

# **Grime: Criminal Subculture or Public Counterculture? A Critical Investigation into the Criminalisation of Black Musical Subcultures in the UK**

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## Abstract

This paper sets out to (re-)introduce Black urban musical subcultures as valuable forms of creativity and public expression in an attempt to resist, criticise, and expose their criminalisation by the London Metropolitan Police. Focusing primarily on grime, a host of unfair and illegitimate practices adopted by the London Metropolitan Police will be discussed. This will demonstrate how the routine monitoring, surveillance, and curtailment of Black people's public identity (re)produces stereotypical associations of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups with violent, criminal, and problematic behaviour. In order to challenge openly discriminatory attitudes towards Black urban cultural forms by the police, a counter-argument which calls for their understanding as viable sources of positive and constructive public engagement will be offered.

## Keywords

Race and crime, youth subcultures, cultural criminology, policing, grime

Hip-hop and rap<sup>1</sup> have historically been met with a considerable degree of suspicion in the US (Cummings, 2012; Kubrin, 2005; Kubrin and Nielson, 2014; Baker Jr., 1995; Tatum, 1999; Bridgewater *et al.* 2015; Quinn, 2005; Rose, 1994) often seen as outward manifestations of an 'outlaw culture' (hooks, 1994) that is perceived as dangerous, if not outrightly criminal. In the UK, the situation has not been radically different, especially in recent years, although scant attention has been afforded to the issue by the relevant literature, notable exceptions notwithstanding (Bramwell, 2015a; Barron, 2013; Ilan, 2012, 2014; Talbot, 2011). In fact, the "policing" of black music genres has been a persistent feature of 'policing against black people' in Britain (Fryer, 1984: 391-9; IRR, 1987) since the migration of Jamaican

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<sup>1</sup> Given that the terms "hip hop" and "rap" are often used interchangeably, Bramwell (2017: 2) offers a useful definition, according to which rap refers to 'the practice of lyrical performance by a rapper or MC [...] often over an instrumental track'. Hip hop, on the other hand, could be thought of as a music genre in its own right with rap 'being a prominent' feature in it. Although the two are related, one is not necessarily reducible to the other, with rap being the lyrical ingredient in 'hip hop and other musical genres including garage, jungle and grime'.

soundsystem culture in the UK in the late 1950s. Early examples include police raids that targeted house parties (“blues dances” or shebeens), youth clubs, and other venues where ska, rocksteady, and roots reggae were played (Gilroy, 2007: 152; Gilroy, 1987: 95-104). The most recent example is the ‘discriminatory’ 696 Form (MPA, 2009; Barron, 2013; Ilan, 2012) which was introduced by the London Metropolitan Police to target events that ‘predominantly feature DJs or MCs performing to a recorded backing track’ (*Promotion Event Risk Assessment Form 696*, 2009, 2011, 2017: 2). Focusing on one such UK scene; grime, this article sets out to critically explore stereotypical, if not almost metonymic, associations between rap culture(s), violence, and crime in order to reveal some longstanding and deep-rooted prejudices that such assumptions conceal, while also exposing the dangers that such *idées fixes* pose to criminal justice and open, liberal, democratic citizenship. Contrary to common perceptions about what counts as active public participation and who matters as a public intellectual, an alternative view of grime will be offered as a buzzing hub of public culture where grime MCs perform a vital role as ‘organic’ public intellectuals (Gramsci, 1971: 5-10) or what Jacobs (1961: 68) and Fatsis (2016) refer to as ‘public characters’.

