validity of the masculine/feminine dichotomies of

sound forwarded by formulations such as the hardcore continuum, and points to a critical gap in rap studies literature. As Lorde's conception of the erotic suggests, broadening the parameters within which female pleasure and creativity (or pleasure *as* creativity) is understood allows for a more inclusive discussion of gendered cultural experience, and offers potential analytic frameworks for instances of black female creative expression that are not explicitly sexual. It is in this analytic space that complex and nuanced forms of representation and sexuality in art and culture can be accommodated.

Chapter Seven – Skepta *Konnichiwa* (2016)

Skepta's fourth studio album *Konnichiwa* won the 2016 Mercury Prize, beating the likes of David Bowie and Radiohead (and fellow grime artist Kano), and becoming only the second grime album – after Dizzee Rascal's *Boy In Da Corner* – to do so. Released thirteen years after Rascal's genre-defining *Boy*, the critical and commercial success of the North-London rapper's fourth studio album represents an important milestone both for Skepta and grime music in general. Indeed, Skepta has occupied a central position in the genre since its genesis, and in following his career one can also trace the wider developments of grime music and culture. As Kevin Lozano notes:

> [Skepta] was integral in grime's early hustle during the halcyon pirate radio days, but the music he was making from 2008-2012 was soulless, kowtowing to a sanitized version of grime that went hand in hand with the slow-burning corporate ransacking of the genre that started with Dizzee Rascal's breakthrough almost a decade earlier.[1]

Lozano's observations echo those of Ben Beaumont-Thomas, who frames Skepta's circa-2010 releases as 'the epitome of grime's post-Dizzee decadence', the middle part of his career 'full of wildly lunging swings at the big time – with few of them connecting'.[2] Songs such as 'Rolex Sweep' (2009 - which also has an accompanying dance), 'Bad Boy' (2011), and 'Cross My Heart' (2011) illustrate Skepta's venture into the kind of rap-infused electro-pop that, for critics and fans, signalled the end of grime's creative and commercial promise: Skepta's 2011 third studio album *Doin' It Again* (which contains both 'Bad Boy' and 'Cross My Heart'), 'clearly

[1] Kevin Lozano, 'Skepta – Konnichiwa', *Pitchfork* https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/21858-konnichiwa/ (accessed 7th November 2022).
[2] Ben Beaumont-Thomas, 'The best track of 2015: Shutdown by Skepta', *The Guardian* https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2015/dec/21/shutdown-skepta-best-track-of-2015-grime (accessed 7th November 2022).

a bid for international recognition', is for John Doran 'the sound of grime destroying itself'.[3] Integral in grime's 'early hustle', and a central figure in the genre's near collapse circa-2010, it is perhaps fitting that Skepta should be a driving force in grime music's commercial and artistic resurgence.

Beginning with his 2012 mixtape *Blacklisted*, Skepta abandoned pop-rap in favour of a return to the sounds of grime's first wave, a career rethink and act of self-rediscovery cemented in 2014 with *Konnichiwa*'s first single 'That's Not Me'. Highly evocative of grime's first wave, and released with a music video (at a reported cost of £80) which intentionally evokes the mood of early grime DVDs *Lord of the Mics* (on which Skepta clashed with fellow MC Devilman) and *Practice Hours*, 'That's Not Me' was ranked No.1 in *Complex* magazine's 2019 list of grime's most impactful songs of the 2010s.[4] The single is representative of *Konnichiwa*'s wider back-to-basics grime flavour. With features from UK MCs Jme, D Double E, Novelist, Wiley, and Chip, the album revives and reconnects with grime's key musical aesthetic tenets. Skepta consciously connects *Konnichiwa* to grime's perceived golden era through the musical and cultural evocation of the genre's early practices and sound palette. In tying himself musically and lyrically to grime's golden era, Skepta authenticates himself as a legitimate grime artist.

Konnichiwa also effects an expansion of grime's sound world. Skepta weaves grime's burgeoning transatlantic relationship with North American Hip Hop into the album's musical material, both immediately through the appearance of Harlem rapper Young Lord/A$AP Bari, and implicitly by references both to his relationship with Canadian superstar Drake and to a now-infamous Kanye West performance at the 2015 BRIT awards ceremony. This is done,

[3] Killian Fox, 'Skepta: Doin' It Again – review', *The Guardian* https://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/jan/30/skepta-doin-it-again-review (accessed 8th November 2022); John Doran, 'Skepta – Doin' It Again (Boy Better Know/3 Beat) Review', *NME* https://www.nme.com/reviews/reviews-skepta-11825-320392 (accessed 8th November 2022).
[4] 'The 2010s: Grime's Most Impactful Songs', *Complex* https://www.complex.com/music/2019/11/the-most-impactful-grime-songs-of-the-decade-2010s/skepta-jme-thats-not-me (accessed 9th November 2022).

however, in a way that maintains grime's cultural and musical dominance throughout *Konnichiwa*. In doing so, Skepta points to grime's growing global presence, and is able to explore other sonic possibilities, without sacrificing or diluting grime's key tenets.

Exploring Skepta's *Konnichiwa* facilitates not only a consideration of the methods through which grime artists post-2010 revived, reimagined, and reconnected with the genre's 'golden era' aesthetics, but also developed upon these aesthetics to broaden grime's musical and cultural scope. *Konnichiwa* marks an important landmark in grime's history, and the moment of grime's legitimate mainstream arrival. It is an album that at once connects the grime to its turn-of-the-century sonic roots, and looks forward to the scene's trajectory into the British and global cultural mainstream.

'The return of real grime'

For George Lipsitz, popular music is 'nothing if not dialogic, the product of an ongoing historical conversation in which no one has the first or last word'.[5] An analysis of Little Simz's *A Curious Tale* demonstrates the potential for Bakhtinian dialogism to function as a useful framework for considering coherence within grime as a genre, and the ways in which artists can remain tied to grime's ongoing historical conversation. Skepta's *Konnichiwa* presents an opportunity to not only investigate further the ways in which dialogism can behave as a genre-unifying framework, but also the extent to which it can offer an insight into grime's compositional practices.

'Lyrics', the second song on *Konnichiwa*'s track list, opens with an exchange between Wiley and MC Bushkin recorded during a 'crew clash' between Pay As You Go Cartel and Heartless Crew at Watford's Destiny nightclub in 2001:

[5] George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 99.

(Bushkin) Come off the stage! Move!
They don't want to hear you! They don't want to hear you!

(Wiley) What, is that what you think? Is that what you think?
Oi blud, calm, calm, calm
Lyrics for lyrics, calm[6]

This recording is immediately followed by the song's chorus, which transforms Wiley's plea for peace into a lyrical motif:

Yeah, hear me on the radio, wah gwan?
See me on the TV, hi mum
Merk MCs when the mic's in my palm
Lyrics for lyrics, calm
Hear me on the radio, wah gwan?
See me on the TV, hi mum
Merk MCs when the mic's in my palm
Lyrics for lyrics, calm

The use of recorded or sampled material is an important feature of *Konnichiwa*, as will be explored. Significant here is the transmutation of sampled dialogue into lyrical material. Lipsitz's notion of 'traces of the past' pervading the music of the present is here a quite literal description of Skepta's compositional practice. "Lyrics for lyrics, calm" is in Bakhtinian terms an 'overpopulated' utterance, 'tast[ing] of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life' – the line, which encapsulates a key commandment of grime's clash culture, has been recycled by numerous artists related to the grime scene, including P Money on his 2015 track 'Who's in Charge?' and MC M.I.K, who uses the same sample on his 2014 track 'Spar Off'.[7] In the same way that the male speaker in Little Simz's 'Persons' evokes

[6] 'Lyrics' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uxxUT1WPASU (accessed 9th January 2023).
[7] Bakhtin quoted in Hersch, 'Unfinalizable', 368.

sound system culture, the sample that opens ‘Lyrics’ is a literal time capsule of the late-garage and early-grime clash events that shaped the genre. While Little Simz’s involvement in grime’s ongoing dialogic process is more passive or subconscious, Skepta deliberately underscores the ties between his music and grime’s definitive early years, consciously situating ‘Lyrics’ (and indeed *Konnichiwa*) within the genre’s cultural lineage. This deliberate association is also constructed musically: underneath the sample that opens ‘Lyrics’, Skepta fades in the song’s bassline and kick-drum pattern in anticipation of their proper entry (0:14), using a low-pass filter to blend his beat with the sonic character of the original recording. This same filter is applied also to the chorus, making Skepta’s voice sound as though it is coming through a slightly fuzzy radio transmitter. The result is a musical coupling between ‘Lyrics’ and the Wiley sample, cementing a relation between the two – that is, between *Konnichiwa* and grime’s perceived halcyon days. As well as supporting the back-to-basics approach Skepta takes throughout *Konnichiwa*, and embedding both the song and the album within grime’s cultural lineage, there is an element to which a younger Wiley’s presence on ‘Lyrics’ substantiates the music as a legitimate example of grime, and Skepta as an authentic grime practitioner. In consciously evoking the crew-clash era (in which Skepta himself was involved as a brief member of Roll Deep, the crew that Wiley founded after Pay As U Go Cartel disbanded), a time before grime was meaningfully established (the sample was recorded in 2001, before either of Wiley or Dizzee Rascal’s respective prototypical releases), and with the voice of pioneer Wiley, the so-called ‘Godfather of grime’, Skepta positions himself and his music as not simply beneficiaries of grime’s development as a genre, but as a central force in this process. For much of the first verse in ‘Lyrics’, Skepta occupies himself with the evocation of this same early-grime era:

> Yeah, you got merked last week
> Couldn't even get a rewind, that's peak

Couldn't get out your punchlines on time
Now you wanna diss me? Oh blud, what a chief
Sidewinder, you got air on the roads
Eskimo Dance, you was spitting off-beat
Lord of the Mics, you was spitting that heat
But right now, your bars ain't on fleek
You don't wanna clash me, you will get merked
Bury MCs six feet in the dirt
I know you saw the police outside
You saw the blood on Devilman's shirt
Got rude, that didn't work
And your girl looks like she don't work
Mental
Man wouldn't beat that even if I was burst

Comparable in both substance and style to Kano's MCing on *Home Sweet Home*, Skepta's lyrics centre on criticising an imaginary adversary's mic skills while emphasising the brilliance and power of his own; paired with the opening sample, the verse attempts partly to capture the magic of live clashing on a piece of recorded music in the same way as 'Reload It' or 'Mic Check 1-2'. Coded within Skepta's verse, however, are references to grime history that, for suitably enculturated listeners, continue the evocation of the genre's early days begun by the Wiley sample: "rewind" is a reference to the performance practice of 'reloading' (see Kano chapter), "Sidewinder" and "Eskimo Dance" refer to now-legendary underground club nights (the latter founded by Wiley in 2002) that shaped the genre in its early days, and "the blood on Devilman's shirt" alludes to what is now considered a seminal clash between Skepta and Devilman on *Lord of the Mics 2* in 2006 (note also the reference to *Lord of the Mics* earlier in the verse). The second verse of 'Lyrics' continues this theme: "tell a pussyhole look sharp, fix up" references two early Dizzee Rascal songs, 'Pussyole (Old Skool)' and 'Fix Up, Look Sharp'. In coding such references into his verse, Skepta is not simply evoking grime's early days, but including himself as a key actor in the genre's definitive era. Indeed, the 'I was there'

tone of this verse is indicative of Skepta's desire to certify himself as an authoritative voice in grime music.

Skepta is in many ways appealing to what Sarah Thornton outlines as two kinds of authenticity that are constantly at play 'between the production and consumption of records': 'the first sort of authenticity involves originality and aura […] the second kind of authenticity is about being natural to the community or organic to subculture'.[8] Thornton notes the 'formation of new authenticities specific to recorded entertainment' throughout the 20th century, and (in response to Benjamin) highlights that recording technologies did not 'corrode or demystify "aura" as much as disperse and relocate it' – in becoming 'the source of sounds', records 'underwent the mystification usually reserved for *unique* art objects'.[9] Framing the recorded sample that opens 'Lyrics' as an authentic sound source, in that it serves as a document of a unique event (the 2001 crew clash) held in regard by involved practitioners of the grime scene, and has been employed since in numerous recordings since as a kind of cultural artefact, bolsters Skepta's claim to authenticity; 'Lyrics' is authenticated by the sample's 'aura'. The appearance of present-day Wiley in 'Corn on the Curb', the track that immediately follows 'Lyrics' on *Konnichiwa*, consolidates this claim: as Andrew Goodwin has argued, as a result of developments in recording technologies, 'aura' has 'been transferred from the art object to its maker'.[10] The presence and endorsement of accepted grime pioneer Wiley on *Konnichiwa*, both figuratively and musically, therefore cements Skepta's position in the grime community. Similarly, the lyrical coding of Skepta's verse is not simply an evocation of grime's golden era, but a claim to authenticity, or a demonstration of his 'being natural to the community'.[11] This lyrical coding appears throughout the album: "Fix up look sharp when I enter" in 'Konnichiwa' (again in reference to Dizzee Rascal's influential song); Wiley's verse

[8] Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995), 30.
[9] Ibid., 27-8.
[10] Andrew Goodwin quoted in Thornton, *Club Cultures*, 27.
[11] Thornton, *Club Cultures*, 30.

on ‘Corn on the Curb’ – “I was there back in the day when it was garage/And them man said they wanna get rid of MCs […] Some MC Det/Skibadee, Baseman and Trigga MC” (namechecking veteran Jungle and Drum & Bass MCs Det, Skibadee, Baseman and Trigga); ‘That’s Not Me’, the central motif of which quotes a freestyle performed by Roll Deep member Scratchy during a 2005 Rinse FM broadcast; and “I remember when Wiley told me to jump on mic” in ‘Detox’. The effect of this is less nostalgic than it is dialogic. Dialogism is here an authenticating force, imparting *Konnichiwa* with the ‘aura’ of grime’s perceived glory days via quotation of and reference to seminal and definitive recordings (e.g. *Boy In Da Corner*) and important cultural artefacts (e.g. the 2001 crew clash, Scratchy’s 2005 Rinse FM freestyle). In establishing and then emphasising a dialogue between *Konnichiwa* and the period surrounding grime’s genesis, Skepta authenticates both himself as a bona fide artist who is ‘organic to [grime’s] subculture’, and *Konnichiwa* as a legitimate instance of grime music that possesses the same ‘originality and aura’ as the recordings to which its lyrics refer.

Konnichiwa’s dialogic quality permeates not only the album’s lyrical material, but its musical fabric also. ‘That’s Not Me’, *Konnichiwa*’s first single, opens with the following melodic motif in B flat minor:

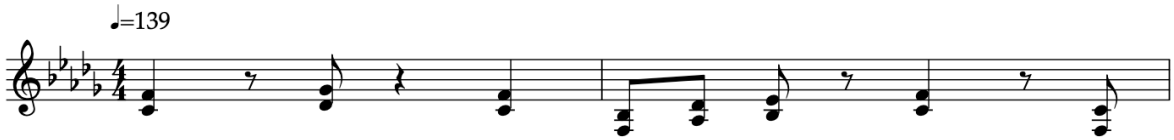

Figure 19 - 'That's Not Me' melodic motif.

Important here is not the melodic or harmonic content of the motif, but the games-console-like bleeps that comprise its timbral and sonic character. Recognisably reminiscent of early-era grime, the bleeps are in fact the same warped digital flute and ‘eski-clicks’ heard on Wiley’s *Treddin’ On Thin Ice*. The musical content of ‘That’s Not Me’ is built primarily from two samples, both taken from early-era Wiley instrumentals - ‘Jam Pie’, from which Skepta

samples the distorted flute and clicks, and 'Ice Rink' (featured on *Treddin'*) from which Skepta samples the drum pattern.[12] Indeed, references to Wiley also permeate the lyrical material of 'That's Not Me', as Skepta derives both his lyrical content and flow from Wiley's song 'Pies' (again featured on *Treddin'*, and built from the 'Jam Pie' instrumental):

(Wiley, 'Pies')
It was Eskiboy, and I come from the road (Road)
Pricks wanna try and put Wiley on hold
But no (No)
Bastard, I'm one of those (One of those)
Bad attitude, yo, I got one of those (Got one of those)
Yeah, girlfriend, I had one of those (Yeah)
Black teak spot, yo, I got one of those (Yeah)
Girls on the low, yo, I got some of those (Got some of those)

(Skepta, 'That's Not Me')
See me, I come from the roads
Pricks wanna try and put Skepta on hold
But no, badboy, I've been one of those
Wake up call, you will get one of those
One to the eyeball, one to the nose
I don't really care about your postcode
Take your girl, no dinner, no rose
Two minutes in my bedroom, no clothes

'Fabled to be from an old ice-related Nintendo game', Wiley's eski 'click, clink and stomp', as well as the warped digital flute, were originally found in the factory pre-set banks of now-discontinued sound modules.[13] As Son Raw notes: 'Ironically, since those sounds were first used thanks to their ease of access, the rarity of that VST has since led countless new producers

[12] 'Jam Pie' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hAyhGx_9WiI , and 'Ice Rink' here: https://www.youtube.com/shorts/9jVimRIQLos (accessed 14th January 2023).
[13] Zak DesFleurs, '10 sounds that define modern club music – and the stories behind them', *factmag.com* https://www.factmag.com/2017/08/10/club-music-sounds-stories/ (accessed 16th January 2023).

on hunts down long abandoned music forums to get copies of the sounds, and they've accumulated a sort of hipster caché (*sic*) along the way'.[14] Raw terms the continuing use of these now-iconic sounds in grime production as 'scene memory', which at its best 'can create a rush by colliding nostalgia and the shock of the new all at once'; for Raw, 'That's Not Me' simultaneously 'felt like the return of real grime and the start of a new era', and part of a process in which grime 'canonized its own "classic" sound palette, grabbing presets and ideas from the genre's formative years and twisting them into countless new shapes'.[15] The accumulation of hipster cultural cachet that Raw refers to is analogous to the mystification process that Thornton notes in relation to original recordings. Indeed, 'cultural cachet' is in many ways equivalent to the notion of 'aura'. In (re)sampling sounds from Wiley's prototypical and now-classic instrumentals, Skepta builds the 'aura' of these records into the musical fabric of 'That's Not Me', and establishes a specifically sonic dialogue between his music and the 'real grime' that Raw refers to. As Skepta himself details, this aura-building process is entirely intentional:

> "I had the beat in my head, I knew what I wanted it to sound like. I wanted a proper old-skool sound, I wanted to take it back to all the old grime songs, but I wanted to do it properly. So I phoned [East London MC and producer] Jammer and I asked him 'Where's that keyboard you used to use back in the day?' […] finally I got it. This keyboard is so heavy 'cause it's got a million songs on it. I turned it on and it's got all the grime sounds on it. All the early Jammer, Wiley sounds, they're all there. All the old grime was made on that keyboard. All of it.[16]

The sampling of the past heard in 'That's Not Me' can be considered with reference not only to Bakhtinian dialogism, but also to the related concept of 'Signifyin''.[17] 'That's Not Me'

[14] Son Raw, 'Wot U Call It, Eski? The Stickiness Of Grime's Old-School Sounds', *Complex UK* https://www.complex.com/music/2016/02/the-evolution-of-grime-production (accessed 16th January 2023).
[15] Ibid..
[16] Skepta quoted in Hattie Collins and Olivia Rose, *This is Grime* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2016), 272.
[17] 'Sampling' is here being used in a broad sense, rather than in reference to the specific and well-documented cultural practice of sampling derived from North American hip hop.

is less pervaded by the 'traces of the past' described by Lipsitz than it is constructed from them. Theorised by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in African American literary studies, and adapted to Black musics by Samuel A. Floyd Jr., Signifyin is 'repetition *with a difference*; the same and yet not the same'.[18] As Russell Potter explains: 'When, in a jazz riff, a horn player substitutes one arpeggio for a harmony note, or "cuts up" a well-known solo by altering its tempo, phrasing, or accents, s/he is Signifyin(g) on all previous versions'.[19] Hip Hop, Jazz, reggae, and other forms of Black musics are 'Signifyin(g) what came before them'.[20] Williams notes that musical texts 'Signify upon one another, troping and revising particular musical ideas. These musical "conversations" can therefore occur between the present and the past, or synchronically within a particular genre'.[21] The warped digital flute samples and Eskibeat sounds that comprise the musical material of 'That's Not Me' do exactly this, 'troping and revising particular musical ideas', in this case particular sounds, and generating a musical conversation with the past, specifically here grime's perceived golden era. It is important, however, to note the possibility that (as with any instance of sampling) not all listeners will experience the same nostalgia – as Son Raw notes, for newer grime fans who 'weren't around or weren't paying attention a decade ago', sounds such as those used by Skepta on 'That's Not Me' 'still feel beamed in from the future'.[22] That Skepta's sampling of Wiley's early tunes is clearly 'textually signalled', however, is indicative of their importance.[23] That is, the extent to which 'That's Not Me' draws attention to its borrowed material, through Skepta's employment of grime's 'canonized' sounds, as well as his 'allosonic' quotation (whereby previous material is quoted by means of re-recording or performing the quotation, as opposed to digital sampling) of Wiley's 'Pies'

[18] Russell Potter quoted in Justin Williams, 'Intertextuality, sampling, and copyright' in *The Cambridge Companion to Hip Hop*, ed. J.A. Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 206-220, here 207.
[19] Ibid..
[20] Williams, 'Intertextuality, sampling, and copyright', 207.
[21] Ibid..
[22] Raw, 'Wot U Call It, Eski?'.
[23] Williams, 'Intertextuality, sampling, and copyright', 209.

lyrics, would suggest, beyond listener recognition, the centrality of these quotations to the song's identity.[24]

While the focus of this project is primarily sound, the music video released for 'That's Not Me' demonstrates the same referential and nostalgic 'scene memory' as the song's musical and lyrical material, noted by Jme in his verse ("See me and Skepta in a video with a nostalgic backdrop").[25] Made at a reported cost of £80 (in line with the 'back to basics' attitude of the song) and filmed on the set of grime radio show *Just Jam*, the video sees Skepta and Jme performing their respective verses into makeshift microphones (in this case the built-in microphone on a pair of headphones) while standing at the decks. The footage of Skepta, Jme, the (unnamed) DJ, and the decks themselves is superimposed onto footage taken from a documentary-style video made by Skepta before the release of *Konnichiwa*.[26] The low-fidelity aesthetic of the music video not only effects the same evocation of golden-era grime as does the music, but it also has a transformative effect on the way that the song is heard. The visually-dislocated radio show set-up next to which Skepta and Jme perform is an obvious allusion to grime's pirate radio days, and specifically to an environment whose 'limitations and affordances' had a 'profound influence on grime's sound'.[27] Pirate radio clashes would require MCs to perform over instrumentals that were crafted by DJs on the spot, sampling live from dubplates and borrowing excerpts from multiple sources to weave new musical fabrics. It is by adopting these practices into his production that Skepta's evocation of the pirate radio era is so effective; 'That's Not Me' deploys familiar sonic fragments to 'mobilize the meanings and

[24] Ibid., 208-9.
[25] The music video for 'That's Not Me' can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dyONbqggasY.
[26] The documentary-style video can be viewed here: https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2vkmx9.
[27] Rob Gallagher, '"All the Other Players Want to Look at My Pad": Grime, Gaming, and Digital Identity', *G.A.M.E.* (Reggio Calabria, 2017). Gallagher continues: No sponsors to thank meant space for long-form mixes, *liveness* increased the stakes for performers and allowed for a degree of listener interaction, while FM radio's poor sound quality fostered forms of sonic branding that ensured particular artists' voices and styles would cut through the static'.

associations they carry', using the same compositional practices and sonic palette as early grime producers and DJs to situate itself within an evolving aesthetic tradition.[28]

Much like in Hip Hop, therefore, where sampling has been a means of creating a lineage with older African-American music such as funk, soul, and rhythm and blues, quoted material in grime solidifies coherence between artists and musics despite its relative youth as a genre (Skepta's own involvement in grime's pirate radio days illustrates grime's historical brevity).[29] The use of sampling and the deployment of grime's classic sound palette in 'That's Not Me' affords Skepta an elegant means of returning full-circle to grime's roots, and includes him within the music's aesthetic tradition as an authentic practitioner. It is from this position that Skepta can then dictate what happens next. If 'That's Not Me' 'felt like the return of real grime and the start of a new era', then it is Skepta who will initiate this new epoch.

'A New Era'

If the samples that open 'Lyrics' and constitute 'That's Not Me' 'signify' on grime's musical roots, deliberately underlining the dialogic relationship between Skepta's music and that of grime's early pioneers, then the samples that close 'Corn on the Curb' and 'Crime Riddim' constitute the broadening of this conversation. 'Corn on the Curb' concludes with an extended recording of a phone conversation between Skepta and fellow North-London rapper Chip (formerly Chipmunk):

(Chip) Yo, fam
(Skepta) Yo, Chip
Talk to me, man
Where are you, though? Who are you with?