Researching the monitoring and curtailment of, if not the outright clampdown on, urban black music by the Metropolitan Police (Bernard, 2018) might seem outside the remit of criminology, were the police not involved in ‘regulating’ (Talbot, 2007; 2011) and ‘disproportionately singl[ing] out’ such music scenes ‘for police attention’ (Barron, 2013: 7). Drawing on the example of grime to illustrate the continued suspicion with which (young) Black Britons have historically been treated by the police (Hunte, 1966; Humphry, 1972; John, 1972; Pule, 1973; Bishton and Homer, 1978; Gilroy, 1982; Bridges and Gilroy, 1982; Bowling and Phillips, 2002; Eastwood, Shiner and Bear, 2013; Whitfield, 2004; EHRC, 2010, 2012; Riots Communities and Victims Panel, 2012; HMIC, 1997, 1999, 2000, 2013; Quinton, 2015; Bradford and Loader, 2016) allows criminologists to renew our interest and focus on addressing and responding to racist policing in an era of alleged post-raciality or racelessness (Goldberg, 2015), which nevertheless exposes the existence of deep-seated prejudicial attitudes within the police force and the criminal justice system more broadly (Halliday, 2015; Safer Bristol Partnership, 2017; Keith, 2006; Lammy, 2017). In addition to such painful reminders of police racism, it also seems necessary to challenge not just the

visible blemishes of prejudice and discrimination, but also interrogate the socio-cultural soil from which they spring by articulating a broader vision for making sense of the policed custodians of grime as unfairly stigmatised and misunderstood paragons of intellectual life, public culture and participatory social life.

The remainder of this article, therefore, will introduce grime as a genre, explain how and why it has been disproportionately policed in various ways by the London Metropolitan Police since the early noughties, and reframe grime (sub)culture as a vibrant form of public expression that is unfairly identified, defined, perceived, and processed as a criminal subculture by the police.

### *Wot Do U Call It<sup>2</sup>, Grime?*

Before explaining how a musical genre, such as grime, became the focus of unfair, hostile, illegitimate, and discriminatory policing practices, a brief attempt at introducing grime to an academic audience seems necessary as a way of setting the scene for the argument that is pursued in this article. Grime originated in the early noughties (2002-2003) as a self-consciously and unashamedly edgy, unadorned black music genre that fused the rhyming tradition of Jamaican dancehall culture (Stolzoff, 2000), from which US rap sprang, with hip-hop-inspired rhythms or beats that were initially made using basic music software (e.g. FruityLoops) or game consoles (e.g. *Music 2000* on the Playstation, *Mario Paint* on the Super NES). Distinguishing itself from its stylistic predecessor, UK garage, which glamorised 'champagne and cars' (Dizzee Rascal, *Showtime*) grime set out to portray the gritty, "grim(e)y" reality of life in London's council estates in an almost ethnographic fashion (Barron, 2013; Bramwell, 2015a, 2015b; Ilan, 2012). Instead of just being yet another mutation of previous Black British music genres, though it certainly evolved from them, grime made its mark on the capital's music scene by drawing its strength from its uncompromising attitude towards creating and disseminating music (mixtapes/grimetapes, DVDs, pirate radio shows, online blogs, self-released albums) and fearless musical and lyrical content that sounds as rough as it intended to be; earning its stripes as a twenty-first century 'rebel music', as dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson put it (1976) in his description of Jamaican roots reggae music. Grime's defiant pose becomes particularly audible in its lyrical

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<sup>2</sup> This section borrows its title from the song 'Wot Do U Call it' (2004) by the self-styled "Godfather" of grime, Wiley.

performance (fast, urgent delivery), music production innovations (use of unusual software), ethos (DIY) and context (urban poverty, “inner city” life), thereby creating a ‘community’ (Hancox, 2013: 1) which reflects the ‘endless pressure’ (Pryce, 1979) of living in stultifying urban environments that are shaped by a lack of opportunities and negative experiences of policing (Ilan, 2012: 42). These ingredients of grime’s subterranean identity and *raison d’être*, therefore, make it a unique resource for critical, cultural criminological research that aims at digging deep into unfamiliar facets of sociocultural life; not just to unearth what hides behind multiple, thick layers of meaning woven by (subcultural) groups that are (un)like us, but to also address and expose how and why music scenes like grime attract attention from law enforcement agencies and the criminal justice system.