[28] Rob Gallagher, '"All the Other Players Want to Look at My Pad": Grime, Gaming, and Digital Identity', *G.A.M.E.* (Reggio Calabria, 2017).
[29] Joanna Demers, 'Sampling the 1970s in hip-hop', *Popular Music* 22, no.1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 41-56, here 41.

I'm on my Js, blud

Sound, man. This ting has got me, blud, I'm not gonna lie, fam. I'm not gonna front, fam

Mad pressures from every angle, fam

Yeah?

It's come like I'm too ambitious to be with the mandem on the road but, I'm... like...

I can't be up there with them people either... you know what I'm saying?

I'm too black to be up there, you see what I'm saying, fam?

I don't know, I feel like... I feel like I'm in limbo, Chippy. I feel like I'm in limbo, fam

The 'limbo' that Skepta describes is perhaps best understood in relation to Son Raw's characterisation of *Konnichiwa* as a halfway house between 'real grime' and a 'new era'; Skepta's artistic and cultural dilemma lies in bringing grime to a wider audience while remaining in touch with 'the mandem on the road'. The wider audience in question is (of course) the U.S. The question of grime's potential for cross-Atlantic appeal has often been difficult, leading to engineered collaborations and the kind of electro-pop crossover music that Skepta himself made between 2008-2012, leaving the genre in a creative and commercial slump. Yet 'real grime' has been proven to work 'Stateside': Dizzee Rascal's *Boy In Da Corner* received a 9.4 review from *Pitchfork* upon its release, and by 2004 Dizzee was touring America.[30] While *Boy* appeals 'in its total foreignness and relentless bombardment of beats and bars', however, *Konnichiwa*'s approach is more inclusive.[31] Indeed, rather than barefaced appeals to the American market, *Konnichiwa* crafts a synthesis between the two worlds – it is not until the end of 'Crime Riddim' that anyone with a non-British accent speaks. When this does happen, it is in the form of a 'skit' (a short comedy sketch placed between musical

[30] Scott Plagenhoef ,'Boy In Da Corner', *Pitchfork* https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/2345-boy-in-da-corner/ (accessed 19th January 2023).

[31] Constant Gardener, 'Skepta Reaches Rap Fans Without Abandoning Grime Authenticity on 'Konnichiwa'', *Complex* https://www.complex.com/pigeons-and-planes/2016/05/skepta-konnichiwa-grime-rap (accessed 19th January 2023).

material, and a device used everywhere in rap music from Dr. Dre to Dizzee Rascal to Kendrick Lamar):

(American voice) A'ite, a– you really gonna do that right now?
A'ite, I'mma fucking pull out the Bazooka
I'mma blast ya ass
You're gonna wish you never fucking did that
(British voice) Eediot man, shut ya mout man
You're fucking pussy bro
You are a fu– yo, I'mma– I swear, right now
Pussy? Bruv you're chat– you're chatting shit over a fucking game bro, calm down
Oh yeah, where'd you learn that one, your fucking mother?
No your bludclart baby-mudda
Where you from?
London, know 'bout us bro
You're a fucking scumbag
"Scumbag"
Yeah watch, turn around
I'mma blast you in the face right now
Bang, bang, bang
Yeah, pussy, pussy
Dickhead!
Okay, okay
Bro, share your location, share your location
I'll come to your yard man
Big man ting I'll come to your yard
You're gonna come into my house? And actually think you're gonna do that? Get the fuck outta here bro
Come on, big man ting
I'm right here, motherfucker
Aite, aite, aite, say nuttin'
Really? Really?
Still talking
Bruv you're little gamer man, get me, I really do this bro
I do this everyday

All day everyday
Lock arf my man
"Everyday"
Peace kid, later
Dickhead

The audio quality and the sound effects heard in the background indicate that the skit is set between two characters interacting while playing a video game (in the vein of *Call of Duty*), speaking over headsets, or "chatting shit over a fucking game" – note here once again the demonstrable centrality of video games to grime culture (chapter two). The American voice heard in this skit rings as incongruous against the four-track salvo that opens *Konnichiwa* ('Konnichiwa', 'Lyrics', 'Corn on the Curb', and 'Crime Riddim'), all of which heavily feature British slang and are performed solely by British MCs (Skepta, Novelist, and Wiley). The juxtaposition of the American voice against two British voices underlines this dissonance, which is furthered by the comical contrast in argots: "*your fucking mother*?"/"Your bludclart baby-mudda", "Big man ting I'll come to your yard"/"*You're gonna come to my house*?", "*Peace kid, later*"/"Dickhead". The tension, both in an immediate sense with regard to the antagonistic nature of the exchange as well as in a broader cultural manner i.e. the difference in slang and accent, is in many ways symbolic of grime's chequered cross-Atlantic past. Yet here the balance of power is noticeably shifted in favour of the UK; there is a sense in which the listener is encouraged to interpret the American character as somehow ridiculous, or at least punching upwards. The song that follows this skit, 'It Ain't Safe', exhibits the first musical American contribution on the album. Interestingly, the American influence on the track can also be seen on the single's album cover, which appears to visually reference Gangsta Rap pioneers N.W.A.'s debut album *Straight Outta Compton* (figure 2). The track opens with the voice of Harlem rapper Young Lord/A$AP Bari asking for his headphones to be turned up, before he delivers the song's chorus:

It ain't safe for the block, not even for the cops
It ain't safe for the block, not even for the cops
It ain't safe for the block, not even for the cops
(etc.)

Aside from the song's outro (the repeated line "you've been duckin' from me shawty"), Lord/Bari's contribution is limited to the song's repetitive chorus. The bulk of the lyrical and vocal workload is left to Skepta, whose verses display a curious and careful blend of his usual British slang and Americanisms: "buzzing on the road", "Bari got the weapon in the pocket of the Ksubi's" (namechecking Lord/Bari himself), "The traphouse was a shithole" ('traphouse' is a term originating in Atlanta, Georgia to describe drug houses which later lent its name to 'trap' music, a Chicago-born rap subgenre), "with my n****s smoking on some indo" ('indo' is again a term of American origin signifying indoor-grown marijuana, and features heavily in much 90s Hip Hop e.g. "Condos in Queens, indo for weeks" in The Notorious B.I.G.'s 'Juicy', or "rolling down the street smokin' indo" in Snoop Dogg's 'Gin and Juice'), "Bang brrrang dang dang, on my Lil B shit […] we're the realest on the telly" (namechecking California rapper Lil B, before quickly deploying a Britishism - 'telly' for television).



Figure 20 – Album cover comparison for Skepta and Lord Bari's single 'It Ain't Safe', and N.W.A's *Straight Outta Compton*.

That Young Lord/A$AP Bari's contribution is limited to the song's hook, and the fact that 'It Ain't Safe' follows an unmistakeably British-centric four track volley, contributes to the sense in which grime is opening its doors to Hip Hop rather than the historically-precedented contrary – a feeling furthered by the fact that it is Bari who features on *Skepta's* album. The inclusion of the above Americanisms in Skepta's verses feels more like a respectful blend rather than shallow imitation, closer to equal synthesis than barefaced appeal. This sense of inclusion is furthered in the music video released alongside 'It Ain't Safe'.[32] Filmed in North London, the music video sees Young Lord join Skepta and a group of people (among them Stormzy and Konan of London duo Krept & Konan) on a tour of various locations, among them the estates and tower blocks of Tottenham interspersed with footage featuring British police officers and vehicles. Historical context here lends the highly Americanised chorus ("It

[32] The music video for 'It Ain't Safe' can be seen here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czLQoG01PFs (accessed 20th January 2023).

ain't safe on the block, not even for the cops") a shared cross-Atlantic meaning; Mark Duggan (reportedly a friend of Skepta's) was shot dead in Tottenham Hale in 2011 by police, leading to public protests which eventually escalated into riots across London. Released only three years later, 'It Ain't Safe' speaks not only to Skepta and Bari's musical alliance, but a broader cultural and political cross-Atlantic exchange. Indeed, both the song's video and the historical context of the London riots suggest N.W.A's influence extends beyond Skepta's choice of artwork; 'It Ain't Safe' demonstrably exhibits the same brand of swaggering, anti-establishment irreverence, as well as the same frustrations with police violence and institutionalised racism, as 'Fuck the Police' – only with a British accent.

While earlier 'collaborations' between UK grime and American hip hop artists struck audiences as somewhat gimmicky and contrived, forcing grime artists often to alter both the sound and substance of their music in an attempt to 'break' the mainstream (and American) market, the collaborative spirit of 'It Ain't Safe' feels more organic in both its style and subject matter. Skepta's blend of his usual British slang with Americanisms contributes significantly to this. In Bakhtinian terms, words like "indo" and "traphouse" are, in the context of American hip hop, 'overpopulated' utterances; by employing them, Skepta is establishing a dialogue with, or 'Signifyin' upon, this same hip hop tradition. While a musical dialogue with the past was in 'That's Not Me' an authenticating force, it is a unifying one here. This lyrical or vernacular dialogue in 'It Ain't Safe' is also to a degree consolidated musically. Figures 3.1-3 illustrate the basic rhythmic character of three songs: 'It Ain't Safe', 'Yamborghini High' by rap collective A$AP Mob (of which A$AP Bari is a member) released in 2016 (the same year as *Konnichiwa*), and 'Lyrics'.[33] A comparison between 'Yamborghini High' and 'Lyrics' (figures 3.2 and 3.3) illustrates some of the key differences between contemporary American

[33] 'Yamborghini High' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tt7gP_IW-1w (accessed 5th March 2023).

and UK-produced rap with regard to their rhythmic character; where UK grime is ‘skippier’, heavier, more irregular, and generally less danceable, American hip hop is smoother, more regular, and more groove-oriented.

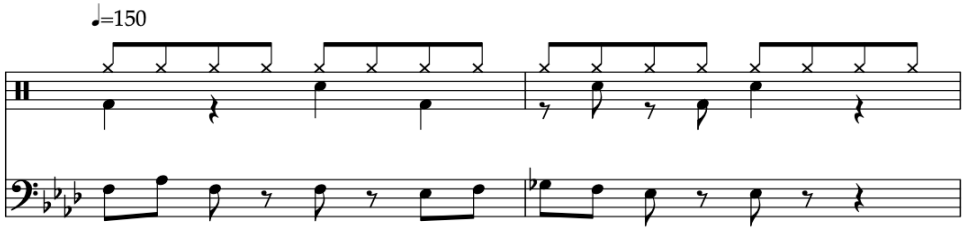

Figure 21.1 – ‘It Ain’t Safe’ basic rhythmic cell.

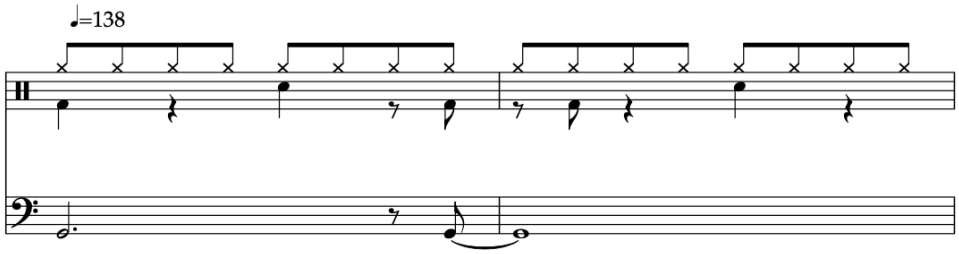

Figure 21.2 – A$AP Mob ‘Yamborghini High’ basic rhythmic cell.

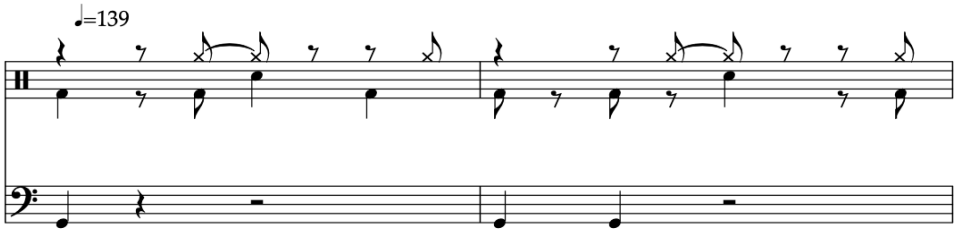

Figure 21.3 – ‘Lyrics’ basic rhythmic cell.

This rhythmic smoothness is generated largely by regular hi-hat quavers against which the light syncopation of kick drums can establish a danceable (or at least head-bobbable) groove. ‘Lyrics’ on the other hand employs its hi-hats as anticipatory upbeats to heavy kick drum and snare hits which have the effect of slowing any potential groove feeling, and promoting a

generally heavier feeling in the rhythmic character of the song. 'It Ain't Safe' arguably demonstrates a blend of these two approaches; heavy kick and snare hits still prevail, but they are set against regular, hip hop-influenced, hi-hat quavers. That 'It Ain't Safe' can exhibit both the musical and lyrical influence of its American guest while retaining enough of its grime-based ethos (heard particularly in the churning, angular synthesised bass timbres of the verses) to fit comfortably within what is an 'very British' album is demonstrative of the success with which Skepta authenticates himself as a grime artist, and *Konnichiwa* as a grime album.[34]

Between 'That's Not Me' and 'It Ain't Safe' arguably lies the defining feature of *Konnichiwa*; 'for all that the album self-evidently has one eye fixed on the States, you never get the sense of an artist subjugating his own personality to succeed abroad'.[35] Throughout *Konnichiwa* Skepta establishes and maintains a dialogue between both himself and grime's musical and cultural history (musically in the case of that's not me, and both literally and figuratively in the form of D Double E and Wiley's various features), the scene's present (both literally in the form of Novelist's verse on 'Lyrics', and more broadly with musings on the current musical landscape), and the UK rap scene's developing relationship with the US. Perhaps nowhere, however, is this dialogue in its various forms and guises presented more clearly than on the album's second single 'Shutdown'.

'Shutdown' (to mean 'something was done incredibly well or something was done astoundingly in a notable way' i.e. an event was 'shutdown' – possibly as a reclaiming of the word's negative associations with grime i.e. Form 696 and the literal shutdown of live music events) is comparable in many ways to 'That's not Me'.[36] Both songs exhibit the same heavy

[34] Alexis Petridis, 'Skepta: Konnichiwa review – dextrous, sharp and very British', *The Guardian* https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/may/12/skepta-konnichiwa-review-boy-better-know-album-of-the-week (accessed 14th March 2023).
[35] Ibid..
[36] https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=shut%20down (accessed 14th March 2023); 'Shutdown' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQOG5BkY2Bc (accessed 14th March 2023); for more on Form 696 see https://www.horniman.ac.uk/story/what-was-form-696/ (accessed 22nd September 2023)..

kick drum hits that reinforce synthesised bass stabs, 'skippy' hi-hats, a BPM of roughly 140, and choruses 'classic of grime sloganeering'.[37] Indeed, alongside 'It Ain't Safe' ("ring-ring pussy"), 'That's Not Me' is quoted in 'Shutdown's singalong chorus:

> When it's shutdown
> That's not me and it's shutdown
> Ring-ring pussy, it's shutdown
> Fashion week and it's shutdown
> Went to the show, sitting in the front row
> In a black tracksuit and it's shutdown
> Touch the road and it's shutdown
> Boy Better Know and it's shutdown

This singalong or anthemic quality is reminiscent of grime's rave and radio era (and indeed of 'That's Not Me'), where memorable catchphrases and straightforward statements constructed to provoke a reaction and audience engagement are favoured over more tongue-twisting lyrical acrobatics. That is not to say, however, that the lyrical content of 'Shutdown' is not in some way complex. Skepta once again densely codes his verses with references to his own oeuvre (as above), grime veterans ("I got gigs just like Joe Grind", namechecking UK rappers – and brothers – Giggs and Joe Grind, playing on the homophonic nature of "gigs" with the name of the former; "Roll Deep in a blacked-out Bentley" which gives a nod to Wiley's collective Roll Deep, of which Skepta was briefly a member), live MC/sound system events ("I pick up the mic and it's reload time"), and his own pedigree ("I bet I make you respect me/When you see the mandem are selling out Wembley", a lyric which contains a subtle reference to Dizzee Rascal's 'Respect Me').[38]

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[37] Ian McQuaid, 'Skepta's "Shutdown" is a musical revelation', *The Line of Best Fit* https://www.thelineofbestfit.com/features/longread/skeptas-shutdown-track-of-the-year-2015 (accessed 14th March 2023).

[38] "You people are gonna respect me/I bet I make you respect me" Dizzee Rascal 'Respect Me' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IrcwIeZhajA (accessed 20th April 2023).

Skepta's dense and highly specific codification of his verses in 'Shutdown' effects the same dialogic relationship between the song and grime's perceived golden era as explored elsewhere in *Konnichiwa* ('Lyrics' and 'That's Not Me'). Heard in tandem with the song's 140 bpm, back-to-basics instrumental, the lyrical style and content of 'Shutdown' suggests Skepta's readiness to pay his dues to grime's musical and cultural history. This does not, however, ever come at the expense of *Konnichiwa* claiming its own power. While much of the album occupies itself with giving grime culture its flowers and paying its dues to all that came before, it is important to remember that Skepta himself was a part of that same history (as a member of Roll Deep, featuring on *Lord of the Mics*, etc.). Importantly, however, and as Skepta is keen to illustrate throughout *Konnichiwa*, he is integral to grime's present celebration and future proliferation:

> I was in Paris, shut down l'Arc
> New York, shut down Central Park
> Talk about London, yo, Frisco, where shall I start?[39]

These lyrics are an obvious indication of grime's success as an international export. Skepta's (and therefore – we are led to believe – grime's) international appeal is, however, better illustrated through the use of sampling in 'Shutdown'. The song is bookended by samples of Canadian superstar Drake, the first taken from the rapper's Vine account as he boasts of being in Las Vegas' Marquee Nightclub outside of opening hours, and the second from the short film 'Jungle':

> Man's never been in Marquee when it's shut down, eh?
> Truss mi, daddy
> […]

[39] Frisco, a fellow member of Boy Better Know, also released a single called 'Shutdown' in 2011; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CY7pgu56z5A (accessed 20th April 2023).

Link up, daddy
Alright
Yo, tomorrow I'm gonna come scoop you, eh? We'll go to Biz's
Yeah, for sure
Alright
Dun know.[40]

To bookend any song by sampling one of the world's biggest artists is ambitious, and is perhaps at first a confusing artistic decision given that the samples, aside from literally featuring the words "shut down" (used in a different manner i.e. the club is closed), don't *interact* with any of the musical material (in the same way as the Wiley sample on 'Lyrics' for example). Yet these samples effect the same cultural expansion as Yong Lord's feature on 'It Ain't Safe', albeit in a different way. While Skepta weaves American influence and aspiration into the musical and lyrical material of 'It Ain't Safe', 'Shutdown' suggests its transatlantic appeal extra-musically. Indeed, rather than a cheap marketing scheme the samples that bookend 'Shutdown' reference Drake's ongoing relationship with the UK's rap scene; the Canadian namechecked Wiley as his "favourite rapper" on stage in 2012 and has sustained a friendship with Skepta over several years, culminating in Drake symbolically 'signing' with the latter's Boy Better Know label in February 2016 (and tattooing BBK to his shoulder) before giving an entire song on his 2017 album *More Life* to a Skepta solo outing ('Skepta Interlude').[41] Skepta's relationship with Drake thus appears to reverse the historical trend in power dynamics between British and North American rappers; as Ian McQuaid notes: 'Which other UK artist (or global artist for that matter) could shamelessly kick off with a Drake sample, and appear to be doing Drake a favour?'.[42] In the same way that the music video for 'It Ain't Safe' sees Young Lord

[40]'Jungle' can be seen here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xnF3ePutWaA (accessed 21st April 2023).
[41]Aimee Cliff, 'A Brief History of Drake's Relationship with Boy Better Know', *The Fader* https://www.thefader.com/2016/02/25/drake-skepta-bbk-timeline (accessed 23rd April 2023); 'Skepta Interlude' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TaMxyjB_2aE (accessed 23rd April 2023).
[42] McQuaid, 'Skepta's "Shutdown" is a musical revelation'.

physically appear on the streets of London, Skepta roots Drake's voice in the unmistakeably 'grimey' sound world of 'Shutdown'. Further, Drake's use of the typically London slang phrase "Dun Know" (originally a Jamaican patois phrase that translates to 'you already know', used to emphasise the validity of a fact – also the name of an earlier Skepta song 'You Dun Know') contributes to this sense that historical power dynamics are shifting.[43] Drake's appearance on 'Shutdown' (in sample-form) is in a basic sense promotional, but functions as an in-joke rather than a ploy for attention, in line with the referential nature of *Konnichiwa*'s handling of samples. Drake's voice does not explicitly champion – or even reference – Skepta, 'Shutdown', the album, or grime music. Rather, listeners familiar with the Canadian rapper's ongoing relationship with the UK music scene will recognise the sample's symbolism as a sonic consolidation of Drake's fandom. In the same way that Wiley's voice at the start of 'Lyrics' authenticates the song as a legitimate instance of grime music tied to the genre's lineage, Drake's voice authenticates 'Shutdown' (and *Konnichiwa*) as a global product. Crucially, Skepta's employment of Drake's sampled dialogue *outside* of the musical text allows him to signal 'Shutdown's global reach without sacrificing or subjugating any of its, or his, musical personality.

This slightly subliminal form of transatlantic promotion appears also at the song's midway point (1:49-2:02) in the form of a skit:

> A bunch of young men all dressed in black
> Dancing extremely aggressively on stage
> It made me feel so intimidated and it's just not
> What I expect to see on prime-time TV.

[43] 'You Dun Know' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGXI0zLofQI (accessed 24th April 2023).

Unlike the Drake samples which are completely separate from the musical material of 'Shutdown', the above lines are spoken over a stripped-back iteration of the song's main bass hook; a low-pass filter is employed, comparable to the opening bars of 'Lyrics', to allow only the hook and kick-drum stabs to undulate under the skit. The skit is delivered by an anonymous female voice –the same voice heard in an earlier Skepta song 'Ace Hood Flow' from his earlier mixtape *Blacklisted* (2012) – and references a Kanye West performance at the 2015 BRIT Awards.[44] West (the winner of three BRIT awards for international male solo artist) was invited to debut his frenetic single 'All Day' at the 2015 ceremony which boasted no grime nominees (a feat repeated at the 2016 awards).[45] When aired live on ITV, the performance was censored 'to laughable effect' in response to West's generous employment of expletives, producing a 'skittering, otherworldly broadcast, essentially unwatchable'.[46] The skit that features in 'Shutdown' is a collation of the 151 Ofcom complaints received as a result of West's performance, in addition to a Twitter furore over West's supposed promotion of 'gang culture'.[47] This is of course intentional, and the apparent disconnect between West's performance and the British public merely mirrors the same disconnect inside the O2 Arena:

> The cameras capture the gulf between the spectacle on stage, the drama, white knuckle thrill and furious glee of heavyweight American hip hop, and the dazed, besuited industry figures below, stalled in their skins, barely a single one of them seen moving when confronted with the bomb-strewn bombast and shrapnel-flicked passion of West at his peak. The gap is physically short, but viewers can see that it

[44] 'Ace Hood Flow' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wSVCa3Ff9gE (accessed 23rd April 2023).
[45] Kanye West's performance of 'All Day' at the 2015 BRITs can be seen here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ABk7TmjnVk (accessed 27th April 2023).
[46] 'Musique Vérité; Why Kanye West's "All Day" At The 2015 Brit Awards Is One Of The Best Ever Live Performances', *Roads to the North* https://roadstothenorth.com/2020/04/08/musique-verite-why-kanye-wests-all-day-at-the-2015-brit-awards-is-one-of-the-best-ever-live-performances/ (accessed 27th April 2023).
[47] Luke Bailey, 'Kanye's Brits Performance Actually Featured Top UK Grime Artists', *Buzzfeed* https://www.buzzfeed.com/lukebailey/kanye-and-grime#.kiXygYMym (accessed 27th April 2023).

> constitutes a cultural chasm, calling into severe question the ability of British music bureaucracy to handle an ego and ability of these gigantic proportions.[48]

As this account of specifically Kanye West's energetic and virtuosic performance highlights, the (British) musical elite still have little feeling for hip hop, a genre whose rise to the apex of pop culture's peak is undisputed. West and hip hop, however, are at least invited. The Greek chorus of roughly forty figures, or the "bunch of young men all dressed in black", accompanying West onstage speaks to an ongoing exclusion of black British talent from (theoretically) the UK's biggest music awards ceremony. Among the young men were British MCs Stormzy, Novelist, Jammer, Krept and Konan, and of course Skepta himself (who mentions his trip in 'Konnichiwa': "Boy better know man went to the BRITs on a train"). Novelist gives an account of how the performance was arranged:

> We were just chilling in Skepta's house and Kanye rang Skepta and said "yo, can you get some of your guys to come down?" So Skepta just brought his music mates. It was very spontaneous. It was only an hour before the show. I liked the fact that I was onstage with people like myself in my tracksuit; that was sick…[49]

At West's bidding, therefore, the BRITs stage was triumphantly mobbed by some of the biggest names in a scene that has been continually snubbed by the British music industry. The performance was lauded by Wiley via Twitter, who felt 'a statement was made': 'Kanye knows the Brits ain't letting dons in there like that so he kicked off the door for us. Imagine 1 of us saying Yeh I'm bringing 20 dons'.[50] Yet the performance cannot be said to represent a

[48] 'Musique Vérité; Why Kanye West's "All Day" At The 2015 Brit Awards Is One Of The Best Ever Live Performances'.
[49] Novelist quoted in Dan Hancox, 'Was Kanye patronising or boosting grime with his Brits performance?', *The Guardian* https://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2015/mar/02/was-kanye-patronising-or-boosting-grime-with-his-brits-performance (accessed 4th May 2023).
[50] Wiley via Twitter, quoted in Hancox, 'Was Kanye patronising or boosting grime with his Brits performance?'.

collaboration, and the only clue for the British MCs' presence is a moment at the end when Kanye thanks Skepta ("Yo Skepta, Thank you"). Even with over forty representatives onstage, the grime scene's voice remains silent. Indeed, commentators such as Remel London felt that the performance merely exemplified UK rap's inferiority and subservience to the US scene – 'I realise that Kanye is supporting us by giving us a platform and a little shout out, but I'm sorry, don't treat my brothers like back-up dancers'.[51] Whether patronising or progressive, however, the overwhelming implication of the MCs' presence on the BRITs stage was the fact that they would not have been invited otherwise.

Skepta's interpolation of Kanye's 2015 performance into 'Shutdown', released as a single only four days after West's performance, can be heard as both a reiteration of this issue – grime's ongoing exclusion from the British music industry – and a reclaiming of his own, and grime's, presence onstage with Kanye. Indeed, seizing the opportunity to appear on the BRITs stage to a televised audience of millions is in many ways an embodiment of the independent spirit and DIY self-sufficiency that has characterised grime since its inception. Skepta's sonic reclamation also underlines the fact that the grime scene's participation in West's production was entirely consensual and, for those on the stage, defiant. As Novelist states:

> Onstage at the Brits, we were the people's people, the rebels, and that's why Twitter and everything was going mental. The TV, the blogs, the big magazines, it doesn't matter if they say it, the country knows about us, and that's all that matters.[52]

[51] Remel London, 'Our Grime Stars Are Too Good To Be Kanye's Back-Up Dancers', *The Voice* https://archive.voice-online.co.uk/article/%E2%80%98our-grime-stars-are-too-good-be-kanye%E2%80%99s-back-dancers (accessed 4th May 2023).
[52] Novelist quoted in Hancox, 'Was Kanye patronising or boosting grime with his Brits performance?'.

Grime's proven ability to operate outside of the mainstream music industry through social media, internet forums, independent labels (such as Skepta's own Boy Better Know label), and streaming sites has often negated the need for industry recognition. Indeed, grime's perceived creative slump circa-2010 exemplifies the underwhelming and often damaging consequences of industry involvement. It has, therefore, often been fashionable and even advisable for the grime scene to reject both official recognition and the musical establishment, a sentiment echoed by Skepta himself: "Wanna know how I did it with no label/No A-list songs, and I told them/Blud, I just shutdown". The skit in 'Shutdown' is demonstrative of this. Skepta strips the skit of any overt contextual information, transforming a barrage of Ofcom complaints about a specific performance into an obscure in-joke between himself, his listeners, and the grime scene. Kanye West's blessing is bestowed upon Skepta's music in the same way as Drake's, and the relationship that Skepta curates between himself and these juggernauts of the US rap scene remains more referential than reverential. Careful handling of the skit enables Skepta to once again demonstrate his global appeal without subjugating any of his musical personality. Accusations of back-up dancing are addressed twofold: the skit collates West and the British MCs into one "bunch of young men" in a subtle abolition of hierarchy, and is heard over Skepta's own musical material. By disappearing West from his account of the 2015 BRIT awards (as present on 'Shutdown'), Skepta positions himself and the grime scene at the forefront of the performance, and reclaims the event as central to his own narrative as grime's torchbearer.

While musically comparable to 'That's Not Me' in its back-to-basics, 140bpm instrumental and anthemic chorus, 'Shutdown' is not concerned solely with reviving grime's golden-era, pirate radio aesthetics. Rather, the song functions also as a kind of metatext, as Skepta is able, through his nuanced handling of samples as well as overt statements in his verses, to indicate not only his own standing, but also grime's cultural position.

"Sorry mum, I am a grime star"

One year from Kanye West's 2015 performance, and just over eight months after the release of 'Shutdown', and grime's position appeared not to have changed; the 2016 BRIT awards once again boasted no grime acts among its nominees. As Stormzy's 2016 'One Take Freestyle' bemoans:

> What? None of my Gs nominated for BRITs?
> Are you taking the piss? Embarrassing
> But I've got the force like Anakin
> This year, I'll let that slide, stop panicking
> But next year, I'm going on dark
> Like wah gwan, is my face too dark?
> Last year, they told the mandem that to be nominated
> You've gotta go on UK charts
> So what do we do? We chart.[53]

One year on from this, however (and as Stormzy promised), Skepta took to the BRITs stage to perform 'Shutdown', and received nominations for British male solo artist, Mastercard British album, and British breakthrough act, alongside Kano in the former two categories and Stormzy in the latter. Though the 2017 awards saw grime artists leave empty handed, the scene's sheer (legitimate) presence indicated some form of progress, or rather grime's now-undeniable popularity. As the following chapter on Dave explores, the BRIT awards have often served as a litmus test for grime's cultural standing, both with regard to the awards themselves and the performances that punctuate the ceremony. Given that in 2010 Dizzee Rascal took to the BRITs stage, after winning 'British Male Solo Artist', to perform an indie-pop mashup, Skepta's 2017

[53] 'One Take Freestyle' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MhESGrnUieU (accessed 5th May 2023).

performance of the undeniably grime-y ‘Shutdown’ is significant. It marks a key victory in grime’s bid for mainstream acceptance on its own terms.

Konnichiwa repackages the aesthetics of grime’s perceived golden era for younger audiences, reviving and reinventing the sonic experiments of Wiley and other scene pioneers to create an album that is at once nostalgic and contemporary. As the case of Stormzy shows (chapter nine), this repackaging of grime’s golden era sound world was for younger grime artists a shorthand method for claiming authenticity in the scene, paying respect to those who built the scene, and crafting new contexts in which grime’s old-school aesthetics could thrive. Unlike Stormzy, however, Skepta was present at grime’s inception. Skepta evokes grime’s classic sonic palette not simply to pastiche the genre’s golden era sound, but to reinstall and re-establish himself musically as a key actor in grime’s past, present, and future. Like Dizzee Rascal, Skepta’s career in many ways mirrors grime’s evolution as a scene, from underground beginnings, through dance-pop dilution, to reinvention and cultural renaissance. *Konnichiwa*’s critical and commercial success is a triumph not only for Skepta, but for grime culture as a whole.

Chapter Eight – Dave's *PSYCHODRAMA* and the Aestheticization of Environment

Released in March of 2019, *PSYCHODRAMA* is the full-length debut studio album from South-London rapper Dave. The album, termed 'one of the most significant bodies of British rap music in a generation', follows several singles and EPs from Dave, and represents an important artistic statement and cultural moment not only for Dave, but for grime music as a whole, winning the 2019 Mercury Prize (only the third grime artist to do so) and receiving widespread critical acclaim.[1]

The album itself is widely regarded as a concept album, 'framed loosely around the idea that the 20-year-old is in therapy for everything he's been through'.[2] Indeed, the album's opening track 'Psycho' opens with spoken dialogue, ostensibly from Dave's therapist:

> Tuesday, 23rd of January, 2018
> I'm here with David
> This is our first session
> We're just gonna talk about your background
> Where you're from, any issues you've been dealing with
> So, where should we start?

This reading of *PSYCHODRAMA* as a kind of extended therapy session is one that Dave himself has supported, citing his older brother's experiences in prison therapy as inspiration for the album's structure. Christopher Omoregie, Dave's brother, is currently serving a life sentence for his involvement in the 2010 killing of Sofyen Belamouadden, and even appears in *PSYCHODRAMA*'s final track 'Drama' in a recorded phone call with Dave. While collecting

[1] Ciaran Thapar, 'Dave – Psychodrama', *Pitchfork* https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/dave-psychodrama/ (accessed 4/12/20).
[2] Dan Hancox, 'Dave: Psychodrama review – debut long-player doesn't disappoint', *The Guardian* https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/mar/10/dave-rap-psychodrama-cd-review (accessed 5/12/20).

his Mercury Prize, Dave paid tribute to his brother: "This is your story, and even though you can't be here, I know you're watching this bro, and I'm so grateful, thank you so much".[3]

This (auto)biographical quality is reflected throughout *PSYCHODRAMA*, as much of the album carries an immediate tone and representational style, narrating and reflecting upon the personal experiences of an author, presumably Dave. What I wish to explore here, however, is the extent to which the album, through the author's recounting of their experiences, may be said to express location - that is, the ways in which *PSYCHODRAMA*, musically and lyrically, embodies and reflects upon the environment of its genesis. This chapter examines two musically similar songs, 'Environment' and 'Black', and explores the ways in which Dave experiments with and challenges aesthetic expectations in a way that intensifies and amplifies his articulation of his social and geographical environment.

"I saw keys, learned to play"

Given this chapter's focus on *PSYCHODRAMA*'s articulation of location, an obvious point of focus is the track 'Environment'. The 'therapy dialogue' that structurally frames 'Environment' ties it thematically to 'Psycho', 'Purple Heart', and 'Lesley', in which the same dialogue features, and supports *PSYCHODRAMA*'s conceptual narrative – one that positions Dave as a patient undergoing therapy. The employment of this 'therapy dialogue' throughout the album serves largely as a structural motif, or a means of bolstering *PSYCHODRAMA*'s overarching conceptual form. 'Environment' demonstrates this structural function on a micro level; the track opens with a question from the therapist – "What do you think people see when they look at you?" – to which Dave's lyrics are a response.

[3] Dave quoted in Laura Snapes, 'Mercury prize 2019: rapper Dave wins for "exceptional" Psychodrama', *The Guardian* (September 2019) https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/sep/19/dave-wins-mercury-prize-2019-album-psychodrama (accessed 12/02/21).

The question that opens 'Environment' serves largely to establish the song's confessional or conversational tone, placing the listener 'in the room' with patient and counsellor, almost forcing audience engagement by including listeners in what is made to feel like an intimate exchange. The song itself explores the psychological complications attached to Dave's social milieu generally and his position as a successful musician specifically. Lyrically, much of the song is composed of 'You see/I see' constructions:

> You see our gold chains and our flashy cars
> I see a lack of self-worth and I see battle scars
> He has to be with twenty man when he wears jewellery
> And you see it as gangster, I see it as insecurity

The "you" to whom Dave addresses his lyrics is determined largely by how the spoken question that opens 'Environment' is interpreted - whether the listener feels it is a question they are asking or being asked. Either way, by inviting listeners to identify themselves as interviewer or interviewee, the dialogue that opens the track offers greater potential for audience engagement than the 'odes to the cold city' found elsewhere on *PSYCHODRAMA*; where 'Screwface Capital's 'swaggering about success and sexual prowess' will likely alienate some listeners, the comparably delicate approach in 'Environment' facilitates greater opportunity for audience involvement and empathy.[4]

Crucial to this 'delicate approach' is the way in which Dave supports the textual elements of 'Environment' in his handling of instrumentation, texture, and timbre.

[4] Thapar, 'Dave – Psychodrama'; Alexis Petridis, 'Dave: Psychodrama review – the boldest and best British rap album in a generation', *The Guardian* https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/mar/08/dave-psychodrama-review-best-british-rap-album (accessed 8th December 2020); 'Screwface Capital' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xyoNmOwJvyM (accessed 16th September 2023).

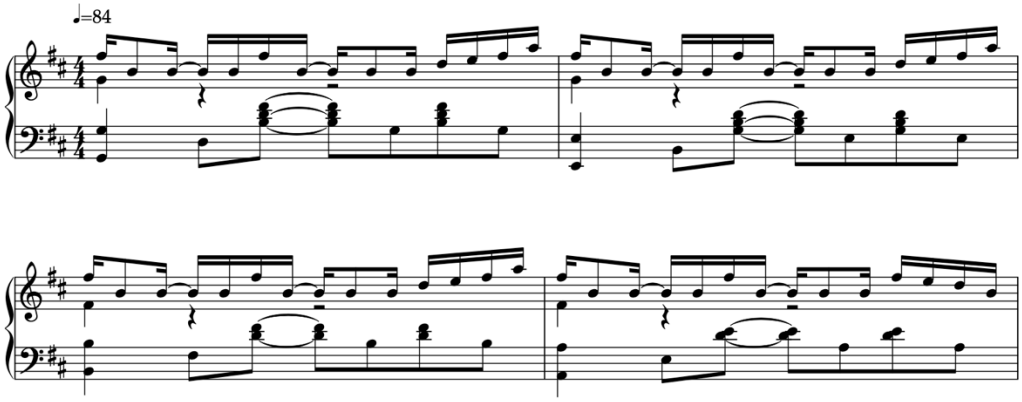

Figure 22 - Basic four-bar Piano cell for 'Environment'.

The therapy dialogue that opens ‘Environment’ is accompanied by a melodic and harmonic pattern played on an acoustic piano (Figure 22). The effect of this acoustic sound evokes what may be termed listeners’ ‘timbral memory’. As Allan Moore highlights, timbre can ‘convey the sense of style, and thus mood’; as we are ‘incapable of keeping in mind the particular sound of a precise timbre’, we can ‘recall only the way we represent it to ourselves’.[5] The acoustic piano sound that opens ‘Environment’ specifies, for suitably enculturated listeners, a ballad style of music (as in Elton John’s ‘Your Song’, Moore’s own example, whose ‘plain piano accompaniment […] encourages us to hear it as our song’) that in turn encourages listeners to hear Dave’s lyrics as more honest, as they would for any ‘balladeer’ (Rufus Wainwright, Elton John, etc.).[6] As various authors have suggested, the inclusion of acoustic instruments like piano or guitar in popular music often affords these songs a quality of sincerity, demonstrated in the arrangements of artists like Leonard Cohen, whose simple acoustic guitar accompaniments encourage us ‘to take him at face value, as if he is sitting just before us, communicating directly with us’.[7] In the same way the use of piano in ‘Environment’ instils Dave’s lyrics with a greater

[5] Allan F. Moore, *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 44-45.
[6] Ibid., 44.
[7] Ibid., 45.

sense of sincerity, heightening the song's confessional or conversational tone, as well as contributing to the feeling of accessibility and involvement generated by the opening dialogue.

Departing from listeners' genre-based aesthetic expectations, 'Environment' dispenses with the synthesised and electronic timbres prevalent elsewhere on *PSYCHODRAMA* and the grime genre generally, matching Dave's lyrical shift from swagger to sincerity with a musical tone shift. While piano textures feature elsewhere on the album (such as in 'Screwface Capital'), 'Environment' and – as will be shown – 'Black', represent the only sustained instances of this 'acoustic' aesthetic on the album, and it is this sparing use that delineates the two tracks as significant moments in *PSYCHODRAMA*.[8] In employing exclusively acoustic sounds, Dave is able to draw upon listeners' 'timbral memory' of these sounds and thus further authenticate his lyrical message as personal or faithful to his experience. To use Moore's example, in the same way that listeners assume 'Your Song' is a genuine depiction of Elton John's love for his beau, the exploration of the psychological complications attached to someone in Dave's position in 'Environment' is taken to be an accurate reflection of the rapper's real, lived experience. We are therefore encouraged to take Dave at face value as he details the experience of his environment, one that is perhaps more social than geographical:

> You see the club poppin' when we do the show
> But you don't see the studio, my life is not a movie, bro
> Champagne bottles and all the screaming girls
> It's ironic how you'll never hear a scream for help
> Fuckin' hell, why do you think we're going through the same thing?
> Depression when you make it, the pressure and the hatred

[8] The eleven-minute narrative epic 'Leslie' does in many ways employ a similar aesthetic but uses obviously sampled harp sounds, and is therefore musically distinct from both 'Environment' and 'Black'.

As Dave reflects upon his environment, detailing the psychological strain he bears as a result of his position (a successful rapper) lyrically, he simultaneously creates a musical environment that serves to amplify and intensify this feeling of reflection. Taking Moore's simplistic but efficient assertion that timbre can 'convey the sense of style, and thus mood', Dave's employment of acoustic timbres in 'Environment' may be shown to represent this same communication of mood.[9] Further, if a listener's relationship with timbre is as personal as Moore contends, and we are 'incapable of keeping in mind the particular sound of a precise timbre', and can 'recall only the way we represent it to ourselves', then the acoustic piano in 'Environment' enacts the same invitation for engagement as the therapy dialogue; in the same way that we are included in an intimate patient-therapist exchange, listeners must engage with the music, relating their own recollections of these acoustic timbres to the ones actually presented on the track.[10]

I hope to have illustrated the ways in which 'Environment' draws upon timbral techniques from genres far removed from grime in order to both musically enhance Dave's lyrical sincerity and heighten the track's possibility for audience engagement. Whether Dave intends the employment of acoustic timbres to have this effect or not is unimportant; the emotional and associative effect of these sounds derives from listeners' engagement with them. The discussion of 'Black' that follows, a track musically similar to 'Environment', examines more closely this listener engagement in a broad sense, and considers the interaction between environment, aesthetics, and ideology that it can provoke.

[9] Moore, *Song Means*, 44-45.
[10] Ibid.

‘Black’

Tricia Rose has highlighted the ‘critical differences between the attacks made against black youth expression and white youth expression’.[11] Writing on the ‘attack’ on American rap music in the late 1980s and early ‘90s spearheaded by ‘politically and economically powerful organizations’ (such as the Parent’s Music Resource Center, The American Family association, etc.), Rose notes that the ‘terms’ of this assault are ‘part of a long-standing sociologically based discourse that considers black influences a cultural threat to American society’.[12] Drawing comparisons between rap and heavy metal, a ‘popular white form of expression’, Rose underlines the stark differences in their respective reprovals: while the predominantly white heavy metal audience are framed as ‘*victims* of [the music’s] influence [italics in original]’, rap fans are ‘the youngest representatives of a black presence whose cultural difference is perceived as an internal threat to America’s cultural development’.[13] For Rose, the ‘ideological nature’ of rap music’s censure illuminates ‘the ways in which racial discourses deeply inform public transcripts and social control efforts’.[14]

While the context in which Rose is writing is perhaps unique to late-twentieth-century America, and the reception of a particular brand of West-coast Hip-hop (i.e. the institutional opposition to groups like NWA), the observations outlined above remain relevant, particularly when applied to contemporary UK-based rap. Indeed, the ‘ideological nature’ of rap music’s censure has pervaded grime’s history, whether rhetorically in the form of government condemnation (David Cameron argued that grime music ‘encourage[d] people to carry guns and knives’ in 2006), or more practically with ‘form 696’, a risk assessment form implemented by The Met in 2005 which asked music venues to indicate the ethnic groups most likely to

[11] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise*, (Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 130.
[12] Ibid., 129-30.
[13] Ibid..
[14] Ibid., 130.

attend an event.[15] Form 696 has since been scrapped (as of 2017), and grime has supposedly found an audience in parliament that included self-confessed 'grime fan' Matt Hancock who, while Tory Culture Minister in 2017, published a passionate, albeit discomfiting, defence of 'the UK's urban music scene' in *The Times*, grime culture remains in many ways publicly and institutionally maligned.[16] Much like Hip-hop in late-twentieth-century America, however, the reception of grime in the UK continues to exhibit the same 'sociologically based discourse' that considers black influence a societal 'threat', a trend that 'Black', *PSYCHODRAMA*'s first single, describes, demonstrates, and embodies.[17]

'Black' recounts and expounds upon black experience in contemporary Britain. Taking the monolithic idea of 'Black' – or 'black' as a blanket term to describe a multitude of different ethnicities and cultures – as a lyrical lynchpin, Dave seeks to animate this static conception by elucidating what "black is":

> Look, black is beautiful, black is excellent
> Black is pain, black is joy, black is evident
> It's workin' twice as hard as the people you know you're better than
> 'Cause you need to do double what they do so you can level them
> Black is so much deeper than just African American

The track details black minority experience in the UK, highlighting the same perceived threat to dominant (white) society posed by black culture that Rose identifies in her analysis of rap's critical reception in '80s and '90s America.[18] Rose's analysis focuses on groups like N.W.A,

[15] 'Cameron attacks Radio 1's hip-hop', *BBC News* http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/5055724.stm (accessed 10th February 2021); Chi Chi Izundu and Jessica Furst, 'Form 696: Concern over "racist" police form to be raised', *BBC News* (2017) https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-39181672 (accessed 10th February 2021).
[16] Matt Hancock, 'As a grime fan, I know the power of the UK's urban music scene', *The Times* (2017) https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/as-a-grime-fan-i-know-the-power-of-the-uk-s-urban-music-scene-nq7h0j3hk (accessed 10th February 2021),
[17] Rose, *Black Noise*, 130.
[18] Ibid..

whose 'thrilling, troubling, often hilarious mix of nihilistic gunplay, casual misogyny, ghetto reportage and furious protest' evoked the harsh and volatile realities facing black youth in Los Angeles' urban ghettos.[19] 'Fuck Tha Police', the group's notorious musical attack on the LAPD's use of excessive force and extensive racial profiling, threatened institutional America such that it provoked an unprecedented official letter of warning from the FBI. While N.W.A's 'cinematic, well-crafted, gritty, and vulgar' lyrics ("They have the authority to kill a minority", "Ice Cube will swarm/On any motherfucker in a blue uniform") seem far removed from Dave's comparatively poetic and subtle narration, both 'Fuck Tha Police' and 'Black' demonstrate similar potential for social resonance 'with rap fans and black youths in general' in their critique of institutionalised racism and systemic oppression.[20] Further, and perhaps surprisingly, both songs have received both public and institutional censure.

Notwithstanding their contextual differences, 'Black' in many ways echoes the same sentiments as 'Fuck Tha Police': both touch on issues of racial profiling - "Thinkin' every n***a is sellin' narcotics"/"Black is being guilty until proving that you're innocent" – as well as the targeting of minorities by law enforcement - "police think they have the authority to kill a minority"/"And if he's white you give him a chance, he's ill and confused, if he's black he's probably armed, you see him and shoot". While N.W.A direct their message to a specified target (law enforcement generally and the LAPD specifically), however, the studio recording of 'Black' does not seem to aim its ideas at a particular recipient.