### **Grime: The Sound of Crime?**

The sonic and lyrical militancy of grime caught the attention of the London Metropolitan police, especially following shootings, stabbings (Muir, 2006; *BBC News*, 2006) and other ‘incidents at live music concerts in 2006, some involving guns’ (*The Independent*, 2008). Much of the suspicion with which grime has been met by the Met, draws on fatal shootings that took place in UK garage concerts, grime’s parent genre, by members of the popular band So Solid Crew (*BBC News*, 2006). Yet, isolated incidents aside, there is ‘no basis to infer but anything but a coincidental link’ between crime and grime (Ilan, 2012: 46). This is not to discount these facts or to play down the seriousness of the acts, but to refrain from making facile causal links between some incidents and the characteristics of an entire musical genre, its performers, and followers in a process where ‘atypical’ events are selected and presented a ‘stereotypical’ fashion (Lea and Young, 1984: 64) due to cultural prejudice that subsequently assumes the features of and leads to discriminatory action.

In the case of grime, the main evidence of such discriminatory policing against the genre’s protagonists and audiences comes in the form of the Promotion Event Risk Assessment Form 696, which was launched by the London Metropolitan Police in 2008 with the aim of ‘identify[ing and minimis[ing] any risk of most serious violent crime happening at the proposed event’ (*Promotion Event Risk Assessment Form 696*, 2009: 1). The original version of the 696 form contained leading questions that directly targeted bashment, R’n’B, and garage artists, whose music is popular with young, Black British audiences, although grime

has been hardest-hit by Form 696 leading to event cancellations (Jonze, 2010; *The Independent*, 2008, *Channel 4 News*, 2017, Bramwell, 2015a: 127), “bashment bans” (Ellis-Petersen, 2017), and club closures (Grierson, 2016) as a direct result of implementing what Bramwell (2015a: 63) described as a ‘key instrument in suppressing the scene’s growth in the capital’ which ‘disproportionately affects black artists’. Since it was first introduced, the 696 form was revised in 2009 (MPA, 2009) and eventually withdrawn in November 2017 following a review ordered by the London Mayor Sadiq Khan (*News Met Police*, 2017).

Despite such a salutary development, the issue has hardly vanished (Bernard, 2018); especially since the official announcement issued by the Met Police, following the removal of the 696 Form ten years after its launch, offers no apology for or confession to the form’s discriminatory nature. Apart from claiming that Form 696 was received negatively ‘by members of the London music industry, particularly around a perception that events associated with some genres of music were disproportionately affected by this process’ (*News Met Police*, 2017), the emphasis of the announcement is on the impact that the 696 Form had on ‘the night-time economy’, rather than on BAME individuals and groups. This non-apology from the Metropolitan Police is consistent with the way in which the 696 form was revised in 2009, which omitted all mention of specific music genres by name and no longer asked promoters to specify ‘the target audience’ for the planned event or provide details of ‘the make up of the patrons’ (*Promotion Event Risk Assessment Form 696*, 2008: 1, 3), but it still targeted events that ‘predominantly feature DJs or MCs performing to a recorded backing track’ (*Promotion Event Risk Assessment Form 696*, 2009, 2011, 2017: 2). Given that the only musical genres that fit that description exclusively belong to the family of black popular music, which involves the use of pre-recorded music as the sonic background against which MCs perform their lyrics, the ‘potential’ for Form 696 ‘to be perceived as discriminatory’ (MPA, 2009) hardly disappears. The optimism that inevitably follows from the withdrawal of Form 696 soon becomes tempered by the realisation that much like the cosmetic changes made to the original form, the Met’s announcement of the withdrawal of Form 696 actually demonstrates exactly what it denies in its studied avoidance of owning up to prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory practices that brought Form 696 about, and whose legacy remains although the paperwork may have disappeared.