Yet Dave's exploration of what "black is" proved divisive after its release: BBC Radio 1 presenters Annie Mac and Greg James felt compelled to defend the song after a number of listeners 'texted in saying it was "racist" against white people'.[21] While the word "white"

[19] Brian Hiatt, 'N.W.A: American Gangstas', *Rolling Stone* https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-news/n-w-a-american-gangstas-73485/ (accessed 10th February 2021).
[20] Rose, *Black Noise*, 128.
[21] 'Dave responds to Radio 1 listeners' offence at Black', *BBC News* (March, 2019) https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-47372175 (accessed 11th February 2021).

appears in the song only once ("if he's white you give him a chance"), those offended by 'Black' perhaps felt targeted by Dave's use of the ambiguous pronouns 'they' and 'them':

> Black is people namin' your countries on what they trade most
> Coast of Ivory, Gold Coast, and the Grain Coast
> But most importantly to show how deep all this pain goes
> West Africa, Benin, they called it slave coast
> Black is so confusin', 'cause the culture? They're in love with it
> Take our features when they want and have their fun with it
> Never seem to help with all the things we know would come with it

A defence of 'Black' against such reactionary and ignorant claims is not the purpose of this study, nor is it necessary (I hope). What I wish to highlight here is the extent to which the song's treatment as an aesthetic object echoes the message *within* 'Black'. This is perhaps better considered through public reaction to Dave's performance of the song at the 2020 Brit Awards. On the same night he was nominated for four awards, winning 'best British album', Dave performed an extended version of 'Black', adding a verse to the studio-recorded version:

> It is racist whether or not it feels racist
> The truth is our Prime Minister is a real racist
> They say, "You should be grateful we're the least racist"
> I say the least racist is still racist
> And if somebody hasn't said it
> Equality is a right, it doesn't deserve credit
> Now if you don't want to get it, then you're never gonna get it
> How the news treats Kate versus how they treated Megan
> Rest in Peace Jack Merritt, you're my brother in arms
> There's tears in our eyes and love in our hearts
> We never had the same background, culture, colour, or past
> But you devoted your life to giving others a chance
> And for that, I'm so taken aback
> Because it gave us all a voice, I have to say it for Jack

> As a young black man seeing paper and crack
> Giving tougher sentences, it's just papering cracks
> All he would want is unity, funding for communities,
> Equal opportunities, people under scrutiny,
> No more immunity, way less hatred,
> More conservation, less deforestation
> We want rehabilitation, now that would be amazing,
> But Grenfell victims still need accommodation
> And we still need support for the Windrush generation
> Reparations for the time our people spent on plantations
> I'm done.[22]

Dave's live performance ties 'Black' more definitely to the environment of its author and audience. While in the studio version, the listener is largely left to assume that the song pertains to what "black is" in a specifically *British* context, through use of MLE (Modern Language English) and the assumption that London-born Dave is drawing upon his own experience, this live performance inextricably links 'Black' to minority experience specifically within the UK.[23] Notwithstanding the obvious context of an awards ceremony run by the British Phonographic Industry and broadcasted nationally by ITV, the performance ties itself intrinsically to the specific 'location' of Britain in 2020 by both reflecting and commenting upon the social and political background against which it took place. As Nosheen Iqbal comments:

> In the week in which the government unveiled a controversial new immigration system and No 10 refused to deny whether the PM agreed with an adviser who suggested

[22] Dave's performance can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mXLS2IzZSdg (accessed 10th February 2021).
[23] For more on MLE, see Ruth Adams, '"Home sweet home, that's where I come from, where I got my knowledge of the road and the flow from": Grime music as an expression of identity in postcolonial London', *Popular Music and Society* 42, No. 4 (2018), 438-455.

> black people were mentally inferior, Dave's decision to use his platform to give voice to the black British experience was particularly resonant.[24]

The added verse, however, negates the need for listeners' knowledge of the above, referencing the 2019 murder of prison rehabilitation worker Jack Merritt (who incidentally worked with Dave's older brother Chris) during the London Bridge attacks, the British media's treatment of Meghan Markle, as well as the government's response to the Grenfell Tower tragedy in 2017. Indeed, it is the specificity with which Dave speaks in this verse that not only gives 'Black' more of a target (i.e. the UK's institutional and societal relationship with race/institutionalised racism), but made the song a target itself. Like Radio 1's broadcasting of the studio version, Dave's performance of 'Black' on national television sparked some offence, as Ofcom received more than 300 complaints that the song 'was racist against white people'.[25] Further, Home Secretary Priti Patel felt compelled to defend Prime Minister Boris Johnson following Dave's performance, arguing the rapper had made a 'generalisation' and that Johnson was 'absolutely not a racist', feeling Dave's verse to be 'completely wrong' and 'the wrong assertion to make against our prime minister'.[26] While a far cry from a warning from the FBI, Patel's comments nonetheless demonstrate the same institutional resistance to politically-motivated rap music experienced by N.W.A. Indeed, Patel's comments, when seen in connection with the Ofcom complaints, exhibit the same 'ideological' critique of rap highlighted by Rose. That a government minister felt obliged to defend the Prime Minister against Dave's accusations, yet other previous Brit-Awards political outbursts, crucially from white, non-rap musicians,

[24] Nosheen Iqbal, '"It was so emotional": the duo who helped rapper Dave stun the Brits', *The Guardian* (February 2020) https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/feb/23/how-rapper-dave-blew-away-brit-awards (accessed 12th February 2021).
[25] The Office of Communications, commonly known as Ofcom, is the government-approved regulatory and competition authority for the broadcasting, telecommunications and postal industries of the United Kingdom; 'Brit Awards 2020: Ofcom rejects racism complaints over Dave performance', *BBC News* (March 2020) https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-51806925 (accessed 13th February 2021).
[26] Lanre Bakare, 'Dave hailed for Brit awards protest against 'racist' Boris Johnson', *The Guardian* (February 2020) https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/feb/19/dave-hailed-for-brit-awards-protest-against-racist-boris-johnson (accessed 13th February 2021).

escaped institutional comment (e.g. Damon Albarn's drunken critique of Brexit in 2018), speaks to a continuing trend of the same phenomenon.

I do not wish here to initiate a comparative analysis of the UK and America's history with racism or artistic censure, but to highlight the similarities between the two cases in order to argue that each song provides an opportunity for listeners to consider how they perceive their environment or location based on their aesthetic reaction to each song. That is, both songs narrate and reflect upon their respective social environments – racial profiling perpetrated by the LAPD in late-twentieth-century America and the institutionalised oppression experienced by black British people – and challenge listeners to reflect upon their own experience of the same environment. In taking either song as the locus of a social aesthetic experience, audiences may employ aesthetic judgements to demarcate themselves and define a community of listeners who either empathise with or reject the depiction of their society presented by the artists.

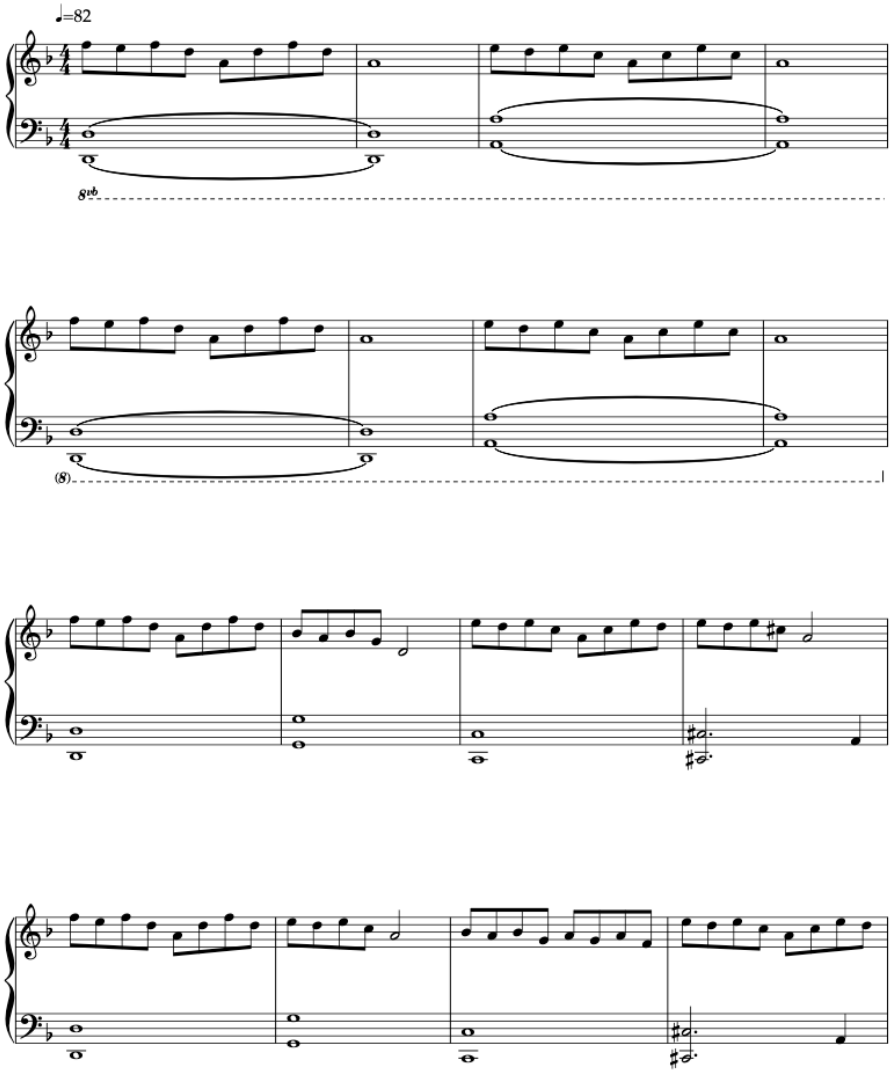

Figure 23 - Basic Piano Pattern in 'Black'.

Yet musically, ‘Black’ is far removed from ‘Fuck Tha Police’. N.W.A. utilise the now-established musical aesthetic norms associated with hip-hop, exhibiting what Tricia Rose calls ‘working in the red’ – ‘recording with the sound meters well into the distortion zone’. ‘Black’, however, like ‘Environment’, employs acoustic instruments to accompany Dave’s lyrics, namely piano, strings, and a drum kit (Figures 23-25).

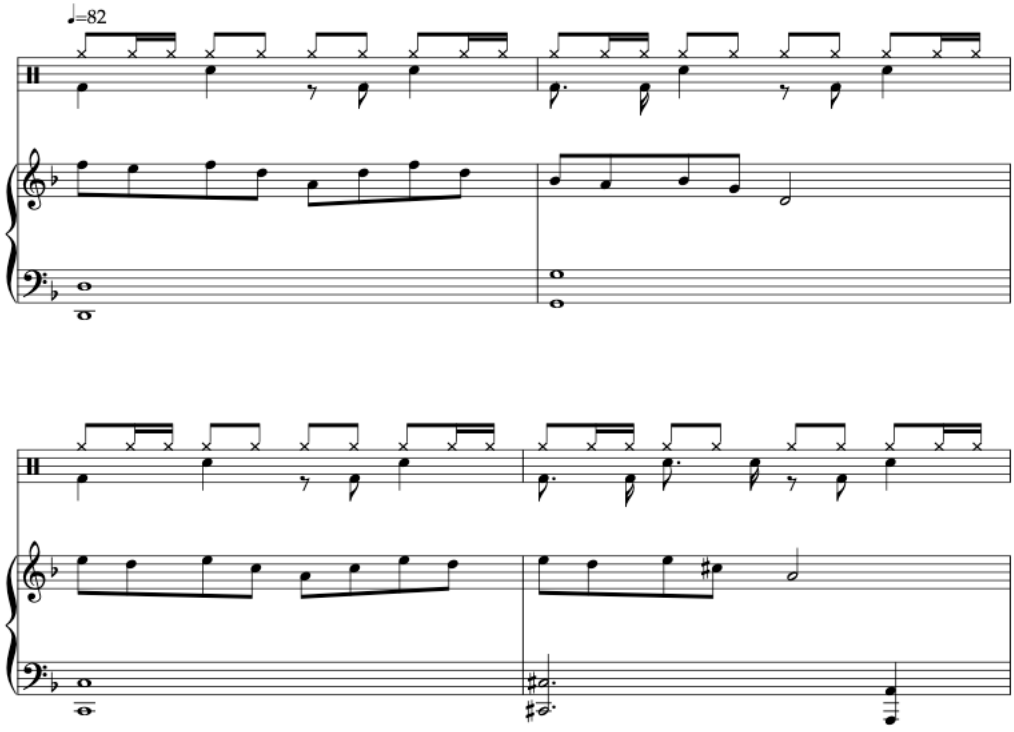

Figure 24 - Four-Bar cell of Drum Pattern in 'Black'.

Evoking the same ‘timbral memory’ in listeners as ‘Environment’, the familiarity of the drum and string timbres that feature in ‘Black’ causes listeners to hear them as ‘a simple colouring of the texture’, contributing to the song’s ‘smoothness’ rather than generating the kind of textural disruption associated with rap.[27]

[27] Ibid. 45-46.

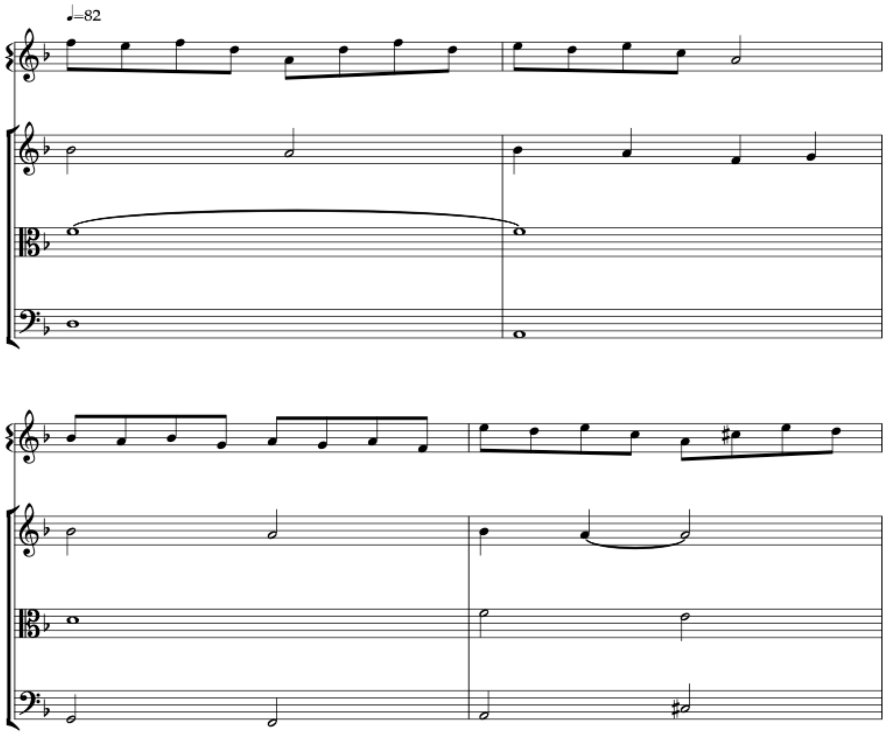

Figure 25 - String Movement in 'Black'.

This evocation of style is heightened in Dave's performance of 'Black' at the Brits, where the image of a performer sitting at a piano backed by a visible string section buttresses the sonic intimacy and sense of honesty generated by the song's handling of timbre and texture (the Brits performance even dispenses with the drum kit, the instrument with the greatest disruptive potential). Yet it still received the same ideologically-motivated critique as previous BRITs performances from black (rap) artists; Kanye West's 2015 performance received more than 150 complaints to Ofcom 'for West's use of the N-word', and Tyler, the Creator 'took a swipe at Theresa May' in 2020 'for his five-year ban for supposedly promoting terror and hatred in his lyrics – while white artists with similar lyrical focus, such as Eminem, were not banned'.[28] While the musical aesthetics of 'Black' differ from those employed by the above

[28] Chanté Joseph, 'The Brit awards have become a platform for black politics – and brilliance', *The Guardian* (February 2020) https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/feb/20/brit-awards-black-politics-dave-stormzy-kanye-west-tyler-the-creator (accessed 13th February 2021).

artists, it has still faced a similar level of institutional and societal critique. Although, as explored above, Dave employs a sound world at odds with the musical tropes of grime, or any rap music, 'Black' cannot evade the same form of critique.

Parallels may be drawn here between 'Black' and Body Count's 1992 song 'Cop Killer'. Body Count, American rapper Ice-T's speed metal band, were forced to remove the song from their debut album because of 'attacks from politicians', attacks that 'consistently referred to ['Cop Killer'] as a rap song (even though it in no way can be mistaken for rap)'.[29] As Ice-T describes it:

> There is absolutely no way to listen to the song Cop Killer and call it a rap record. It's so far from rap. But, politically, they know by saying the word *rap* they can get a lot of people who think, 'Rap-black-rap-black-ghetto,' and don't like it. You say the word *rock*, people say, 'Oh but I like Jefferson Airplane, I like Fleetwood Mac – that's rock.' They don't want to use the word rock & roll to describe this song.[30]

As Rose argues, the case of 'Cop Killer' is indicative of the 'racial discourses [that] deeply inform public transcripts and social control efforts' in relation to sanctions against rap music.[31] Though again it is important to underline the differing contexts in which 'Cop Killer' and 'Black' were created, both songs largely reject the established sound world of rap to communicate a political message, yet face criticism that ties them back to the genre they are attempting to work outside of. While Dave's delivery on 'Black' can certainly be classified as rapping, it can be argued that the musical accompaniment, whether on *PSYCHODRAMA* or live at the Brits, means the song can no longer be heard as a grime/rap performance. As Jan Moir's sarcastic commentary – 'And it must be tru cuz [Dave] said it' – illustrates, the possibility of hearing 'Black' as socially conscious 'bluesology' à la Gil Scott-Heron, a ballad,

[29] Rose, *Black Noise*, 130.
[30] Ice-T, quoted in Rose, *Black Noise*, 130.
[31] Rose, *Black Noise*, 130.

or pertaining to singer-songwriter sensibilities (a largely white-dominated genre), is precluded by Dave's position as a black grime artist.[32]

It is of course possible, and even likely, that Dave had no intention of evoking the musical styles mentioned above. What I wish to highlight, however, is the ways in which both the message within 'Black', as well as its treatment as an aesthetic object, are tied inextricably to the location of its genesis. The song seeks to widen the scope of *PSYCHODRAMA*'s address, moving away from the experiences of those living in specific parts of London (as outlined in 'Streatham' and 'Screwface Capital') and, particularly in Dave's Brits performance, looks to the Black experience, and what "black is", in contemporary Britain. At the same time, the aesthetic judgements of 'Black' made by various groups serve only to tie the song closer to the social, political, and geographic environment it depicts. 'Black' aims to illustrate that issues surrounding race go "so much deeper than just African-American", and that a consideration of the British black experience demands that the UK's ongoing problem with racism and equality be questioned. The song offers an account of minority experience in contemporary Britain with which the listener, through aesthetic interaction, can choose to sympathise, or reject and censure. Indeed, an examination of 'Black' from a social aesthetic perspective highlights the ongoing prevalence of the rap-specific 'ideological critique' identified by Rose, as well as the extent to which audience reception can define the meaning within an aesthetic object. The kind of negative reaction to 'Black' outlined above serves only to highlight issues that Dave touches upon within the song itself; the ongoing marginalisation and oppression of black society and culture.

[32] Jan Moir, 'Why don't posturing pop stars ever protest over grooming gangs?', *Mail Online* (February 2020) https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8027125/JAN-MOIR-dont-posturing-pop-stars-protest-grooming-gangs.html#comments (accessed 16th February 2021).

"What do you think people see when they look at you?"

That aesthetic and ideological judgements of 'Black' are so tightly interwoven speaks to a tension present in the music's production and reception. Grime's powerful connection to its social and cultural environment that has allowed it to become a pivotal and crucial cultural pillar for those for and from the music speaks. As 'Environment' and 'Black' both demonstrate, grime music's ability to articulate its socio-cultural surroundings positions it as a fitting artistic genre for marginalised groups; as well as producing music that is aesthetically complex and powerful, Dave's *PYSCHODRAMA*, as with any instance of grime, speaks to and for an audience whose voice has been historically suppressed and censored.

It is this deep affiliation with, or articulation of, its environment, however, that has caused the music to suffer a similar fate from both critics and scholars. *PSYCHODRAMA*, in a similar vein to Little Simz's *A Curious Tale*, aims to expand grime's musical language, borrowing instrumental arrangements and timbral elements from other, arguably disparate genres, in order to heighten and amplify its narrative aims. Critical and public response to 'Black', however, which employs the same musical 'mood' as 'Environment', is indicative of a continuing trend: overlooking grime's musical aesthetic features and indeed its status as art, numerous accounts have and continue to frame the music all too easily as an artefact of the maligned social formations, and as such the music vulnerable to critique that is more often political and ideological than aesthetic or artistic. As my discussion of 'Black' illustrates, Dave's position as a black grime artist precludes for some the possibility of hearing his music either as valid social commentary or as art in a broad sense, and instead receives critique that is less musical-aesthetic and more socio-political in nature. For figures like Priti Patel and Jan Moir, 'Black' is not a legitimate artwork that aims to expand the musical boundaries of its genre, while also detailing the realities of the British black experience, but represents simply an attack on the British political establishment, cultural institutions, and social status quo.

Through the act of their critique, such audiences position 'Black' outside the boundaries of art, and redefine the song as an act of political expression that can be disciplined and controlled.

That Dave's position as a black grime artist should limit the aesthetic and cultural categories or frameworks in which his music is considered speaks also to the implicit limitations imposed on the MC, and to the homogenising forces to which MCs are subjected. Zuberi suggests that the 'specificities of the MC's voice and persona are reminders of black subjectivities in a world in which ethnically marked and racialised citizens and migrants are imagined in collective and often homogeneous terms'.[33] 'Black' serves to remind listeners of these black subjectivities, and animates the static and homogeneous conceptions of what 'black is'. Yet the song's reception exemplifies the very homogenising forces to which 'ethnically marked and racialised citizens' are subjected. Dave operates across genres and traditions outside of grime's lineage (singer-songwriter balladry), but much of the critical and public response to his work does not afford him such fluidity. Contrary to Zuberi's assertion that MCs are non-genre-bound actors, the presence of the MC's voice in 'Environment' and 'Black' behaves as a musically and culturally homogenising and limiting force. As such, the songs function not only as direct commentaries on Dave's social, cultural, and geographic environment, and what he feels to be the black British experience, but as artefacts that demonstrate the very issues that Dave underlines. Skepta's back-to-basics anthems heralded the rise of grime's profile in popular culture, but the kind of negative reaction to 'Black' outlined above serves only to highlight the narrow terms of its recognition. Jeffrey Boakye has written insightfully on the questions raised by the sudden mainstream recognition of a music that was previously marginalised:

[33] Zuberi, 'New Throat Fe Chat: The Voices and Media of MC Culture'', in Jon Stratton and Nabeel Zuberi (eds.) *Black Popular Music in Britain Since 1945* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016) 187-201, here 191.

In terms of power politics, the recognition of Grime plays into existing paradigms and hierarchies. Marginalised peoples tend to stay marginalised because dominant social forces don't want to lose their dominance. This explains why Grime could never have made it into the mainstream when it was trying to emerge out of its early adolescence. But more interestingly, and far more complicated, is the idea that mainstream acceptance of Grime actually reinforces existing power imbalances. The mainstream has accepted a vision of Grime that it is comfortable with, that it finds safe, that it understands. New Grime, in all its back-to-basics glory, reinforces existing notions of urban youth and existing notions of black masculinity. It isn't particularly political, and it is therefore inherently safe. It remains adolescent, concerned with the trappings of adulthood and the exhilaration of taboo. And it poses absolutely no threat to dominant ideas of blackness. If you ask the question, 'What is being recognised in Grime's resurgence?', the answer is simple: Everything that was already understood about Grime.[34]

[34] Jeffrey Boakye, *Hold Tight* (London: Influx Press, 2018), 328-9.

Chapter Nine – Stormzy: the case of grime

> Couple man called me a backup dancer
> Onstage at the BRITs, I'm a backup dancer
> If that makes me a backup dancer
> The man in your vids? Backup dancer
> The man in your pics? Backup dancer
> Man wanna chat about backup dancer
> Big man like me with a beard
> I'm a big man, how the fuck can I backup–?[1]

Stormzy's 2015 single 'Shut Up' emerged first as a one-take YouTube video, filmed in a park near Thornton Heath in South London. The one-take video sees Stormzy deliver a freestyle over the now-classic 2004 white-label instrumental 'Functions On The Low' produced by XTC, an associate of East-London crew Ruff Sqwad.[2] Originally intended as an instalment of his 'WICKEDSKENGMAN' freestyle series in which he improvises over classic grime instrumentals, the immediate interest and excitement around 'Shut Up' led Stormzy to re-record his vocals, release the track on streaming sites, enter the UK Top 40, and even make a bid for Christmas No.1 (with changed lyrics including "Really I shouldn't be in the rave/ 'Cos I don't drink when I'm riding my sleigh"; it eventually ended up at number 8).Two years later, and Stormzy's debut studio album *Gang Signs & Prayer* entered the UK Albums Chart at number one, becoming the first grime album in history to do so. Incredibly, all sixteen songs from *Gang Signs & Prayer* appeared concurrently in the UK Singles Chart, and the album was certified platinum by the British Phonographic Industry a year after its release. Further, three years after 'backup dancing for' Kanye West in 2015, Stormzy won both 'British Solo Male'

[1] 'Shut Up' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RqQGUJK7Na4 (accessed 15th June 2023).
[2] 'Functions On The Low' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-uy0XIlnz4U (accessed 15th June 2023).

and ‘Mastercard British Album of the Year’ at the 2018 BRIT Awards. A year on from this, and Stormzy became the first Black British performer to headline Glastonbury festival.

Stormzy’s breakout year coincided with Skepta’s back-to-basics grime revival, and his strict adherence to golden-era principles illustrated in ‘Shut Up’ (freestyling, 140bpm, instrumentals that either hail from or sonically evoke grime’s first wave) allowed the South-London rapper to position himself as a key proponent of grime’s commercial renaissance, or the ‘bullish we-were-right-all-along manifesto’ set out on Skepta’s 2014 single ‘That’s Not Me’.[3] This sense of right-place-at-the-right-time, coupled with apparently genuine grime credentials, propelled Stormzy not only to underground stardom but to a position of cultural mainstream influence enjoyed by very few grime artists. Remarkably, Stormzy achieved this fame and commercial success (entering the UK Top 50 Singles on four separate occasions in 2015 alone) while maintaining an authenticity ascribed to him by critics and grime purists alike. The ‘WICKEDSKENGMAN’ series’ nostalgic visuals reminiscent of early-era grime’s clash culture (*Lord of the Mics* et al.), revitalisation of classic grime instrumentals, robust rhymes, and charismatic delivery signalled, like Skepta’s employment of grime’s classic sound palette, a connection between Stormzy and the genre’s golden era.

Yet Stormzy’s latest offering at the time of writing, *This Is What I Mean* (2022), sees the rapper’s sound depart almost entirely from the grime genre. The album replaces the in-your-face attitude and back-to-basics sound palette that characterised Stormzy’s early rise with a deeply introspective sound world heavily influenced by RnB, gospel, Afropop, and soul; *This Is What I Mean* sees Stormzy sing as often as rap over soundscapes at times reminiscent of Stevie-Wonder-style slow jams. The South-Londoner’s ‘intimate love letter to music’ presents a ‘mellow and mature tone’, and this appears to have coincided with a near-total abandonment

[3] Alexis Petridis, ‘Stormzy: Gang Signs and Prayer review – teeming with original ideas’, *The Guardian* (2017) https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/feb/23/stormzy-gang-signs-and-prayer-review-merky (accessed 20th July 2023).

of grime's aesthetic tenets.[4] As a pivotal figure in grime's cultural renaissance circa 2015, and as an artist whose meteoric rise was so tied to grime's core values, Stormzy's later departure from the genre's sound world is significant. Indeed, the difference in sound between Stormzy's early releases and his latest (No. 1) album is comparable in many ways to the contrasts between Dizzee Rascal's *Boy In Da Corner* and *Tongue n' Cheek* (chapter four), and in the same way is representative of more than simply the trajectory of one artist. Like Dizzee, Stormzy became grime's poster boy for a generation of listeners, garnering both critical acclaim and mainstream engagement for both himself and the genre. Given Stormzy's stature both within the grime scene and the cultural mainstream, a consideration of his career also facilitates to an extent an examination of the genre's musical and cultural developments from its mid-2010s renaissance to present day.

"I was on the roads when Dizzee made 'I Luv U'"

For Jeffrey Boakye, Stormzy represents 'the full maturation and fully realised potential of the Millennial baby in grime culture'.[5] Like Little Simz and Dave (chapters six and eight), Stormzy is a '90s baby who came of age at a time when grime music was in its formative years – he was ten years old when *Boy In Da Corner* was released. As Stormzy himself states:

> I used to hate American rap. A lot of people say they grew up on Mobb Deep, Tupac and Biggie. I ain't got a clue about none of that. I wouldn't be able to tell you a single song. I just know Lethal B and Kano Vs Wiley. I think sometimes they don't realise that, the grime scene. I was talking to Wiley the other day, saying, 'you lot are our Tupac and our Biggie'.[6]

[4] Sam Moore, 'Stormzy – 'This Is What I Mean' review: levelling up on his own terms', *NME* https://www.nme.com/reviews/album/stormzy-this-is-what-i-mean-review-3355857 (accessed 3rd September 2023).
[5] Jeffrey Boakye, *Hold Tight* (London: Influx Press, 2018), 229.
[6] Stormzy quoted in Hattie Collins, 'Stormzy Grew Up On Grime, Now He's Eclipsing His Heroes', *Vice* https://www.vice.com/en/article/r7pzze/the-perfect-stormzy-hattie-collins-2014 (accessed 27th July 2023).

Stormzy has always been keen to express how integral the 'OGs' have been to his career – his 2015 single 'Know Me From' namechecks Dizzee Rascal (quoted above), Wiley ("Shout out to my big bro Wiley, that's a badman from early"), and Roll Deep – and this in itself has been central to his success as an authentic grime MC (and beyond). Like Skepta, Stormzy is laying claim to authenticity by demonstrating his natural belonging to the grime community. Appearing on stage with Kanye West as a representative of the UK music scene with Skepta, as well as in the background of music videos for Skepta's 'It Ain't Safe' and Wiley's 'On A Level', helped to establish Stormzy as (literally) a part of the scene.[7] Further definitive community-belonging moments include a 2014 Wiley tweet in which the 'Godfather of grime' dubbed Stormzy 'the #1 grime don in this new era', and asked him to 'please take this [grime music] to a place where we [first-wave grime artists] couldn't', and the Wireless festival in 2015 during which Dizzee Rascal joined Stormzy on stage.[8] It is not only Stormzy's musical upbringing in a specifically grime-infused context, as part of a generation of artists for whom *Boy In Da Corner* represented a musical year zero, but his professed and proven acceptance by his musical heroes that authenticates him as a bona fide grime artist.

Stormzy's early releases seek to further demonstrate his legitimate grime credentials, especially his 'WICKEDSKENGMAN' freestyle series. Consisting of four videos uploaded to YouTube between November 2013 and September 2015, the series sees Stormzy freestyle over four different classic grime instrumentals – Dot Rotten's 'Rowdy Riddim', SX's 'Woo Riddim', Ruff Sqwad's 'Pied Piper', and Jme's 'Serious'. While the primary focus of this project has been sound, the visual aspect of the 'WICKEDSKENGMAN' series is significant. The sight of Stormzy standing in various nondescript settings (ranging from a park to an estate

[7] The music video for 'On A Level' can be seen here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aRfRzsEhgVQ (accessed 1st August 2023).
[8] Wiley quoted in Collins, 'Stormzy Grew Up On Grime'.

complex) surrounded by friends and fans (the crowd grows exponentially between the first and final instalments) and holding a microphone recalls golden-era grime videos such as *Risky Roadz* and *Lord of the Mics*. While perhaps not raw 'clash' footage, the unfiltered live energy and low-budget visual and sonic aesthetics of the 'WICKEDSKENGMAN' series do evoke something of the excitement and energy of soundclash culture; there is a sense in which Stormzy is able to capture the illicit appeal of pirate radio sets while retaining a certain social-media-oriented sheen in a way that remains authentic and appealing. Further, given that many old-school grime videos (*Risky Roads*, *Lord of the Mics*, *SBTV*'s freestyle videos, and various freestyle videos from the early 2000s) have since been uploaded to YouTube by various grime fans, the production aesthetics of Stormzy's videos therefore virtually match those of the golden era.[9] Whether intentional or not, the similarities in execution between vintage videos and the 'WICKEDSKENGMAN' series serves as a connecting force.

Bakhtinian dialogism is once again relevant here as a means of examining Stormzy's processes of self-authentication, in that much of the videos' sonic authenticity is derived from the use of classic grime instrumentals. Reviving and, to an extent, reinventing these classic instrumentals allows Stormzy to forge a dialogue with grime's past by troping and revising musical ideas from the genre's first wave. When framed as authentic sound sources, held in high regard by grime purists and practitioners and possessing a certain 'aura', these instrumentals authenticate Stormzy's freestyles as legitimate instances of grime music in the same manner as Skepta's handling of samples authenticates *Konnichiwa*. Like Skepta, Stormzy appeals to a kind of 'scene memory' in order to simultaneously confirm his musical heritage while crafting a new context for it.

[9] For an example of these golden era videos see here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BZ7WyR6ccQA accessed 4th August 2023).

The very labelling of the videos as a 'freestyle' series is in many ways more an appeal to scene memory than it is an accurate description of content. While the term is slightly disputed and can mean anything from a freely improvised series of rhymes to simply any instance of performing over a beat that is not a fully realised song (something like a sketch), its use here nonetheless evokes early clash and pirate-radio MC culture, where material would have to be genuinely improvised to a great extent. While the content of 'WICKEDSKENGMAN' series seems to be somewhere between off-the-cuff improv and polished performance, in labelling the videos as 'freestyles' Stormzy once again effects a simple but clear connection between himself and grime's first-wave MCs. The connection is, however, not limited to the labelling of the videos. The crowd interactions throughout the series, where Stormzy's bars are crashed by crowding fans reacting to a particularly sensational line or are bolstered by the crowd joining in, and those moments where Stormzy misses an entry because he 'can't hear the drop' or slips up on a delivery, contribute to the sense in which these performances are derived from, rather than imitations of, the freestyle videos from grime's golden era. Stormzy's delivery, and the bars that he constructs throughout the series, speak to an awareness and an understanding of the MC's role in grime's pirate radio and clash culture era. These include: call-and-response lyrics that invite audience participation ('Shut Up'), memorable catchphrases and straightforward statements ("Yeah, look brudda, this my house/That's my laptop, that's my sound/That's my people, that's my crowd/That's my kingdom, that's my crown" – WICKEDSKENGMAN [Part 4]), as well as provocative and self-assured lyrics that evoke the braggadocio of MC clashes ("I don't run out of bars/Just like Chip, I don't run out of bars/Walk in the rave, put the glass to your face/Look, I make fuckboys run out of bars" – WICKEDSKENGMAN [Part 4]).

It is not my intention to imply that Stormzy's 'WICKEDSKENGMAN' series, or any of his earlier releases, represent in any way a cynical grab for authenticity. Stormzy's

performances, whether freestyled or not, demonstrate a clear and obvious microphone ability, and an abundance of charisma and sheer force of personality – particularly memorable is the introduction to the first instalment: "Big up all the peng tings worldwide […] this is Stormzy, a.k.a. Big Mike, a.k.a. put my phone on charge so I can text your girl, a.k.a. stiff chocolate [breaks off laughing]".[10] He has no issue in communicating the same bravado and self-assurance as early-era MCs, and is convincingly at home when performing over grime's now-hallowed classic instrumentals. It is also important that many of Stormzy's (relatively young) listeners in 2015 would not necessarily have known that 'Functions On The Low', or indeed any of the classic instrumentals over which he performs, had existed in the grime consciousness for more than a decade before 'Shut Up' was released. Like many of the references contained within *Konnichiwa*, there is a level of appreciation that is missed if listeners do not have the requisite grime knowledge, and the success of Stormzy's freestyles cannot be said to hinge upon their use of these instrumentals. Arguably, even for those acquainted with grime's history, these instrumentals reside in the more niche areas of the genre's past. Stormzy's awareness and use of these instrumentals is indicative of the fact that he grew up listening to them, and the fact that he is a member of grime's subculture. Rather than simply employing these instrumentals as signifiers of a claimed authenticity, therefore, Stormzy is demonstrating his credentials as an involved and long-time grime practitioner while simultaneously reinventing them – or signfiyin' upon them (see chapter seven) – in a way that both includes him within grime's musical tradition and affords him his own voice within the genre.

[10] 'WICKEDSKENGMAN [part 1]' can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DAYOklbLtXw (accessed 3rd August 2023).

"Look, I'm a lord of the mic, and I ain't been Lord of the Mics"

As I have implied, the formula behind Stormzy's early success is demonstrably similar to *Konnichiwa*'s: instrumentals that either evoke or simply *are* grime's golden-era sound, lyrical material that evokes in some way grime's pirate radio and clash culture era, a no-nonsense approach to production (both musical and visual), and a keen awareness and appreciation of grime's cultural tradition and the efforts of the genre's forebearers. Unlike Skepta, however, who preoccupies himself lyrically with reminding his audience that he *is* one of grime's forebears and was present during the genre's formative years (as a member of Roll Deep etc.), Stormzy (who is more than ten years younger than Skepta) cannot lay claim to the same historical reputation. *Konnichiwa* was for Skepta a return to his musical roots as a grime pioneer; Stormzy claims a right to those roots in his early releases by convincingly positioning himself as a part of a lineage, a genuine grime practitioner with real scene knowledge and an awareness of grime culture. While I have demonstrated some of the ways in which Stormzy achieves this musically, through the employment of classic instrumentals and a microphone ability reminiscent of golden-era MCs, his astronomic rise has been aided by his clever negotiation of social media.

In many ways, the contrasts between Skepta and Stormzy reflect the larger contrasts between the stars of grime's first wave and its renaissance. Like Dizzee Rascal, Wiley, and Kano, Skepta paid his dues on pirate radio, clashed publicly with rival MCs (e.g. on *Lord of the Mics*), released on white label vinyl, and performed live endlessly at raves and sound system events. Stormzy, however, like Dave and Little Simz, represents and embodies the rise of the social media star. Jeffrey Boakye notes:

> […] the Internet has changed everything in music and youth culture. Fifteen years ago, an up-and-coming underground artist would have to put in dues on (probably) pirate radio, white label vinyl and live performances. Ten years ago it was mixtape hype and

> mainstream-baiting video efforts. Plus live performances. Now it's YouTube virals and social media. Live performances optional.[11]

While these developments are by no means unique to grime music, they nonetheless form an important part of the scene's growth since 2010. While, as Boakye notes, artists of the old school would have to cut their teeth in countless settings and through various mediums, social media and growing access to the internet has precluded the need for such efforts from younger artists. As Stormzy's career indicates, new artists can breach local boundaries 'with broadband efficiency'.[12] There is a distinct need, however, for these younger artists to still demonstrate some evidence of work ethic, and the grime scene appears resistant to the notion of the 'overnight sensation'. As Stormzy himself states in part four of the WICKEDGSKENGMAN series:

> Man are saying that I blew up too fast
> Man are saying that I came up too quick
> Rudeboy, look on the YouTube, darg
> Mandem are putting in the graveyard shift
> […]
> Every MC wan' try and take shots
> Tell 'em boy there hard work pays off.[13]

Though the old rites of passage are now largely defunct, the 'grafter' mindset (Wiley once referred to himself as a "wheeler and dealer") that they necessitated remains central to defining a grime artist as authentic.[14] Now that pirate radio, white label vinyl releases, and live performance (including raves and MC clashes) are no longer *de rigueur*, the excitement and

[11] Boakye, *Hold Tight*, 231.
[12] Ibid..
[13] 'WICKEDSKENGMAN [Part 4]' can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QfRJyt3gTzo (accessed 4th August 2023).
[14] Wiley 'Crash Bandicoot Freestyle': https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l0KTC58OibE (accessed 4th August 2023).

energy of these practices, as well as their somewhat illicit appeal, has in many ways been transposed onto a new means of promotion, and the WICKEDSKENGMAN series is illustrative of this. While the series literally shows his fanbase growing and crystallising in real time (compare the few in part one to the flock in part four), Stormzy demonstrates an awareness throughout of the chimerical nature of social-media-derived fame. The lyrics quoted above denote Stormzy's own concerns with appearing too unversed, and he is often at pains to insist on his work ethic: "But don't be a fool man I stayed g'd up/Can't chat to me about work rate tell a MC n***a try keep up" (WICKEDSKENGMAN [Part 3]). As well as insisting upon his own hard work, Stormzy navigates the potential traps of going 'viral' by flagrantly owning his social-media-star status. 'WICKEDSKENGMAN [Part 1]' gives a clear instance of this: "They say I'm a Youtube n***a/That's cool, I'm fine with that" – importantly, Stormzy pairs this self-awareness with the indication of (what he feels to be) his very real street credibility – "But when you see me in the flesh could you give me a shout, pull me up and remind me that?" – and in the end reclaims internet stardom as something wholly good – "True say I'm a Youtube n***a so/You can't just forget my face".[15]

There is every reason for Stormzy to wholeheartedly embrace his YouTube stardom. As Sam Wolfson notes, the dissemination of grime music in its early years is comparable to the way that social media works now: hundreds of tracks would come out each month, responding and interacting with each other, music videos were filmed on phones, and rappers jostled for prominence during freestyle clashes on radio station Rinse FM, YouTube channel Risky 2 Roadz or on Jammer's Lord Of The Mics battle series'.[16] With the increased prominence of YouTube and other social media sites, all platforms on which artists can

[15] 'WICKEDSKENGMAN [Part 1]' can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DAYOklbLtXw (accessed 4th August 2023).
[16] Sam Wolfson, 'Stormzy: "My man Jeremy Corbyn! I dig what he says"', *The Guardian* https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/may/21/stormzy-grime-skepta-kanye-drake (accessed 5th August 2023).

promote themselves and their music directly to audiences free of charge, it follows that a largely DIY and opportunistic genre like grime would seize upon these platforms for its continued growth. While the artists of grime's first wave had to seek back channels or wait for industry recognition (yielding often questionable results), social media has afforded younger grime practitioners a direct line to potential audiences. Importantly, social media as a so-called 'democratic' force has also decreased the power of industry and corporate tastemakers and gatekeepers. Stormzy's success speaks not only to the possibilities afforded to grime artists by social media, but to grime's apparent popularity in the mid-2010s. As Boakye notes:

> [Stormzy's 'WICKEDSKENGMAN' series] is a moment of obfuscation between the lines of mainstream and underground, proving that grime had enough raw appeal in 2015 to propel itself out of the shadows, beyond the limelight, well into the stars. Stormzy has made it by actually making it […] his DIY, digital web 2.0 success has been on his own terms.[17]

That Stormzy's success has been 'on his own terms' is important. Indeed, the direct communication line that social media affords artists in turn facilitates the unmitigated representation of identity and personality. Artists now command greater control of their public perception, or public persona. Gary Alan Fine notes that 'to be authentic is, typically, to have an authentic biography'; while the work should ideally be more important than the story, at the moment 'the who, the identity, matters greatly'.[18] Fine explores the relationship between 'the creation of the idea of personal legitimacy […] as a means of valorising aesthetic authenticity', which is for Fine achieved by 'situating the artists within a set of social positions that come to define their identity within this art world'; 'Their social positions – their identities – naturalize

[17] Boakye, *Hold Tight*, 234.
[18] Gary Alan Fine, 'Crafting authenticity: The validation of identity in self-taught art', *Theory and Society*, 32 (2003), 153-180, here 175.

the production of their art'.[19] Indeed, part of Stormzy's appeal resides in his ability to successfully communicate his social position, or identity, in relation to the grime scene, which in turns serves to legitimate his musicking. 'Personal legitimacy' is constructed both by Stormzy himself verbally through lyrics that speak to his 'realness' and street credentials ("Kill a whole crew of MCs on my own/Kill a whole crew of MCs for the throne" – 'Shut Up'), musically through the use of classic instrumentals, and visually through his evocation of golden-era grime's clash and freestyle videos, as well as capturing his homegrown audience expanding in real time. And as discussed above, Stormzy's legitimacy is also bestowed upon him externally, through his proximity to and personal affiliations with grime's first-wave and its 'heroes'. This combination of self-determination and external verification thus establishes Stormzy as a legitimate actor whose personal authenticity validates and valorises his artistic and aesthetic authenticity. Further, this personal legitimacy is underscored by the apparent independence that Stormzy is afforded by his use of social media. The industry interference that has historically plagued the grime scene, as in the case of Dizzee Rascal and Skepta, is circumvented by Stormzy and artists of the new generation, as they retain and (importantly) present a sense of autonomy, or continue to produce 'on their own terms', while gaining demonstrable commercial success.

"You opened the door and look who entered/Oh, it's the king of grime"

The culmination of Stormzy's early commercial success arrived with the release of his 2017 debut studio album *Gang Signs & Prayer*. While a handful of singles prior to the album do feature custom-built instrumentals (e.g. 'Know Me From'), *Gang Signs* represents Stormzy's first sustained musical, as opposed to lyrical, statement, and the musical material itself wavers

[19] Ibid., 155.

between straightforward sonic adherence to and radical departures from grime's soundscape.[20] The result is an album that splits opinion, and in many ways is defined by the same tensions observed in Stormzy's early releases. On the album's second track 'Cold', Stormzy offers a summary of his career to date – "I just went to the park with my friends, and I charted" – and later in 'Crazy Titch Interlude' calls (literally on the phone) upon the eponymous Titch, an early-era MC who is currently serving a life sentence for murder, to verify his credentials against perceived accusations of hype.[21] Stormzy's apparent defensiveness here, however, is arguably only a minor manifestation of a larger tension that runs through *Gang Signs & Prayer*. The album entered the UK Album Charts at number one, and was met with widespread critical acclaim. Yet Stormzy, 'the man that took grime to number one', has done so with an album that is 'far more than grime'.[22] These two quotes, taken from two articles by the same author for the same publication only one year apart, capture the obvious questions posed by the album: '"Are you loyal to your roots?", and, most importantly, "What kind of musician are you?"'.[23]

The three-track volley that opens *Gang Signs & Prayer* appears to address these questions in a straightforward manner. 'First Things First', 'Cold', and 'Bad Boys' all exhibit Stormzy's grime MC credentials, pairing dexterous and brooding microphone ability with instrumentals that recall the 'icy electronics' of Eskibeat.[24] 'Cold' in particular claims a connection between itself and grime's lineage that traces back to Wiley's glacial soundscapes. As well as its title, the song's 'cold' lyrical motif – "I'm so cold", "Where your snow line?",

[20] 'Know Me From' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PxbzujA69DA (accessed 6th August 2023).
[21] 'Cold' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sDnl97ucqKg (accessed 6th August 2023); 'Crazy Titch Interlude' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8SdN7M6Qk6k (accessed 6th August 2023).
[22] Eleanor Halls, 'Stormzy interview: the man that took grime to number one', *GQ*, https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/stormzy-interview (accessed 6th August 2023); Eleanor Halls, 'Stormzy's new album proves he's far more than grime', *GQ* https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/stormzy-album-review-gang-signs-and-prayer (accessed 6th August 2023).
[23] Halls, 'Stormzy's new album proves he's far more than grime'.
[24] Alexis Petridis, 'Stormzy: Gang Signs and Prayer review – teeming with original ideas', *The Guardian* https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/feb/23/stormzy-gang-signs-and-prayer-review-merky (accessed 6th August 2023).

"I've been cold the whole season/I should call my next one Freezing" – invokes the same extramusical associations as Wiley's Eski-instrumentals, and is underscored musically by the high-pitched chiptune motif throughout that recalls both the video game sounds or high-frequency clusters that characterise much of Wiley's sound specifically, as well as grime's classic sound palette generally. Arguably, the tracks that open *Gang Signs & Prayer* are comparable in many ways to those that open *Konnichiwa*, exhibiting the same deployment of grime's classic sound palette as well as guest appearances from grime artists both old and new. The presence of first-wave grime veteran Ghetts and relative newcomer J Hus on 'Bad Boys' functions in the same way as Wiley and Novelist's presence on Skepta's 'Lyrics', in that they establish a dialogue between Stormzy and grime's past and present, and neatly includes him within this lineage. 'Bad Boys' actually opens with sampled dialogue from Ghetts' early noughties clash with fellow MC Bashy.[25] We hear a sampled younger Ghetts saying "Oi, where's Carlos? Where's Carlos?", which is then later re-worked into material for J-Hus' chorus in the song, "You're not bad I'm bad ask Carlos", deploying the same techniques found in Skepta's 'Lyrics', where Wiley's sampled dialogue is transformed into lyrical material in the song. Further, the appearance of present-day Ghetts on 'Bad Boys' lends the song a kind of historical power, and grime's golden-era days of MC clashes are connected musically to the scene's present through the voice of one MC. The sense of dialogue in *Gang Signs* is also emphasised by Stormzy lyrically, for example in 'Cold' when Stormzy states he was "on the roads when Giggs made 'Talkin' Da Hardest'" (a seminal 2007 UK rap release), in a lyric that not only refers to British rap history but also to Stormzy's earlier release 'Know Me From' where the same construction is used in reference to Dizzee Rascal ("I was on the roads when Dizzee made 'I Luv U'"), as well as later in the album in 'Return of the Rucksack', when

[25] The clash can be seen here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6IGIhW-WjQE (accessed 2nd September 2023).