What the controversy around the 696 form illustrates, even in its aftermath, is the stubborn persistence of institutional racism within the London Metropolitan police as expressed in ‘processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantages minority ethnic people’ (Macpherson, 1999: para. 34). If anything, the 696 Form demonstrates all this fairly clearly; adding to the legacy of the Scarman (1981), Gifford (1986), Macpherson (1999), and other more recent inquiries and reviews (Safer Bristol Partnership, 2017) some of which venture beyond policing (Keith, 2006; Lammy, 2017) despite their various limitations (Fekete, 2017; Bridges, 2018). What is of particular interest to critical and cultural criminologists, however, is the continuity and change in the criminalisation of expressive forms of Black musical cultures, such as grime, the regulatory policing tactics (Talbot, 2011: 81) used in doing so, and the long-standing and deep-rooted cultural stereotypes that inform all the above; highlighting Cain’s (1973: 19) memorable assertion that Black people have historically appeared ‘different, separate [and] incomprehensible’ to the police.

This “incomprehensibility” of Black (British) culture is routinely blamed on stereotypes about problematic family structures, culture, and values, served as a ‘stale dish of inner-city pathology, family breakdown, fatherlessness and chaos’ (Gilroy, 2003) which also functions as a reminder of the incompatibility of “black culture” with mainstream norms and values; often constructing ‘the black presence’ as a ‘threat’ to the ‘homogeneous, white, national ‘we’ (Gilroy, 1987: 49). This form of cultural racism (Fanon, 1964) has its roots in the belief that “black” cultural values should be suspected of promoting violent or criminal lifestyles (Bramwell, 2015a: 141-4), and should therefore be responded to by tactics that have been variously described as ‘policing against black people’ (IRR, 1987; Fryer, 1984: 391-9).

This pathologisation of Black British culture and the framing of its musical exports as ‘symbols of trouble’ (Cohen, 1988) becomes even more eerily interesting in its capacity to alchemize culture into crime by eventually merging the two together through ‘dangerous associations’ (Williams and Clarke, 2016) between “blackness” and “criminality” (Gilroy, 1982) that render young Black Britons’ modes of public participation suspect if not denoting gang membership *tout court* (Hallsworth and Young, 2008; Hallsworth, 2013; Pitts, 2016; Palmer and Pitts, 2006; Palmer, 2009). This, of course, is nothing new as Keith (1993: 159)

reminds us by describing how '[b]lack social centres and social events become labelled variously as foci for political agitators (1960s London); scenes of mugging; drug dealing and street crime (1970s London); and/or potential sites of public disorder (1980s London), as the conflict between police and Black people becomes part of police routine'. Some recurring examples of policing Black British culture include the police overstaffing of black cultural events (e.g. Notting Hill Carnival), the harassment of black people in meeting places such as youth clubs, music and other semi-public venues (Sivanandan, 1982; 31-34; Gutzmore, 1993: 207-230; Gilroy, 1987: 115-116; Talbot, 2007), to say nothing of a host of measures that were introduced to control the movement of Black Britons in the capital through a host of controversial methods such as the 'sus laws' of the 1970s (Demuth, 1978) or saturation policing tactics such as Operation Swamp '81 and the Special Patrol Groups (SPGs) that dominated the policing against Black Britons in the 1970s and the 1980s, succeeded by Operation Trident in the 1990s, and Operation Shield, the Metropolitan Police Gang Matrix and the Promotion Event Risk Assessment Form 696 in 2000s.