Stormzy builds the song's hook ("Like, I roll deep on these, put these MC's on deep freeze") out of a reference to Dizzee Rascal's 2009 'Creeper Freestyle'.[26]

These tracks, which convincingly combine the same high-energy MC technique demonstrated in the 'WICKEDSKENGMAN' series with instrumentals that evoke grime's golden era, and feature grime practitioners both established and emerging, appear to convincingly answer the questions posed above: Stormzy is loyal to his (musical and cultural) roots, and is unquestionably a grime musician. Much of *Gang Signs & Prayer* confirms this assertion. 'Big For Your Boots', 'Mr Skeng', 'Return of the Rucksack' (which samples Dizzee Rascal's 'Seems 2 Be' from *Boy In Da Corner*), and (the reappearance of) 'Shut Up' all clearly demonstrate the same back-to-basics, golden era-derived sound, yet the tracks with which they are interwoven demonstrate a total departure from grime's sound world: 'Blinded By Your Grace, Pt. 1', the track that follows 'Bad Boys', is a Stevie Wonderesque gospel ballad, and is complemented later in the album by the more expansive but equally gospel-derived 'Blinded By Your Grace, Pt. 2'; 'Velvet', which follows 'Big For Your Boots' and precedes 'Mr Skeng', is a synthesiser-driven romantic slow jam; 'Cigarettes & Cush' is essentially an R&B track; '21 Gun Salute' with grime-scene veteran Wretch 32 returns to the gospel-influenced sound world of 'Blinded By Your Grace, Pt. 1'.[27] Most surprising of *Gang Signs*' stylistic departures from grime's sound world is the introduction of the singing MC. Stormzy sings throughout 'Blinded By Your Grace, Pt. 1', and songs like 'Velvet' 'Blinded By Your Grace Pt. 2' combine introspective rapping with soulful crooning. Though the balladry that influenced Dave's

[26] 'Creeper Freestyle' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ctuFC0FNVwI (accessed 3rd September 2023).
[27] 'Big for Your Boots' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFOErVWlsxg (accessed 2nd September 2023); 'Mr Skeng' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFOErVWlsxg (accessed 2nd September 2023); 'Return of the Rucksack' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V4Vem0z7GAY (accessed 2nd September 2023); 'Blinded By Your Grace, Pt. 1' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AFJbUv7tQSM (accessed 2nd September 2023); https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wDlCWuQQ2uo (accessed 2nd September 2023); 'Velvet' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xIUQvWoIz8I (accessed 2nd September 2023); 'Cigarettes & Cush' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jLXQHThL3FU (accessed 2nd September 2023); '21 Gun Salute' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36ywxZFwl6M (accessed 2nd September 2023).

PSYCHODRAMA represents arguably the same kind of stylistic departures present on *Gang Signs*, Stormzy's ventures into gospel singing thoroughly challenge the boundary between stylistic expansion and abandonment. It is a tension that characterises *Gang Signs*: given garage's roots in the gospel-and-R&B-influenced 1980s 'New York House' scene (chapter one), does Stormzy's soulful and introspective crooning in fact tie the album to grime's cultural lineage? Or is such a connection too tangential to be convincing? The album also interrogates the limitations of the MC's 'voice'; can the voice of the MC unite an album's varied and disparate aesthetic influences once this 'voice' is multifaceted itself? If the MC is not tied to genre boundaries and can operate across diverse styles, is this fluidity also afforded to the MC's actual utterances?

Stormzy is demonstrably aware of these stylistic challenges and questions. Like in his WICKEDSKENGMAN series, Stormzy anticipates criticism and builds both his awareness of it and his responses to it into *Gang Signs*: Stormzy expects that his audience "ain't ready for [his] new stuff" in 'Big For Your Boots', and later in the song states that next year he will "learn how to play the guitar" (presumably to represent another surprise or departure from expectation); "Man thought that Stormzy couldn't sing" (4:05 in 'Velvet'), followed by a chuckle, as Stormzy self-deprecatingly addresses the fact of his singing; 'Mr Skeng' addresses perceived doubts on Stormzy's grime credentials – "They said Stormzy can't be the king of grime/Cuh he can't do radio sets/Let's be real, rudeboy, I would light up a radio set" – and gives what could be a description of *Gang Signs*' track list – "I do rap, then I do grime, then I do rap/Then I sing, then I roll right back"; Stormzy shuns another rite of passage in 'Return of the Rucksack' when he states that he "don't wanna be on Lord of the Mics with shit MCs/Nah, bro [he's] above that", before again restating his grime credentials against perceived criticism – "Stormz' ain't grime and Stormz' ain't clash/look don't be fooled/'Cause the war ting, I love that". As these lyrics illustrate, Stormzy presents both a self-awareness of his bold musical

choices and a keenness to dispel any notion that these choices impact his credentials, or authenticity, at all.

The authenticity that Stormzy lays claim to in these lyrics is one of authentic *individuality*, or being true to himself, rather than the claim to authentic *belonging* effected more obviously in Stormzy's WICKEDSKENGMAN series. Throughout *Gang Signs & Prayer*, Stormzy appeals to both forms: the evocation of grime's golden era aesthetics and the sense of dialogue constructed in the album's grime-oriented tracks demonstrate authentic belonging, while the introspective, gospel-and-R&B-influenced songs represent authentic expressions of self, in which Stormzy speaks from the heart on more personal subjects of love and faith. Stormzy is at once "above" the approval of the grime community ("don't wanna be on Lord of the Mics with shit MCs/Nah, bro I'm above that"), while appearing to be bothered by the perceived assertion that he is an outcast of this same community ("Stormz' ain't grime and Stormz' ain't clash/look don't be fooled"). This tension has in many ways characterised much of Stormzy's career, from the WICKEDSKENGMAN series to his recent releases. Stormzy's YouTube-driven approach afforded him success 'on his own terms', embodying the DIY attitude and independent spirit that has always been associated with the grime scene. Yet the tension present in Stormzy's career between authentic individuality and authentic belonging suggests that the independent spirit that characterises grime culture is not necessarily afforded entirely to its practitioners.

"You're getting way too big for your boots"

'Wiley Flow', the third single from Stormzy's 2019 album *Heavy Is The Head*, encapsulates the tensions outlined above.[28] The song is an homage to grime's godfather, and opens with a sampled Wiley taking stock of his position in the grime scene:

> Bruv, I didn't look at it this way before, but as I approach my birthday
> All you man are my youngers
> You man are my youngers, bruv

Establishing his paternal status in grime culture, Wiley describes everyone else in the scene as his "younger" – a word that can refer to a younger sibling or simply a younger person, with the implication that 'youngers' in some way represent a 'mini me' or an apprentice of an elder or 'older'. Stormzy then takes this sample and immediately transforms it into his own lyrical material:

> If you can't do 10K first week then I don't wanna hear no chat about numbers
> You man are my youngers

Stormzy is here positioning himself as an 'older' in the scene, proffering his music's sales (which is presumably what "10K" refers to) as proof that he has established himself enough to graduate from 'younger' status. Stormzy spends the majority of 'Wiley Flow' pointing to his individual achievements – "If you ain't got more than five top tens then I don't wanna hear no chat about charting/You man are just starting" – to assert his position at the top of the game ("Heavyweight champion of the world/They wanna war me for my belt"). Crucially, however, this is achieved while ostensibly paying music homage to Wiley, whom Stormzy has personally

[28] 'Wiley Flow' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ltNm4MdykBE (accessed 7th September 2023).

credited as a central figure in his success. 'Wiley Flow' interpolates lyrical material and flows from two of Wiley's songs, 'Bad 'Em Up' and 'Nightbus Dubplate' from his 2006 albums *Tunnel Vision Volume 1* and *Tunnel Vision 3*.[29] Stormzy's second verse reworks Wiley's 'Bad 'Em Up' chorus, and the later verses in 'Wiley Flow' borrow both flow and lyrical material from Wiley's 'Nightbus Dubplate':

[Wiley 'Bad 'Em Up']
Bad 'em up, bad 'em up, bad 'em up once
If you wanna come and take man for a dunce
I've been on the grind for a hundred months
And I ain't stopped doing music, not once

[Stormzy 'Wiley Flow']
Bad 'em up, bad 'em up, bad 'em up once
Never could you take me for a dunce
Been on the scene for a hundred months
All I met is bare cunts

[Wiley 'Nightbus Dubplate']
Run up on The Movement laughing, fuck it
Justin's wife's got a bucket, fuck it
Not none of you could chuck it, fuck it
Slew anybody in the family, fuck it
Run up on The Movement laughing, fuck it
Justin's wife's got a bucket, fuck it
Not one of you could chuck it, fuck it
Slew anybody in the family, fuck it

[Stormzy 'Wiley Flow']
Run up on them man laughing, fuck it
You got a chain but you tuck it, fuck it

[29] 'Bad 'Em Up' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BnRjW91Xz6U (accessed 7th September 2023); 'Nightbus Dubplate' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cY8pEUL0WxI (accessed 7th September).

Man throw dirt on my name, blud, fuck it
Slew anybody in the family, fuck it
Run up on them man laughing, fuck it
You got a chain but you tuck it, fuck it
Man throw dirt on my name, blud, fuck it
Slew anybody in the family, iyt, iyt

[Wiley 'Nightbus Dubplate']
Last three dubs hit The Movement and crushed it
Saw 'em on the stage and I rushed it, I've sussed it
Must be the same old kid in the dinner hall
Primary, eating apple crumble and custard

[Stormzy 'Wiley Flow']
Last three tunes kinda prove that I did this
Mind what you say, I put a yout on my shit list
Must be the same old yout in the dinner hall
Primary, sippin' on my juice with my biscuits

Interpolating Wiley's old flows and lyrics allows Stormzy to both establish a musical dialogue between his own utterances and those of (by 2019) an accepted grime legend, and demonstrate the same scene knowledge discussed in relation to his WICKEDSKENGMAN series. In a similar vein to Skepta's 'That's Not Me', which interpolates lyrics from Wiley's 'Pies' (chapter seven), 'Wiley Flow' tropes and revises musical ideas to generate a musical conversation with grime's golden era, and with one of its pioneering artists. Thus by quoting and reworking Wiley's material, Stormzy performs an authenticity of belonging by positioning himself as a part of a lineage – a genuine grime practitioner with real scene knowledge and an awareness of grime culture. That each of Stormzy's 'Wiley flows' are textually signalled ("Now I hit you […] with the Wiley flow") within the song underlines the importance of Wiley's music to his own, and appeals in many ways to the aesthetics of pastiche explored previously in relation to *Treddin' On Thin Ice* (chapter two). While Wiley's quotation and inner pastiche of garage

within ‘Wot Do U Call It?’ authenticates the outer form (i.e. the song, and therefore grime) via musical contrast, Stormzy’s direct quotation and reworking of Wiley’s classic tracks authenticates the outer musical material though a kind of ventriloquism. Weaving Wiley’s now-classic flows through his own flow, allows Stormzy to manifest a bond between the two that positions their authenticity as coterminous.

Stormzy constructs this bond between his music and Wiley’s, and demonstrates his authentic belonging to grime culture, all while delivering a swaggering and boastful account of his personal success, and an assertion of his authentic individuality. Stormzy declares himself the “G.O.A.T” (greatest of all time), declares that after one hundred months on the grime scene “all [he’s] met is bare cunts” (and therefore the scene is beneath him?), assures his audience that “all of the stories that [he’s] lived” are the “stories that [he] tells” (he is an artist who is honest to his experience, and true to himself), and wonders, amid perceived accusations of selling out, “how’s the best spitter in grime so commercial?”. The self-congratulatory braggadocio that permeates ‘Wiley Flow’ appears at odds with the notion of homage, and underlines a tension present in Stormzy’s music and, by extension, with grime music generally. Given the importance of respecting and paying homage to one’s predecessors, as Stormzy himself has stated, to what extent can the authentic expression of self coexist with the reverence of one’s lineage and the demonstration and of authentic cultural belonging? Stormzy’s WICKEDSKENGMAN series, as well as songs like ‘Bad Boys’ and ‘Shut Up’ from *Gang Signs* and ‘Wiley Flow’, obviously exhibit his authentic belonging to grime culture. Stormzy is able to assert himself as an MC with a distinctive identity, while paying homage to the scene’s past by operating consciously within its expected aesthetic parameters. There is a sense in which this identity, however, can become too distinctive.

"You did grime for a sec, then you fucked off"

> You never cared about grime, you just used it
> Worse than Ed with your watered-down music

The above lyrics are from Wiley's 2020 track 'Eediyat Skengman (Stormzy Send)'.[30] 'Eediyat Skengman' (a reference to Stormzy's WICKEDSKENGMAN series) is the first in a series of 'diss' tracks exchanged between Wiley and Stormzy in early 2020 as the two MCs sparked a return to the 'true spirit of grime' and 'clashed' – or the modern, internet-based version of clashing – via YouTube.[31] The "Ed" in question is Ed Sheeran, with whom Stormzy collaborated on 'Take Me Back to London' from Sheeran's *No. 6 Collaborations Project*, as well as 'Own It' from *Heavy Is The Head*. Sheeran was the source of Wiley and Stormzy's 'beef', as Wiley attacked Sheeran in August of 2019 via Twitter for being a 'clout [fame] chaser' and grime 'culture vulture', before Stormzy came to Sheeran's defence.[32] Stormzy and Wiley's Twitter exchange continued on and off for the remainder of 2019, appearing to briefly end with the release of 'Wiley Flow' in September (after which Wiley called Stormzy his "brudda 4 life"), before escalating to a YouTube diss track exchange.[33] For Wiley, Stormzy had become the same 'culture vulture' as Sheeran (notwithstanding the fact that Wiley has previously worked with Sheeran in 2011 on 'If I Could'), and had abandoned his roots in grime, the genre that had given him success.[34] Stormzy's eclectic sonic influences and collaborative choices result, for Wiley, in "watered-down music". Throughout the three Stormzy 'sends'

[30] 'Eediyat Skengman (Stormzy Send)' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SJoA71OGtq8 (accessed 7th September 2023).
[31] Kameron Virk, 'Stormzy, Wiley and the 'true spirit' of grime', *BBC News* https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-51022294 (accessed 7th September 2023).
[32] Charlotte Krol, 'Wiley goads Ed Sheeran for a reaction after "clout chaser" comment about "Take Me Back To London" remix', *NME* https://www.nme.com/news/music/wiley-goads-ed-sheeran-for-a-reaction-after-the-grime-legend-slated-take-me-back-to-london-remix-2542382 (accessed 7th September 2023).
[33] Georgia Chambers, 'Stormzy releases Wiley Flow with new song paying homage to grime legend', *Evening Standard* https://www.standard.co.uk/showbiz/stormzy-releases-new-track-wiley-flow-a4237856.html (accessed 7th September 2023).
[34] 'If I Could' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W6gKICrcqe0 (accessed 7th September).

(Eediyat Skengman (Stormzy Send), Eediyat Skengman 2 (Stormzy Send), Eediyat Skengman 3 (Stormzy Send)), Wiley expresses that Stormzy's success has come at the expense of his artistry ("Nobody cares if you got all your songs on the playlist/The music's shit, we don't play this"), that he owes his career to grime's forefathers ("You wouldn't be nothing without Skepta", "I've done more for you than your dad has"), and challenges Stormzy's grime credentials ("You weren't on the roads when Dizzee made "I Luv U"/Back then, you must've been about 4", in reference to Stormzy's 'Know Me From').[35] Wiley also references 'Wiley Flow', as well as presumably other songs and artists, in the first of his Stormzy 'sends': "These bumbaclat flows I'm hearing are all my ones/It's not homage, looking like a sly one […] They all copy me, they want some of my one".

Predictably, Stormzy responded to Wiley's tracks with two of his own: 'Disappointed' and 'Still Disappointed', the second of which features the instrumental track from Kano's 'Mic Check 1-2' in a return to the WICKEDSKENGMAN formula.[36] Throughout both tracks, Stormzy is preoccupied with both attacking Wiley and defending his status as "the king of grime": "Old man, you'll regret this"; "They say that I'm pop, I don't mind that/True say, I'm the one who brought grime back"; "I'm Big Mike, and I sing and rhyme/They hate when I sing but give 'em time/Number one in this thing of mine/That's what makes me the king of grime"; "I like that you're not self-centred/You opened the door and look who entered/Oh it's the king of grime, king of grime". Both Stormzy and Wiley stay close to the anticipated stylistic norms of clashes: demonstrating a versatility of rapping ability while trading petty and personal insults, threatening each other, and celebrating their own achievements. Stormzy's "king of grime" claim is perhaps expected in the context of an MC "war" (no one has ever won a clash

[35] 'Eediyat Skengman 2 (Stormzy Send)' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uIZtPz3pBX0 (accessed 7th September 2023); 'Eediyat Skengman 3 (Stormzy Send)' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OoCfgOwqhNU (accessed 7th September 2023).
[36] 'Disappointed' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=73mygGW27LM (accessed 8th September 2023); 'Still Disappointed' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=912YaSKGdlo (accessed 8th September 2023).

with modesty), and finds a notable precedent in Skepta's 2008 single 'King of Grime' ("But you can call me MC of all time/Better still call me the king of grime"), yet throughout his feud with Wiley there appears to be more at stake than lyrical one-upmanship.[37]

Stormzy, like many artists of the second wave, effects a claim to authentic cultural belonging partly via a kind of historical connection with the scene's golden era and artists of the first wave both musically (through the revival of classic grime instrumentals in the WICKEDSKENGMAN series, for example) and socio-culturally (receiving praise from and collaborating with grime scene legends, including Wiley himself). Once this claim to authentic belonging is challenged by a pioneer of grime's first wave, and thus by a key pillar on which this claim to authenticity stands, what are the consequences for Stormzy's continued assertions of genuine belonging? Further, given Stormzy's commercial success and mainstream acceptance, why does it remain important for him to claim belonging to grime's subculture? What are the reasons for Stormzy's continuous insistence on genuine cultural affiliation? Despite Wiley's seemingly contradictory stance in accusing Stormzy of deserting grime, considering his own previous forays into more pop-oriented projects (such as his own collaboration with Ed Sheeran), the grime pioneer's objection to Stormzy's musical explorations beyond the genre prompts inquiry into the evolving concepts of authenticity within the grime scene. In 2019, Wiley hailed Dizzee Rascal as 'the greatest person [he's] ever known', yet Dizzee's *Tongue n' Cheek* represents a departure from grime that is equally, if not more, significant than any of Stormzy's endeavours.[38] What, for Wiley, is the distinction between the two instances of stylistic abandonment? Does Dizzee Rascal's historical position

[37] Skepta 'King of Grime' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u9Km95JV9hU (accessed 9th September 2023).
[38] Nick Reilly, 'Wiley hails Dizzee Rascal as "the greatest person I've ever known"', *NME* https://www.nme.com/news/music/wiley-hails-dizzee-rascal-as-the-greatest-person-ive-ever-known-after-years-of-feuding-2523351 (accessed 9th September 2023).

as a pioneer of grime preclude him from such judgement, and therefore is it Stormzy's relative youth that leaves him vulnerable to critique?

Stormzy's betrayal of grime is of course not a matter of objective truth, but an aesthetic and moral judgement made by Wiley based on a series of seemingly arbitrary criteria. Other than for potentially promotional purposes (*The Godfather III* was released shortly after the feud), the reasons for Wiley's sudden attack on a younger artist, whom he had previously dubbed 'the #1 grime don in this new era', are unclear. Boakye notes that as grime leaves its pioneering phase and enters 'a new era of mass popularisation', the scene faces 'new challenges […] concerning ownership and authenticity'.[39] Boakye's concerns for grime's ownership are framed within a specifically racial context, and are expressed in discussion of 'grime's relationship with whiteness' in light of the genre's growing mainstream presence.[40] The issues surrounding ownership and authenticity that Boakye highlights are, however, relevant also to those within grime's inner circle. That is, grime's transition from its pioneering first wave to its mainstream-accepted renaissance has engendered new and (importantly) often inter-generational tensions regarding both ownership and authenticity between grime artists themselves. Wiley's critique of Stormzy's musical eclecticism and grime credentials represents in many ways a defence against (what Wiley feels to be) grime's appropriation. Richard Middleton's formulation of 'appropriation' is useful here: Middleton 'rescues' the notion of 'appropriation' from 'the debris of authenticity', focusing on a style's 'continuity' and 'active use' – which combine as 'tradition'.[41] In this sense, the meanings attached to authenticity are redefined according to the performer or artist who has 'appropriated' a stylistic tradition (e.g. the blues, grime, hip hop, heavy metal).[42] Authenticity is therefore constructed, or ascribed, in

[39] Boakye, *Hold Tight*, 366.
[40] Ibid., 364.
[41] Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music*, quoted in Allan Moore, *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song* (Routledge, 2016), 266.
[42] Moore, *Song Means*, 266.

the act of listening, and not something that is discovered or inscribed within a performance or work.[43] Moore suggests that performers can appropriate a stylistic tradition 'from the inside' (using the example of John Lee Hooker and the blues), and that assurances of an artist or performer's social and geographic claim to a stylistic tradition persuades the listener of the authenticity of their expression.[44] If an artist or MC who is demonstrably from within grime culture's inner circle takes up grime's stylistic traditions, they are appropriating from the inside – the artist's perceived belonging to grime culture allows listeners to ascribe their expression as authentic. In claiming that Stormzy "never cared about grime" and "just used it", Wiley displaces Stormzy from grime's inner circle, rendering his appropriation of grime's stylistic traditions false, or executed 'from the outside', and therefore inauthentic. Further, by making this judgement, Wiley stakes his claim to be not only within grime's inner circle, but an arbiter of authenticity.

Grime's inner circle is in other words an example of the 'specifically musically imagined communities that are irreducible to wider categories of social identity' that Georgina Born describes.[45] Belonging or membership to grime's musically imagined community is a part of what is at stake in Wiley and Stormzy's 'beef' as, when considered with Middleton's notion of appropriation, it is only from within this community that authentic grime utterances may emerge. While in the genre's early years grime's community was not necessarily musically imagined but physically concrete, given the practitioners' geographic proximity (in East London), the scene's online migration and mainstream proliferation necessitated more abstract (i.e. musical) methods of signalling and construction cultural belonging. Grime's community is imagined and reimagined musically in a number of ways, including most obviously through

[43] Ibid..
[44] Ibid..
[45] Georgina Born, 'After Relational Aesthetics: Improvised Music, the Social, and (Re)Theorizing the Aesthetic' in Georgina Born, Eric Lewis, & Will Straw, Impro*visation and Social Aesthetics* (Duke University Press, 2017), 33-58, here 42.

collaboration between artists as an almost physical manifestation of their belonging (i.e. being present on a song), but also the 'I was there' motifs ("Eskimo Dance, you was spitting off-beat/Lord of the Mics, you was spitting that heat" in Skepta's 'Lyrics') and the namechecking of other artists within artists' verses ("Rhyme-wise I got a short order of mine/Dukes, Dee, Wiley, Ghetto/These have got new flows all the time" in Kano's 'Mic Check 1-2'), as well as the reinvention and revival of other (and usually older) grime artists' sonic palette and the sampling of other artists' voices/work (e.g. Skepta's sampling of Wiley on 'Lyrics', as well as his general revival of Eskibeat throughout *Konnichiwa*). To be included within these practices – to collaborate with other artists, to have your name mentioned, or to be quoted and sampled – is to be within the community, and it is the constantly shifting and arbitrary boundaries of this community that renders authenticity an often messy and infinitely-contested site in grime music. That grime's imagined community is often volatile is due in part to the genre's inherently combative nature; the individualistic and self-aggrandising characteristics of MC culture promoted by pirate radio and clash culture are resistant to the notion of community.

It is this tension between the authentic individuality, demanded by an inherently combative MC culture, and authentic belonging, required in order to appropriate grime's stylistic traditions from the inside, that Stormzy's relationship to the scene exhibits. Stormzy's gospel stylings on *Gang Signs & Prayer* represent a clear honesty to experience. In the same way that Dizzee Rascal's grime-pop reflected his new Ibiza-party-boy lifestyle, Stormzy's musical eclecticism reflects, among other things, the rediscovery of his religious faith, his new financial stability and personal wealth, and his acceptance by and position in the (British) cultural mainstream. Despite this honesty to experience and exhibition of (what we assume to be) his authentic self, and the fact that Stormzy still pairs this eclecticism with a continuing use of grime's musical style, as exhibited by the combination of songs on *Gang Signs*, his communal belonging is questioned. This outlines the 'purity of practice' that the grime

community (represented here by Wiley) demands in order to authentically belong, and suggests that without this belonging there is no participation.

"I might sing but I ain't sold out"

Stormzy's *Gang Signs & Prayer*, as well as his later albums *Heavy Is The Head* and *This is What I Mean* (2022), can be described as aesthetically dense.[46] Eric Lewis recognises the aesthetic value 'of the various, perhaps even contradictory, aesthetic properties a work might manifest due to the multiple genres in which it might plausibly be taken to participate'.[47] In response to ideas concerning the role of art categories and genre in the formation of aesthetic judgements, specifically that the aesthetic qualities of a work are relative to the genre to which it is assigned, Lewis highlights that works 'located in multiple social fields of art consumption, creation, and criticism, and that thus participate in multiple genres, may well be aesthetically richer for this'.[48] Drawing from both Derrida and Barthes, Lewis notes that a listener's tendency to naturalise or view as objective the aesthetic properties of a work is greatly influenced by the genre judgements made of that same work, and highlights the importance of Derrida's notion of 'participation without belonging' to genre.[49] Derrida's 'law of genre', the notion that a text cannot be genre-less but participates in one or several genres without ever belonging to them, has far-reaching potential for an analysis of music such as Stormzy's. Stormzy's latest offering *This Is What I Mean* takes as its template the more introspective tracks from his previous albums in a collection of songs on spirituality, politics, romantic relationships, and identity. Stormzy describes it as a "soul album": "I don't mean soul music […] It's just come from my soul".[50]

[46] Eric Lewis, 'What is "Great Black Music"? The Social Aesthetics of the AACM in Paris', in Georgina Born, Eric Lewis, & Will Straw, Impro*visation and Social Aesthetics* (Duke University Press, 2017), 135-159, here 144.
[47] Ibid.,.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid..
[50] Teddy Coward, 'This Is What I Mean review: A stirring study of Stormzy's soul and spirit', *Whynow* https://whynow.co.uk/read/this-is-what-i-mean-stormzy-review (accessed 12th September 2023).

Stormzy's rhetoric alone implies a wealth of genres (gospel, Afrobeats, R&B, Soul, etc.), and thus a wealth of perspectives, from which to consider the music, and the varied cultural and historical contexts in which each perspective grounds his music.

Grime culture's insistence on belonging, however, appears to preclude the possibility of such a fluid relationship with genre. Despite the diverse musical worlds from which he borrows and in which he works, Stormzy himself continues to insist upon his authentic belonging to grime culture. Grime's highly individualistic characteristics arguably appeal to the Derridean notion of 'participation without belonging', as indeed many of the examples in this study demonstrate, for example Dave's piano-based 'balladry' or Kano's borrowings from Jungle and Drum 'n' Bass. Yet grime itself, or grime's imagined community, resists participation. Wholescale belonging to the scene and to the genre, or at least the performance of belonging, is a requirement for working within grime's stylistic traditions. Wiley's claim that Stormzy "never cared about grime" and "just used it" is significant. That a dispute over authenticity, appropriation, and belonging has played out between grime's leading new-generation star and the genre's founder underlines a question that permeates the entire scene: where does grime's essence reside?

In order to appropriate grime's stylistic traditions, stylistic traditions that promote individualism and self-aggrandising, 'from the inside', and thus authentically, an artist must demonstrate and exhibit authentic cultural and (to a certain extent) geographic belonging. For second-wave artists, an important strategy in demonstrating this cultural belonging is the revival and reinvention of grime's first wave aesthetics – 'new faces are defining themselves by old standards, in turn cementing the recent past as a golden age'.[51] Explicit acknowledgement of one's cultural 'godfathers' is necessary, but this must not get in the way of proclaiming one's own importance and superiority. Communal belonging is essential, but not at the expense of

[51] Boakye, *Hold Tight*, 244.

one's own individual authenticity, or being true to oneself. Yet this individualism must not be so extreme as to alienate one from grime's imagined community, as loosely defined and constructed largely by grime artists themselves, for fear of accusations of abandonment and an inauthentic appropriation of style. Authenticity in grime culture is an arena in which identities and subjectivities are negotiated and contested. Is it within these identities that grime's essence resides? In the case of second-wave artists, this authenticity is often negotiated through an adherence to musical and stylistic principles established by previous artists. But can the unique and individual self remain authentic when it is defined through the aesthetic language of others? Does this mean that grime's essence resides in those artists who were foundational to its emergence, and any and all attempts to practise the genre authentically must continually refer back to the work of these artists?

Further, as Stormzy's career suggests, does making something else challenge the coherence of what grime is or can be? If Stormzy, a self-proclaimed grime artist, produces an album heavily influences by gospel and R&B, does this retroactively render his previous work within grime's parameters as inauthentic, as Wiley's accusations suggest? There is a tangible sense in which what grime music *is* is equated to the artists that make it. This works in both directions: 1) despite Stormzy's frequent musical explorations outside of grime, journalists and commentators continue to label him a grime MC and 2) despite his early work in the genre which adheres strictly to grime's golden-era aesthetics (the WICKEDSKENGMAN series), Stormzy's new musical ventures mean that his belonging to grime's community is, for Wiley at least, no longer authentic and therefore his music was never authentically grime. For those that make it, and to a certain extent for those that consume it, grime is less a musical style than it is an intangible label that encompasses everything from musical style to geographic origins to performed identity to accent to appearance. Joseph 'JP' Patterson captures this in some way:

‘Grime is a culture, so it can never die. It’s the way we walk, the way we talk, the way we dress; it’s deeper than beats at 140’.[52]

Yet if grime culture is tied inextricably to the actors that constitute its scene and, as this study has argued, articulates and embodies the local conditions and urban mythologies of the community (or communities) to which grime artists belong, then there is conceivably a point at which an artist’s fame and prosperity mean they can no longer do this authentically. Stormzy’s trajectory from up-and-coming grime MC to mainstream star means that a return to filming freestyles in a park would feel disingenuous. At the same time, however, Stormzy continues to negotiate his identity within grime’s cultural parameters, as evidenced in his responses to Wiley’s accusations and his continued claims to scene belonging (“Headline Reading and Leeds like it's easy/Funny when they talk about the game [i.e. the grime scene] 'cah it needs me” in ‘Mel Made Me Do It’ from *This Is What I Mean*).[53] This is a dissonance recognised by Boakye: ‘Grime was never supposed to make it into the mainstream; it’s the sound of disaffected youth shouting discontent in shows of lyricism that mean nothing to anyone other than themselves. And yet the culture has created a generation of icons who are part of the establishment [e.g. Wiley’s 2018 MBE for services to Music]’.[54]

Grime’s relative youth as a genre, its musical and stylistic reliance on its own recent past, the rapid rate at which practitioners of the genre are canonised into legends, and the constantly shifting parameters of authentic belonging as well as authentic self-expression within the scene are what make it hard to define. Stormzy’s career captures the paradoxical, contradictory, and awkward nature of grime’s ascent into the public consciousness. His journey from golden-era revivalist to mainstream musical chameleon challenges the boundaries of

[52] Joseph ‘JP’ Patterson quoted in Hattie Collins and Olivia Rose, *This Is Grime* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2016), 318.
[53] ‘Mel Made Me Do It’ can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2litzsFCwkA (accessed 10th September 2023).
[54] Boakye, *Hold Tight*, 375.

authentic belonging and self-expression within the grime scene, and interrogates the complex interplay of musical style, genre, authenticity, and cultural identity at stake within the grime community. A consideration of Stormzy's career also demands that grime's ownership is questioned. Does grime exist only as it is expressed by the individual artists that make up its musical constellation? Or is grime something that transcends the individual instances of its creation to represent, as Patterson suggests, something 'deeper than beats at 140'. In a characteristically hypocritical meditation, Wiley leaves grime 'in the hands of anyone under the age of twenty-one, twenty-two', which, at the time of the interview, would have included Stormzy:

> A grime MC's career is limited to some degree and the reason I say that is because it's about MCs shouting and angry and being in pain. The best grime MCs music comes from where she or he was in the most pain. When you were down […] that's where the best work comes from. So the more money you get that will change and he older you get you shouldn't be shouting anymore. You grow out of a grime MC kid and grow into grime MC man, but a grime MC man shouldn't really be shouting. That's for the kids to do. […] What are you still angry about? It's like football man, you can't play it forever.[55]

[55] Wiley quoted in Collins and Rose, *This Is Grime*, 319.

Conclusion

> What do you call it? What does it sound like? Hard to describe in an audio soundbite. Hard to describe for wide-eyed journalists who had not, could not have heard of this… Genre, culture, scene? Lifestyle for mic-bound teens? And here we're starting to see it emerge from the margins; freed. Seen.[1]

> Grime is an unorthodox, rebellious sound that represents madness from the hood, the street. It's like the prototype sound. We've got so many different sounds now. People have their own definitions, so I don't even really wanna define it, but what I do, it *feels* like grime. You see the genre, yeah, people just need to stop trying to change it or it's gonna hit a brick wall.[2]

The equation of grime music with the artists that make it is a trend to which this project itself inadvertently contributes. While exploring a selection of albums that span grime's nearly twenty-year history is beneficial structurally in offering insight as to the ways in which the music has developed, it leaves unanswered the question of where grime's essence inheres. Further, and perhaps more crucially, this project does not advance a definition of what grime *is* – nor should it. Grime is, in this project at the least, an organising principle for a collection of music produced in London from the early 2000s onwards by artists living and working in close proximity to one another, many of whom lay claim to shared musical roots and influences, namely the musics and cultures contained in Reynolds's hardcore continuum (itself a contentious and arbitrary collection of musics and artists). It is among the constellation of artists and albums explored in this thesis that some of the genre's defining features may be traced, as these artists and albums, I argue, represent what Moore terms 'typical' examples of a style (in the same way that Blur's 'Parklife' typifies Britpop, or Mozart and Haydn typify the

[1] Jeffrey Boakye, *Hold Tight* (Influx Press, 2018), 10.
[2] Novelist quoted in Hattie Collins and Olivia Rose, *This Is Grime* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2016), 319.

Classical Style).[3] These artists sit in the centre of an understanding of grime's style, and it is from their work that the key features of this style may be understood. It must be underlined, however, that the artists on whom this study focuses have been grouped not only based on shared geographical and historical locations (London from 2002 to the present), but also on more subjective criteria. The artists and albums have been selected partly based on their perceived importance to popular culture, exhibited by either award wins (three of the albums featured have won the Mercury Prize), chart performance (*Gang Signs & Prayer* is credited as grime's first No. 1 album), or the critical rhetoric that surrounds them (e.g. the blueprint quality that has been ascribed to Wiley's *Treddin' On Thin Ice*). Moreover, my specific positionality has been influential in curating this assemblage of texts. Growing up in London, I experienced much of grime's emergence (particularly after 2010) more or less synchronously – I am three years younger than Stormzy, and two years older than Dave – positioning me as a contemporary and, importantly, as a fan. Having criticised Reynolds' continuum formulation for its personal and biasing tendencies, I must recognise that this study is vulnerable to a similar critique.

Yet, with little in the way of existing grime scholarship, I argue that the structure of this project is an effective way to tackle questions of grime's musical aesthetics. A genre that is both relatively young and already demonstrably nostalgic, and that cannot be defined even by the artists who claim to work within its stylistic traditions, grime is difficult to pin down – it is hard to separate rhetoric from aesthetic practice. In taking artists and albums that are significant both objectively (chart performance, awards, etc.) and subjectively (what I feel to be important texts in grime's history), this project does not offer a preliminary effort in the construction of a 'grime library', but a convincing and diverse collection of texts through which grime's key musical developments may be traced. Given the lack of existing work – or rather the existing but confusing assemblage of claims, suggestions, and intimations – on what grime's stylistic

[3] Allan Moore, *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song* (Routledge, 2016), 120.

parameters actually *are*, it is impossible to pinpoint a set of works that demonstrate and define these parameters. Rather, the carefully considered collection of artists and texts presented in this project have been chosen to facilitate a consideration of what these parameters might be. This project does not set out to be definitive, nor does it aim to represent 'the' history of grime– each of these implies some level of cauterisation. As Boakye, whose book *Hold Tight* is structured song-by-song and stretches from The Winstons' 'Amen Brother' (1969) to 'DBT Remix' by Lioness (2018), writes: 'I was never about contributing to a Grime library – I was trying to be a DJ'.[4] As Novelist's quotation suggests, much of the genre's 'essence' can only be felt – it lies in the *affective* networks of the people, places, and practices that make up grime.

"People ask what music I make/Turn the volume up, 'cause that's what"

What, then, do the case studies examined in this project reveal about grime music's aesthetic parameters? What are the traceable musical features and stylistic traditions that unify these artists and albums? Both Wiley's *Treddin On Thin Ice* and Dizzee Rascal's *Boy In Da Corner* are widely regarded to have provided a blueprint or prototype for the grime genre. Yet the most obvious connection that the two albums share is arguably the fact that Wiley and Dizzee were close associates: both artists hail from the same area of East London, and both were members of garage/grime crossover crew Roll Deep. *Treddin'* and *Boy* do share some of the same sonic characteristics, albeit generally. Both albums feature street-level reportage delivered over bass-heavy instrumental tracks, and represent a definitive stylistic break from garage: abrasive synthesised textures, an unprocessed and 'raw' sound palette, high-amplitude blocks of sound, and highly un-danceable and heavy rhythmic patterns are favoured by both Wiley and Dizzee. A cursory listening, however, reveals the relationship between the two albums as largely rhetorical. Between *Treddin'* and *Boy*, therefore, grime's foundational tenets remain loosely

[4] Boakye, *Hold Tight*, 15.

defined, limited to the same parameters that Reynolds offers as definitive of the entire hardcore continuum: 'beat-science seeking the intersection between "fucked up" and "groovy"; dark bass pressure; MCs chatting fast […]'.[5]

Grime's ongoing musical development, however, has validated *Treddin'*s prototypical qualities. Wiley's Eskibeat, and the 'eski-clicks' that characterise it, has come to represent an integral part of grime's classic sonic palette, as cemented by its ongoing reinvention. Skepta's back-to-basics grime revival, as evidenced throughout *Konnichiwa*, tropes and revises the musical ideas and sounds crafted by Wiley – 'That's Not Me' is quite literally constructed from Wiley samples and quotations – in a way that both validates *Treddin'* as a foundational grime text, and establishes a stylistic connection, and thus a shared aesthetic bond, between instances of grime music made over a decade apart. More generally, the 'cold' aesthetic that Wiley claims to articulate sonically has come to unify musical expressions that assert their affiliation to grime. Though the relationship between grime and 'coldness' remains somewhat rhetorical and contentious, it is a relationship that nonetheless has served as a unifying principle for grime artists throughout the genre's development. Stanislaus' writing on the centrality of Japanese cultural artefacts to Wiley's (and grime's) sound illuminates the possible ways in which sonic expression of this 'coldness' manifests, namely in the chiptune sound effects found in video games.[6] Rather than necessarily expanding upon the elusive notion of 'coldness', Stanislaus identifies a key sonic and cultural influence both specifically for Wiley and for grime music generally, one that can be traced through the genre's history from Wiley's 'eski-clicks', through the numerous video-game-themed grime songs to have emerged (D Double E's 'Street Fighter Riddim', Jme's 'The Very Best'), to the obvious Japanese influence in Skepta's

[5] Simon Reynolds, 'Simon Reynolds on the hardcore continuum: introduction', The Wire (2013) https://www.thewire.co.uk/in-writing/essays/the-wire-300_simon-reynolds-on-the-hardcore-continuum_introduction (accessed 1st September 2021).
[6] Warren A. Stanislaus, 'From Cool Japan to Cold Japan: Grime Cyborgs in Black Britain', Japan Forum, (2022), 1-24.

Konnichiwa, both in the form of the shakuhachi heard in the album's opening track, as well as the revival of the video-game-influenced sounds that characterised grime's early production.[7] As shown throughout this project, producers have returned continually to the chiptune-influenced sound palette present on *Treddin*', and therefore the connection that Stanislaus makes between grime's 'coldness' and Japan's cultural influence is useful in establishing shared aesthetic parameters in grime music. Further, as I have suggested, 'coldness' is arguably no more and no less than a term employed to roughly describe grime's sound world in place of more technical terminology, and repeated references and claims to 'coldness' made by grime artists – Stormzy and Headie One both have songs named 'Cold', and Jme's "Riddim is cold like a winter day", for example – represent a claim to belonging, or to aesthetic heritage.[8] Thus whether as a traceable sonic quality, in the form of chiptune-influenced sounds, or as a rhetorical organising principle, the notion of 'coldness' has continually informed grime's stylistic traditions.

Instances of music that revive Wiley's sound palette, however, are arguably more representative of a continuation of Eskibeat rather than of grime. While Wiley's Eskibeat is essentially grime under a different name, the point I wish to underline here is that grime is a constellation rather than an Eski-centric solar system. Wiley undoubtedly sits in the centre of any understanding of grime's stylistic parameters, but he shares that position with other artists like Kano, whose debut album *Home Sweet Home* broadens, augments, and even eludes the musical language of albums like *Treddin' On Thin Ice* and *Boy In Da Corner*. Kano's debut exemplifies a key unifying feature in grime's aesthetics: MC culture. *Home Sweet Home* illustrates MC culture's importance both in tying together grime's often disparate sonic

[7] 'Konnichiwa' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XoQ8e0S1KBo (accessed 13th September 2023).
[8] Headie One's 'Cold' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wVyNovH0KFg (accessed 13th September 2023); Jme's '96 Bars Of Revenge' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rKbKZ3Qe45Y (accessed 13th September 2023).

influences, and in connecting grime music to the traditions from which it emerged – and thus in some way to its core 'essence'.

Alongside fellow pirate radio veterans Wiley and Dizzee Rascal, Kano contributes to an early blueprint for authentic grime MCing, one that incorporates vocal techniques and lyrical material derived from the live performance practices associated with pirate radio and sound system culture, in which complex phraseology and narrative complexity are rejected in favour of direct constructions and memorable phrases designed to elicit a reaction 'in the rave'. Grime's development as a recorded genre speaks to its origins as a primarily live-performed music, and nowhere is this clearer than in the role of the MC. Stormzy's WICKEDSKENGMAN simultaneously cements and reinvents grime's golden-era MC culture, drawing upon both the lyrical and stylistic practices of MC clashes and pirate radio as he 'freestyles' over instrumentals from grime's early years. While the extent to which these performances are freestyled or improvised is debatable – and indeed the recorded format limits the possibilities for the kind of off-the-cuff MCing that pirate radio and clashing promote – the continued revival of these practices speaks to the importance of MC culture in grime's aesthetics. As an early-era grime MC and a veteran of pirate radio, Kano establishes a blueprint for this practice, employing the same techniques derived from his own experience of grime's early performance spaces in his recorded work. Later MCs like Stormzy, who have no history or first-hand experience in pirate radio, continue this practice by coding their verses with the lyrical and stylistic techniques found in the work of early grime artists like Kano, and thus connect their work to the genre's early performance traditions.

Further, Kano's ability to convincingly tie together practices from several genres and performance spaces also demonstrates the limitations of genre categories themselves in relation to musics like grime, and exemplifies Zuberi's contention that the MC is attached less to

specificities of genre and more to broader oral and performance traditions.[9] Such a fluid conceptualisation of the MC challenges the structural aims of this project: the collection of artists and texts presented in this thesis do not combine to give shape to grime's aesthetic parameters, but represent a collection of actors who are embedded in the traditions of MC culture which may include, but ultimately transcend, grime music. Grime does, however, remain a style to which these artists have definitively claimed belonging, and as such their music must to some extent construct and exhibit its musical parameters. Further, the fluidity to which Zuberi points is challenged by the lack of stylistic and cultural mobility afforded to artists such as Dizzee Rascal and Dave, albeit for different reasons. Dizzee's complex mainstream breakthrough highlights both the unifying force of MC culture, in that his musically disparate releases (*Boy In Da Corner* and *Tongue N' Cheek*) remain connected through the voice of the MC, and the limitations of the conception of the MC as a non-genre-bound and fluid actor, and the homogenising forces to which MCs are nonetheless subjected. Given that Dizzee Rascal cannot operate within genres or across traditions outside of grime's direct lineage without accusations of 'selling out', there seems to be a limit to the diversity of musical styles across which an MC may operate before their authenticity and cultural belonging are called into question. Similarly, the MC's voice in Dave's *PSYCHODRAMA* behaves as a musically and culturally homogenising and limiting force; Dave operates across genres and traditions outside of grime's lineage (singer-songwriter balladry), but much of the critical and public response to his work does not allow him such fluidity. MC culture is thus at once a unifying and limiting force. The voice of the MC can unify disparate sonic influences, such as those that have contributed at various points to grime's musical makeup, while simultaneously binding the MC to a set of cultural and stylistic traditions from which they cannot escape. In this sense, MC culture behaves as a unifying force for the purposes of this project, through

[9] Zuberi, 'New Throat Fe Chat: The Voices and Media of MC Culture', 189.

which the musical utterances of Kano, Stormzy, Dizzee Rascal, Dave, et al. are shown to be embedded in the same musical and stylistic tradition. Yet by the same token, MC culture is not helpful in delineating grime's aesthetics specifically; MC culture connects the artists in this project not only to each other, but also to broader cultural and stylistic traditions that encompass genres from jungle to dubstep. The voice of the MC is undoubtedly common to instances of music that claim belonging to the grime genre, but cannot be posited as a definitive or genre-specific characteristic that aids an explication of the music's aesthetic parameters.

Alongside MC culture, or the voice of the MC, this study has proposed Bakhtinian dialogism as a framework through which to consider stylistic coherence across instances of grime music. Dialogism offers at times a quite literal description of grime's compositional practices (e.g. Skepta's song 'Lyrics', which opens with an older recording of Wiley's voice before using his speech as a central lyrical motif), and facilitates a consideration of the ways in which musical and cultural connections between otherwise sonically disparate artists can be drawn. In framing grime as dialogic music, artists like Little Simz, whose music is far removed from that of Wiley, Dizzee Rascal, and other artists from grime's first wave, are shown to be embedded in a 'collective history' of grime (and indeed black British music as a whole). Later artists in grime's development find their voice in the vocabulary of others; the musical utterances of artists like Little Simz, Dave, and Stormzy can be framed as assimilations, reworkings, or reaccentuations of previous utterances made by previous grime artists. In this way, these artists are tied to grime's ongoing historical conversation. Closely related to Bakhtin's concept of dialogism is the concept of 'Signifyin'', or repetition with a difference.[10] Relevant particularly to *Konnichiwa*, and the ways in which Skepta tropes and revises, or 'signifies on', both Wiley's sonic palette and lyrical material in the creation of 'That's Not Me' specifically, both Bakhtinian dialogism and the notion of Signifyin' contribute to an

[10] Williams, 'Intertextuality, sampling, and copyright', 207.

understanding of the ways in which artists pay homage to grime's past while infusing it with new contexts and innovation. Both frameworks thus aid in an understanding of grime as a dynamic and evolving music, whose parameters continue to expand to include a diverse range of influences, unified by a continual recognition of the genre's past and its foundational texts in a way that in turn retroactively cements this past and these texts as representative and demonstrative of grime's core aesthetic parameters.

Yet both dialogism and the notion of signifyin', as well as to some extent the practices of MC culture, help only in understanding grime's ongoing development as it relates to the genre's past. That is, under these terms, grime is defined largely by the extent to which it relates to the music that initially defined it, rather than by a set of evolving aesthetic parameters. Is grime therefore to be understood as an inherently nostalgic music, a genre 'whose *right now* will always be linked to *back then*'?[11] Is there a sense in which, once grime's key musical features could be harnessed, revived, and borrowed, the music ceased to evolve in a meaningful sense? Does grime, therefore, remain a genre that offers expressive potential? Is grime still made anymore? If so, in what form? And if not, when did it die?

> If we take [grime] as a label for anything that pulses at 140 bpm, with syncopated drums, grungy synths and digital blips that MCs spit hyperactive crowd-baiting lyrics over, then Grime is dead. Or dying. At least in mainstream eyes. If we take 'Grime' as meaning any kind of vaguely lyrical urban music coming from kids in the ends created with an entrepreneurial spirit and characterised by street credibility and hyper masculinity codes, then Grime is alive. Grime is Dead. Long Live Grime.[12]

Boakye offers a helpful, if enigmatic, account of grime's creative wellbeing, though he also notes that, writing in 2016, he had concerns of being 'late to the party' with his account of

[11] Boakye, *Hold Tight*, 17.
[12] Ibid..

grime music: 'I felt like I'd missed the Grime wave (apologies) and would be speaking after the fact'.[13] We are assured, however, that grime is 'in good shape', evidenced by continuing releases from 'old and new faces alike': Wiley, Dizzee Rascal, and Skepta have all released music in 2023.[14] While the extent to which these releases represent grime music is certainly debatable, it is noticeable that these artists are, in a tangible sense, continually defined and understood by their relationship to grime culture, irrespective of the music that they produce: they are artists whose *right now* will always be linked to *back then*.[15] Yet grime's animating principles have always been to some extent nostalgic. Grime artists in the scene's early years lean on and call upon earlier practices from the genre's lineage in order to craft their own musical identities, seen most clearly in the crossover qualities of albums like Kano's *Home Sweet Home*: both by virtue of Kano's past performing on pirate radio and as a member of N.A.S.T.Y crew, and deliberately through direct musical and lyrical borrowings, the album evokes the musics from which grime emerged and the spaces where the genre was crafted. Grime music's development has always represented a series of reinventions, borrowings, experimentations, rebirths, and revivals.