The significance of these examples alerts us not just to a false note in the policing of grime, and related musical genres, but also remind us of the complex cultural processes by which certain acts become defined and processed as criminal (criminalisation), as well as how these "crimes" are viewed as an emanation of racial difference; cultural or biological (racialisation)<sup>3</sup>. As Toor (2015: 94) helpfully explains, *criminalisation* should be understood as 'the act of labelling a community, or indeed its members, as 'criminal' due to its perceived associations and engagement with certain illegal and deviant activities', while *racialisation* 'refers to the processes by which specific understandings of race, ethnicity, culture and faith are used to construct a distinct categorisation of [a certain] population'. This is of particular significance to cultural criminology as culture is reintroduced both as an ingredient in the racialisation of crime as well as a site of resistance to cultural marginalisation, social exclusion, and political disenfranchisement. The policing of grime, therefore, functions as a unique case study that illustrates both processes vividly; thereby allowing cultural criminologists in particular to emphasize the cultural underpinnings of law

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<sup>3</sup> Nils Christie (1993: 21), echoing Becker (1973), puts it rather nicely by arguing that '[a]cts are not, they *become*. Crime does not exist. Crime is created. First there are acts. Then follows a long process of giving meaning to these acts. Distance increases the tendency to give certain acts the meaning of being crimes, and the persons the simplified meaning of criminals'.



enforcement and conventional social definitions of what crime is and how it should be responded to, while also reminding us how much 'social harm' (Hillyard and Tombs, 2004) is done in turning (sub)cultural forms of expression into candidates for 'censure' (Sumner, 1990, 1997) and social control.

This begs the question of how cultural criminological scholarship can challenge such stereotypical depictions of subcultures and the injustice(s) that these bring by rethinking and reintroducing musical subcultures like grime as instruments and conductors of active public participation through sonic, lyrical, and bodily performance. Despite recent scholarly optimism (Dimou and Ilan, 2018), ambivalence (Ilan, 2014), healthy scepticism (Bennett and Harris, 2004; Jencks, 2005; Huq, 2006; Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003; Blackman, 2005, 2014) and outright pessimism (Lash 2007; Winlow *et al.* 2015) about the meaning and value of subcultures and their relation to 'depoliticized play in the post-modern pleasuredome' (Muggleton, 2000: 49), the remainder of this article will (re)present grime as a valuable form of creativity, public expression and political agency that continues to resist, criticise, and expose its criminalisation by "speaking truth to power" (Benda, 1928; Jacoby, 1987; Said, 1994) and finding innovative ways to carve out a space for public engagement, belonging, and even work 'within a music industry that is otherwise dominated by socially-privileged groups' (White, 2018: 1; White, 2016).

### **Grime MCs: Criminals or Public Characters?**

Public perceptions of and discussions on hip-hop, rap and their various stylistic offshoots, have traditionally assumed the form of anxiety or dismay at the glamorisation of violence in the lyrical content and overall imagery of rap culture(s). Yet, this charge is as common as the counterargument it has inspired (Gates, Jr., 1990; Kelley, 1996; Kubrin, 2005; Kubrin and Nielson, 2014; Krims, 2000; Kitwana, 2005; Deveraux, 2007; Keyes, 2004; Bramwell, 2015a: 127; Bramwell, 2017: 10; Ilan, 2012: 47); urging caution against such stereotypical, indiscriminate and perhaps *discriminatory* portrayals of an entire musical culture that requires as much "decoding" as any other cultural canon or tradition (Bourdieu, 1984: 2). In the context of grime, this argument was restaged in the form of a comment made by former Prime Minister David Cameron at a British Society of Magazine Editors event, where he accused BBC Radio 1 of playing music that 'encourages people to carry guns and knives'

(Day and Gibson, 2006). This was followed by a timely rebuttal by grime MC Lethal Bizzle who countered the former Conservative leader's statement by encouraging him to attune himself to the realities of young Britons, while fashioning himself and other grime MCs as 'street MPs' who 'empower the kids to get more involved with government and give them a voice' (Bizzle, 2006). What this episode illustrates is not merely a dispute over (mis)interpretations of rap culture but a reluctance to make a distinction between *depicting* and *promoting* violence, coupled by a tendency to treat rap as 'a form of sincere and literal testimony'; thereby dismissing the possibility that it may 'carr[y] fictive qualities' or 'mak[e] use of literary, musical and performative devices in the pursuit of aesthetic value' (Bramwell, 2017: 10) no matter how crude, indecent, suggestive or impolite. Worse still, the audiences are assumed to be passive dupes that are lured into lawlessness by unscrupulous rappers, rather than active and independently-minded interpreters of cultural texts and their meaning.

Contrary to such problematic depictions of grime as a "problem genre", the concluding section of this article reintroduces grime MCs not as criminals who glorify violence in their lyrics, but as 'organic' public intellectuals (Gramsci, 1971: 5-10), 'public characters' (Jacobs, 1961: 68; Fatsis, 2016) or 'street MPs' (Bizzle, 2006) who lay bare *the violence of what is represented by their lyrics* (disturbing images of social exclusion), while also hinting at *the social and political violence done to those who are represented in their lyrics* (grime MCs and audiences) through the criminalisation of grime. Drawing on Fatsis' (2016) reconceptualization of intellectual life as a form of direct public participation that replaces mythologised "public intellectuals" that speak *to* or *for* publics, with ordinary public characters who act *in public*, it will be argued that grime MCs are ideal candidates for the role due to the fact that the genre they represent bears the hallmarks of a quintessentially public-oriented, engaged, and involved 'citizens' music' (Jones, 1995: ix, 232). To do so grime is *re-presented* here as a 'subaltern counterpublic' (Fraser, 1999: 67), a 'heterotopia', or 'counter-site' (Foucault, 1986: 24) of as well as for public culture which creates and sustains active public life through a unique combination and use of spoken word (*logos*), public space (*topos*), craft (*techne*), and entrepreneurial spirit (*ethos*).

Taking a cue from Gramsci's (1971: 10, 5) contention that intellectual life 'can no longer consist in eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions,

but in active participation in practical life', and that 'every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields', grime seems to fulfil that very function. In weaving together what are seen here as four essential characteristics of 'communicative action' (Habermas, 1984); speaking, occupying public space, producing cultural artefacts, and distributing them commercially, grime emerges as a force to be reckoned with intellectually, socio-culturally, and politically too, commanding our attention away from and beyond a law-enforcement context. An analysis of the *logos*, *topos*, *techne*, and *ethos* of grime is therefore necessary and will be provided in turn as a gentle nudge towards stimulating cultural criminological interest in grime; not as a source of despair that needs to be responded to punitively, but as a 'resource of hope' (Williams, 1989) that helps us address the longstanding and deep-rooted biases in the policing of (sub)culture(s) that the criminalisation of grime and other Black British musical subcultures demonstrates.

Starting with *logos*, grime MCs articulate their experiences in and give voice to their grievances about life in the dark side of "urban" (Smith, 2003; Wheatley, 2014); characterised by 'bank scams, street robbery, shotters, blotters [=shotters/blotters: drug-dealers] or HMP' (Dizze Rascal, *Brand New Day*), compared to the imagery of grime's frothier and "blingier" counterparts, such as garage and bashment which emphasise ostentatious displays of status symbols (clothing, jewellery, cars) and "slack" (=lewd) sexuality. In addition to the, often politically-charged, lyrical content of grime, its form and communicative practices (rhyming/"spitting"/rapping) are of equal importance as grime MCs fiercely express what they deeply feel in a dizzyingly, fast-paced manner where orality (Glissant, 1989: 248-9; Potter, 1995; Ong, 2002; Henry, 2006) functions as the mode in which grime MCs speak out as 'carrier-groups' (Eyerman, 2011) who make claims and voice concerns for others.