Other than as a nostalgia trip for grime's established pantheon, the question of grime's ongoing expressive potential remains a pressing one. The existence of grime parody and pastiche, for example, suggests the end of the genre's truly experimental and creative life, in the same way that Wiley's internal pastiche in 'Wot Do U Call It?' signalled the perceived end of UK garage as a creative avenue. Kayode Ewumi and Michael Dapaah (who appears as a crowd member in Stormzy's WICKEDSKENGMAN Part 4) both achieved fame in their

[13] Ibid., 16.
[14] Ibid., 17.
[15] Dizzee Rascal, for example, is referred to as a 'grime star' and a 'grime artist' in many of the articles detailing his recent conviction for assault, though this also raises questions related to grime music's demonisation (and its associated racial politics) in the media (i.e. why is Rascal a 'grime artist' and not simply a 'musician?'): https://www.theguardian.com/music/2023/jan/27/dizzee-rascal-loses-appeal-against-conviction-for-assaulting-ex-fiancee (accessed 18th September 2023).

separate portrayals of fictional MCs Roll Safe (Ewumi) and Big Shaq/Roadman Shaq (Dapaah), both uploaded to YouTube in mockumentary-style videos.[16] Both characters were given a 'Fire In The Booth' episode, a YouTube and BBC radio freestyle series through which non-fictional grime artists have achieved recognition, and Dapaah's fictional/non-fictional novelty song 'Man's Not Hot' peaked at number three on the UK Singles Chart and has been certified platinum.[17] Both Ewumi and Dapaah's characters appeal in many ways to the same authenticating musical practices outlined in this project, namely MC 'freestyles' over classic grime instrumentals. Dapaah's portrayal was further authenticated by the emergence of 'Man's Not Hot MC Mix', which featured grime veterans Lethal Bizzle, Chip (formerly Chipmunk), Krept & Konan, and Jme. The scene's acceptance and assimilation of Dapaah's pastiche, however, speaks to grime's ability to recognise, reinvent, and revive itself. Yet both Dapaah's pastiche and the later 'MC Mix' of 'Man's Not Hot', which use the same instrumental as the 2016 single 'Let's Lurk' by 67 featuring veteran rapper Giggs, both appeal to grime's inherently nostalgic character. Both the original song and the 'MC Mix' arguably do little to expand the genre creatively (using an old instrumental), or to add to the accepted canon of grime artists: like Dizzee's grime revival, the 'MC Mix' is something of a nostalgia trip for already-established faces.

The post-2010 artists featured in this thesis contribute to the sense in which grime music itself no longer offers the same expressive potential that it did to artists such as Wiley, Dizzee Rascal, and Kano. Little Simz, Dave, and Stormzy's (and to some extent Skepta's) music all exhibit a notable departure from the sonic world of grime's first wave. Whether abandonment or expansion, this departure suggests the diminished creative potential afforded to new artists

[16] '#HoodDocumentary Se.1 Episode 1- Introducing R.S' can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=165R9OWugAk (accessed 19th September 2023).
[17] Roll Safe's 'Fire In The Booth' can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7yeNXzaqLA4 (accessed 19th September 2023); 'Man's Not Hot' can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CX3BKKxYTYw (accessed 19th September 2023).

by grime's core aesthetic tenets, as they are present in the music of its 'golden-era' artists. These artists and this music, however, demonstrably share a cultural root. Indeed, this shared cultural root serves as perhaps the most convincing unifying principle for the artists and albums presented in this project. As much as Simz, Dave, and Stormzy demonstrably depart from grime's first-wave aesthetics, their music also serves to validate what came before – grime continues in spirit if not in sound. Grime remains a live subject, and the historical space in which grime exists is not yet over. For as long as artists like Stormzy claim to belong to grime (and even to be 'the king of grime'), the term will continue to serve a purpose as a signifier – even if what it exactly signifies is unclear. That the label 'grime' has become loaded with meaning testifies to the music's accumulated cultural weight, considering that at first it didn't even have a name: 'We didn't call it grime, I don't know who named it'.[18] 'Grime' has evolved from a label used by critics and commentators to describe a specific sound produced by a handful of musicians working in close geographical proximity, to a genre tag that informed the production, dissemination, and consumption of music from a wider pool of artists, to a catch-all term that serves to unify disparate and diverse acts of musicking that share a cultural and affective root. While an interrogation of grime's relationship to 'scene', 'style', 'subculture', and 'genre' (*à la* Hebdige, Hesmondhalgh, Brackett, et al.) is no doubt fruitful ground for scholarship, it lies beyond the scope of this thesis. What is clear, for the purposes of this study, is that grime is no longer (if it ever was) a term that prescribes specific and definable aesthetic parameters.

Grime's stylistic dilution, or rather the evolution of the genre beyond a definable set of aesthetic and stylistic parameters, is an inevitable development, and one common to almost all styles of music. The various stylistic offshoots and variants that grime has come to include, or numerous forms of UK rap and underground musics that have joined grime as an articulation

[18] Tinchy Stryder quoted in Collins and Rose, *This Is Grime*, 77.

of a black British musical tradition, and the extent to which they present a belonging to grime music or its cultural roots, is material for an entire study itself. What this thesis notes is the consequence of this evolution or expansion for an account of grime's musical and social aesthetics. Little Simz's expansion of grime's musical and stylistic boundaries, for example, demands an expansion of the frameworks within which grime music, and indeed female expression within grime music itself, are considered. Dialogism can function here as a framework not just in considering questions of musical influence and interaction, but (through Tricia Rose's reading of the concept) in tying Little Simz to a wider lineage of black women rappers, in turn expanding the theoretical and analytic lenses through which grime music can be examined. The chapter on Little Simz contributes not only to an understanding of the ways in which women rappers carve out a cultural space within grime and oppose the music's proclivity for hardcore sonic masculinity, but in a broader sense suggests an approach to considering grime utterances that effect the same expansion of the music's sonic, social, and cultural meanings and parameters. The influence of the gospel music tradition in each of Stormzy's albums, for example, is a clear candidate for such analysis. Such analyses will contribute to an understanding of grime as an aesthetically dense music, one in which experimentation, reimagination, and revival combine and contribute to the creation of a rich musical and cultural tapestry. Though the evolution of grime's stylistic parameters is an expected stage in the development of almost any musical style, what is notable in the case of grime is the extent to which this evolution is resisted by grime artists themselves, in particular those associated with its first wave. As the case of Stormzy illustrates, grime's stylistic expansion and aesthetic evolution beyond the tenets of its golden era has posed new challenges to artists' ability to perform authentic belonging to grime culture – there is a sense in which experimentation comes at the expense of acceptance.

"I just need to not let my genre die on the way out"[19]

Despite the established aesthetic eclecticism that characterises grime culture, especially post-2010, the scene remains a site in which authenticity continues to be contested, constructed, and challenged. The parameters of grime authenticity are, as I have explored, constantly shifting, and there exists a tension between the genre's implicit expectations both of authentic individuality and authentic belonging. Grime is a musical culture in which new faces must define themselves both with and against what came before, and indeed in which old faces must reassert their foundational contribution to what came before (Wiley has, since 2017, released three albums in a 'Godfather' series – *Godfather* (2017)*, Godfather II* (2018)*, The Godfather III* (2020)). Though the term grime no longer necessarily prescribes a set of specific musical aesthetic parameters, if it ever did, it continues to serve as a label that artists claim, and through which they can both craft cultural identity and situate themselves within a cultural space. Authenticity in grime is a fluid and dynamic site. Despite the constantly shifting parameters of what grime *is*, what it sounds like, its expanding geographic sites of activity, developments in the mediums through which the music is promoted, disseminated, and consumed, and the scene's on-and-off relationship with the cultural mainstream, authenticity is a requirement of grime's practice.

As the case of Dizzee Rascal illustrates, an artist's authenticity relies on falling on the right side of the binary hardcore/softcore divide – or the subcultural hardcore vs. the mass-produced-and-consumed softcore – constructed in the discourse that surrounds grime music and its underground lineage. Dizzee's *Tongue n' Cheek* is felt by critics and fans to have in some way transgressed the hardcore sonic parameters prescribed both by his own earlier work (*Boy In Da Corner*) and by his perceived cultural lineage (the musics of the hardcore

[19] Wiley quoted in Dan Hancox, 'Wiley on his final album', *The Guardian* https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/jun/05/wiley-on-his-final-album-i-need-to-not-let-grime-die-on-the-way-out (accessed 20th September 2023).

continuum, namely jungle and bass culture). In this sense, *Tongue* effects a break from the cultural traditions to which Rascal was originally tied (sound system culture/the hardcore continuum), and fails to appeal to what Moore describes as 'authenticity as primality', or 'the tracing back to an original which validates the contemporary'.[20] Yet such a conception of authenticity in grime is a simplified one. Grime music, however, has (consciously or not) always operated within a pop/underground dichotomy as a genre 'undoubtedly connected to the streets but catering wholeheartedly to the clubs […], often edgy in content but always embraceable in execution'.[21] As his recent return to the scene demonstrates, Dizzee Rascal's ventures into electro-pop have done little to damage his grime authenticity. Rather, Dizzee's career challenges the dichotomous discourses surrounding both genre and authenticity, as well as problematic and short-sighted constructions of musical lineage, such as Reynolds' hardcore continuum. The various differences between *Boy In Da Corner* and *Tongue n' Cheek* demonstrate the cultural and social biases that inform binary distinctions between hardcore and softcore, or underground and mainstream, and the complex negotiations of authenticity that they inform.

There is also a gendered division maintained by the binary distinctions that underlie constructions of authenticity in grime music, and indeed many supposedly subcultural or 'hardcore' artforms. While these hardcore/softcore and masculine/feminine dichotomies are, as I have explored, problematic, they nonetheless remain prevalent both in grime culture itself and in the discourse that surrounds it. Boakye deems masculinity 'the biggest elephant in the room when we're discussing what grime really is', and notes that grime's credibility 'hinges almost entirely on preconceived notions of masculinity'.[22] Dichotomies like those outlined above between a masculine hardcore and a feminine softcore are employed not only to describe

[20] Allan Moore, 'Authenticity as authentication', *Popular Music* 21, No. 2 (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 209-223, here 215.
[21] Boakye, *Hold Tight*, 37.
[22] Ibid., 349.

(or prescribe) grime's musical and cultural characteristics, but also to delineate grime's boundaries as a male-dominated space: the equation of authenticity with an inherently masculine hardcore positions grime and other hardcore musics against a feminine other. Little Simz's claim to be 'not a UK female MC, [but] an artist' is simultaneously a disowning of grime's masculine culture, and an assertion of self outside of this patriarchal lineage.[23] Again through the lens of dialogism as an analytic framework, Simz can be tied to a wider lineage of black women rappers who are in dialogue both with male rappers, and larger social discourses. As such, Simz's work can be framed as an act of self-definition that interrogates the validity of the masculine/feminine dichotomies of sound forwarded by formulations such as the hardcore continuum, and in turn challenges the constructions of authenticity that such dichotomies influence. Grime nonetheless remains for Little Simz a term through and against which she can craft both a musical and cultural identity. Even in her implicit rejection of the music's patriarchal lineage and sonic traditions, Simz nonetheless defines herself as an authentic artist in part *through* this rejection of grime's masculine cultural and musical expectation – "they're scared I'm a pioneer/They're scared I'm a revolutionary, they're scared of authenticity/ […] Woman or not, Simz a bloodclart king!" ('Persons'). Simz's conscious rejection of grime's traditional hardcore (and masculine) constructions of authenticity represents a claim to authentic individuality. She rejects the principles required of authentic grime belonging (sonic and stylistic appeals to a hardcore aesthetic), and in doing so both demands an expansion of these principles, renders them somewhat irrelevant and problematic, and asserts herself as an authentic individual. Conversely, this assertion of authentic individuality, an arguably masculine philosophy, is demanded of grime practitioners as a

[23] Alexi Duggins, 'Little Simz: 'I'm not a UK female MC, I'm an artist'", The Guardian https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/sep/07/islington-mc-little-simz (accessed 4th June 2022).

condition of authentic belonging – a tension between authentic individuality and authentic belonging that is vividly illustrated in the case of Stormzy.

Stormzy's career speaks to the enduring importance of authenticity in grime culture, and illustrates the way that authenticity in the scene continues to be crafted largely through demonstrating a continued awareness of the scene's past. Stormzy's feud with Wiley underlines that this past is dynamic, or 'live', and as such can complexify and alter the parameters within which an artist may lay claim to authentic belonging within grime culture. Like Skepta, Stormzy lays claim to authentic grime belonging in his early work – namely in the WICKEDSKENGMAN series – by quoting and reinventing classic instrumentals from grime's golden era, and demonstrating an awareness of the scene's musical and cultural traditions. The WICKEDSKENGMAN series illustrates the lasting power of grime's early rites of passage. Now that pirate radio, white label vinyl releases, and live performances (such as raves and MC clashes) are largely defunct, the work ethic that they demanded remains central to defining a grime artist as authentic. Stormzy convincingly transposes the excitement and energy of these early practices onto new means of distribution and consumption (i.e. YouTube), evoking the live energy and low-budget visual and sonic aesthetics of clash footage (as found in the *Lord of the Mics* DVDs), reviving grime's golden-era 'spirit' as a means of both paying homage and performing authentic belonging. Stormzy's early claims to authentic grime belonging are bolstered by his professed and proven acceptance by grime's established legends, either in the form of his appearance onstage at the 2015 BRITs or Wiley's tweets that hail Stormzy as 'the #1 grime don in this new era'.[24] Legitimacy, or authenticity, is performed by Stormzy himself verbally (in lyrics that attest to his 'realness' and validated status within the grime scene), musically (through the use of classic grime instrumentals), and visually (through

[24] Wiley quoted in Hattie Collins, 'Stormzy Grew Up On Grime, Now He's Eclipsing His Heroes', Vice https://www.vice.com/en/article/r7pzze/the-perfect-stormzy-hattie-collins-2014 (accessed 27th July 2023).

the evocation of golden-era grime's clash and freestyle videos). It is also bestowed upon him externally, through his proximity to and personal affiliations with grime's first-wave and its heroes. This careful balance is upset, however, when either of these two sources of authentication (internal and external) falters or fails in some sense. Once Stormzy's individual authenticity is articulated in a manner that departs from grime's established means of expression (for example, in his introspective gospel-influenced tracks or collaborations with musicians outside of the grime scene such as Ed Sheeran), his authentic belonging is questioned by the external sources who bestowed it. Once Stormzy's claims to authentic belonging are questioned by Wiley, a pioneer of grime's first wave, and thus a key pillar on which this claim to authenticity stands, his ability to perform authentic individuality, in the context of grime music, is challenged. Stormzy can, for Wiley at least, no longer appropriate grime's stylistic traditions from the inside, and thus authentically. While a listener's ability to ascribe authenticity to Stormzy's articulation of grime's stylistic traditions will depend on the weight given to Wiley's opinion, the feud between the two nonetheless highlights what is at stake in negotiations over authenticity in grime culture.

If authenticity in grime culture is articulated most obviously in a demonstrated awareness of the scene's past, and a respect for what came before, then grime music continues to be defined largely by the extent to which it relates to the music that initially defined it. The nostalgia that characterises much of grime's aesthetics can be viewed as a continued performance of authenticity. This applies both to grime artists old and new: Dizzee Rascal's recent return to grime is in many ways a restatement of his authentic grime credentials, and artists such as Stormzy are considered authentically grime-y for as long as they exhibit an obvious golden-era influence in their music. Skepta's *Konnichiwa*, deemed a return to grime's key aesthetic principles, is essentially a nostalgia trip that does not revive and reinvent grime's early sound palette so much as simply restate it. If this is a reductive way of thinking about the

music, it nonetheless poses questions about grime's continued development, and the extent to which an artist can expand on grime's sound world and stylistic traditions and still claim authentic belonging.

So why does it remain important for artists to defend their authentic grime belonging? That an artist such as Stormzy, who has enjoyed significant commercial and critical success, continues to claim grime legitimacy speaks to the continued importance of grime culture to questions of identity. Further, for second-generation artists such as Little Simz, Dave, and Stormzy especially, grime music not only reflects the social and cultural environments of their formative years, but in some way provided and continues to provide a space in which they enact, model, and experiment with social relations and identities. Grime has come to form a vehicle through which these artists understand and shape their identities, communities, and environments. D Double E speaks to grime's social and cultural important when he states: 'I've given grime my life. My contribution has been so dedicated. I've given grime my all'.[25] It is through grime that these artists, and indeed their listeners, understand themselves in a cultural sense. Grime music is tied inextricably to the environment of its composition, and it is for this reason that authentic belonging remains important for those associated with grime culture. It is also for this reason that value judgements made within grime represent more than aesthetic taste; Wiley's critique of Stormzy's eclecticism is not borne of 'purely' artistic concern, but an attempt to delineate and defend a musical culture to which he feels he belongs, and (crucially) that he feels belongs to him. The quote that begins this subsection speaks to the important role played by grime in the formation and negotiation of identity: grime is Wiley's genre ("my genre"), and later in the same interview 'The Godfather' states "I am grime!".[26] Yet all grime artists in some sense, while not able to claim the same foundational importance to the genre,

[25] D Double E quoted in Collins and Rose, *This Is Grime*, 317.
[26] Wiley quoted in Hancox, 'Wiley on his final album'.

feel the same way. Grime is the artists that constitute it, and these artists are grime. Authenticity remains a contested site in grime music because it is through authentic belonging that these artists and their listeners negotiate an understanding of themselves and their environment.

"So what do you know about grime?"

If grime music is a space in which listeners can model, enact, and experiment with social relations and identities, and a vehicle for the articulation of minority experience in contemporary Britain, then conceptions of the scene must in some way account for the myriad subjectivities and identities that the music articulates. Such a discussion highlights the structural issues with this thesis that I have already discussed, and questions the project's outcomes. Do the albums examined in this study in some way capture some of grime music's defining aesthetic features, and the stylistic parameters and principles that have influenced the composition of grime since its emergence? Or, has this thesis explored the ways in which a number of artists, who are closely tied through geographical proximity and a claimed shared cultural root (bass culture/the hardcore continuum), express and articulate their own particular identities, subjectivities, and cultural, social, and geographical environments? The conclusion of this project is to be found at the intersection of these questions, or rather from their combination. The albums contained within this thesis articulate the social and cultural specificities of their authors through music that borrows, rejects, revises, and reinvents the sounds and styles of a shared cultural root to form a musical tradition (or genre) that is at once tangibly unified yet difficult to pin down.

It is not the aim of this thesis, however, to propose a theory for grime's musical aesthetics that accounts for all musical utterances expressed under the umbrella of 'grime', or to define its sonic parameters. This project is an exploration, rather than an explanation; it is descriptive, not prescriptive. While by no means extensive, I have offered an account of grime

music's salient aesthetic features, as they are present in the music of the artists and albums assembled in the thesis. Further studies may which to concentrate their efforts upon a smaller selection of artists or works. Wiley's *Treddin' On Thin Ice* and Dizzee Rascal's *Boy In Da Corner*, for example, represent such foundational texts in grime's development, and a key moment in the evolution of the British musical underground, that they merit a project to themselves. It must also be said that the decision to focus primarily upon *albums* in this thesis is a somewhat contentious one. Until 2010, the 'grime album' was something of a rarity, and was arguably not the main medium through which grime was made and shared in its first wave; live performance, pirate radio, underground mixtapes and compilations, dub plates, and white label singles formed the primary formats for grime's production and consumption. These formats, and their influence on the development of grime's aesthetic parameters, as well as the shifts in grime's production, dissemination, and consumption effected by the genre's later online migration, are subjects for future studies to consider.

The growth of grime's public profile, as well as the power of the internet and social media, has seen the expansion, or diversification, of the genre's geographical locus. This thesis takes as its focus the musical and social aesthetics of grime music in London, the city from which grime emerged and with which it is most closely associated. Birmingham and Manchester, however, are among the cities to have emerged in the past decade as sites in which grime music is recognisably produced. The geographical spread of grime's production has predictably resulted in the enrichment of the subjectivities, communities, and environments for and from which the music speaks, and future studies may wish to examine more closely the development of grime in locations other than London.

This thesis provides an overview of what I feel to be the salient features of grime's musical and social aesthetics as they are present in a selection of albums felt to be important either culturally or stylistically. While I have limited my focus to grime artists working in

London, the historical boundaries of this thesis are broad – encompassing grime's entire lifespan from the beginning of the century to the present – and as such leave much to be explored in greater detail. Most notable among these potential avenues of focus is a consideration of female expression in grime. Little Simz represents the only non-male voice in this thesis. While this reflects and evidences the problematic exclusion of female voices that has characterised much of grime's history, it must also be recognised that studies such as this, that focus almost entirely on male actors, contribute to the ongoing exclusion of women from grime's story. Shystie, Little Simz, Lady Leshurr, Lioness, and Queenie are among the most pronounced representatives of a growing female voice in grime culture, and future studies must account for this much-ignored contribution to the music's evolution. A consideration of these female voices contributes not only to an understanding of the ways in which women rappers carve out a cultural space within grime and oppose the music's proclivity for hardcore sonic masculinity, but suggests an approach to considering grime utterances that effect an expansion of the music's sonic, social, and cultural meanings and parameters, as well as broadening the theoretical and analytic lenses through which grime music can be examined.

As I state in my introduction, this thesis essentially captures the act of listening. The project recognises that to write hermeneutically from an objective position is impossible, and as such the account of grime music's sound world that this thesis provides will be impacted in various ways by the subject position of its author. This represents not a limitation but an invitation. This project highlights opportunities that are available in and afforded by the musical environment presented by the albums that I have selected, and the ways in which this thesis proposes that grime can be heard, analysed, examined, and understood venture an approach to the academic study of grime music in the hope of expanding the methods and perspectives from which the topic can be considered. The various frameworks and methodologies, as well as the conclusions and questions, that this thesis advances are intended

as points of departure for future studies. It is my hope that they will be critiqued, challenged, developed, and adapted in the development of a more complex and multivocal discourse on grime. Expanding the academic study of grime to encompass a more diverse and varied range of perspectives and subject positions will facilitate an enriched understanding of the opportunities for listening and meaning that the music affords.

Coda

> Early traits were harnessed: Talking the loudest talking the hardest, talking the fastest, talk from the margins, MC styles flourishing like gardens after a season of seeds were planted. What came first? What came after? Who what why when how whereafter? What was the question if Grime was the answer? Young black boys with ancient fathers, family trees with distant branches, sisters, olders, mothers, aunts and whole generations all took part in the crafting of something big from the start. Black UK: the diaspora was large. Large as a continent with all the confidence to spread wildfire after a spark.[27]

> Understand that making music, firstly, and being yourself is the most important thing, that's what grime is. That's what grime is.[28]

The word 'aesthetics' derives from the Greek word *aísthomai* – that which is perceived by feeling. As Novelist states: 'people have their own definitions, so I don't even really wanna define it, but what I do, it *feels* like grime'.[29] Tracing this feeling is perhaps the most that accounts of grime can hope for – to reproduce or define it in writing is impossible. This thesis captures grime's musical and cultural properties as they are present in a collection of albums, mapping iterations of grime throughout an assemblage of texts. Grime is, however, a live and dynamic musical and cultural entity, and the parameters of what defines it are constantly shifting. The expansion of grime's sites of production and consumption means that grime has

[27] Boakye, *Hold Tight*, 8.
[28] Jammer quoted in Collins and Rose, *This Is Grime*, 231.
[29] Novelist quoted in Collins and Rose, *This Is Grime*, 319.

transcended the stylistic parameters that came to characterise it. It is impossible in many ways now to talk about grime – one can only offer examples of it.

Grime's essence inheres in the affective networks of the people, places, and practices that comprise it. Grime represents a counter-public, an arena for resistance and a sphere of communication, expression, and discourse for those excluded from dominant public spheres. Grime is a subculture, characterised by localised and highly collaborative creative production by a distinct social group with shared values, norms, and lifestyles. Grime is a scene, a space for subcultural expression and development that encompasses multiple subcultures, and whose sites of production, consumption, and dissemination remain dynamic and localised hubs of musical activity. Grime is a type of electronic music that developed from jungle, drum 'n' bass, garage, and the other musics grouped under Simon Reynolds' 'hardcore continuum'. Grime comes from jungle. Grime comes from the streets. Grime is characterised by its dark and intense sound world. Grime is mainstream. Grime is underground. Grime is a black British artform. Grime is the most significant musical development within the UK for decades. Grime is Wiley. Grime is Stormzy. Grime is global. Grime ain't a culture, it's a religion. Grime is dead.

Long live grime.

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