Moving from the rhetorical power of grime to the physical space (*topos*) that envelops it, we soon discover that grime MCs use, draw on, and 'produce' public space (Lefebvre, 1991) by 'spray[ing]' their lyrics like 'sonic graffiti' (Bramwell, 2015a: 11, 51) around the city in parks, public transport, and neighbourhood corners. Such use of public space through beats

(rhythms) and rhymes (lyrics), constitutes a broad and diffuse *agora* of sorts where meaning and culture are experienced as lived, embodied entities rather than as abstractions; creating opportunities for assembling citizens through speaking and listening (Oswell, 2009: 12). This is exemplified by the practice of “cyphers/ciphers” which, in rap and hip-hop culture, refers to a ‘circle of participants and onlookers that closes around battling rappers or dancers as they improvise for each other’ (Chang, 2009). Space, place, and culture therefore intertwine to form a public place of assembly where citizenship is exercised in an actively-involved, publicly-situated, and “lived” manner, not unlike the Pnyx in Ancient Athens or Speakers’ Corner in London.

Grime’s creative inventiveness (*techne*) is equally democratic in spirit and attitude drawing on free, inexpensive, and often pirated or shared music production software to create music that carries ‘sonic agency’ (LaBelle, 2018) and makes its public interventions heard by playing music from mobile devices in public places, disseminating it online (Channel U/Channel AKA, Grime digital, Grimepedia), broadcasting it on pirate radio (Rinse FM, Deja Vu, Raw UK, Flex, Mode, Radar, and Heat FM), and distributing it through alternative, informal underground channels (mixtapes/grimetapes, CDs, DVDs, self-released albums). Through such use of music production and distribution techniques, grime set out to talk back insolently to the experience of life lived in a ‘council estate of mind’ (Bramwell, 2015b) through a ‘visceral experience of audition’ (Henriques, 2011: xv) that is intentionally raw, dissonant, harsh, and disruptive; living up to its name in a characteristically candid fashion.

This also reflected in the entrepreneurial spirit (*ethos*) and distribution mechanisms that grime MCs employ to make themselves and their music known. Despite criticisms of grime succumbing to ‘commodified transgression’ (Ilan, 2014) due to the genre’s stellar rise to commercial success (Rawcliffe, 2017), grime MCs have actually used their entrepreneurial acumen in very transgressive ways that remain faithful to the genre’s subversive DIY principles (White, 2018). Although grime is now part of the pop mainstream and no longer transmits from Stratford rooftops, risking any unwanted visits from the Department for Trade and Industry (DTI), it has become *commercial* without being entirely *commercialised*. While grime MCs may bask in the glory of their commercial success, they do so in their own terms exercising an unusual degree of autonomy and independence. This becomes glaringly obvious when considering that North London grime MC Skepta won the 2016 Mercury Prize

for his *self-released* album *Konnichiwa*, or noticing how South London grime superstar Stormzy openly criticised the UK Prime Minister's handling of the Grenfell Tower fire, after winning British Album of the Year and British Male Solo Artist at the Brit Awards 2018, by rapping: "Yo, Theresa May, where's that money for Grenfell? What, you thought we just forgot about Grenfell? You criminals and you got the cheek to call us savages, you should do some jail time, you should pay some damages" (*Guardian News*, 2018).

In the light of this discussion of grime MCs as subversive public intellectuals, or rather 'public characters', who think and act with and through *logos*, *topos*, *techne*, and *ethos* to voice grievances, resist political marginalisation, and reclaim their dignity and self-respect through their art, the criminalisation of the genre raises some urgent questions about *who* and *what* is criminalised when black musical subcultures are being criminalised. Taking a cue from Bauman's (1999: xvi-xvii) nuanced definition of culture as 'the activity of the free roaming spirit, the site of creativity, invention, self-critique, and self-transcendence' coupled with 'the courage to break well-drawn horizons' and 'to step beyond closely-guarded boundaries', it becomes important to interrogate whether what is being policed when grime is policed is an expressive culture that is *prejudicially viewed* as and *discriminatorily responded to* as dangerous, threatening, and criminal even; because it refuses to perform the second meaning that Bauman gives to culture as 'a tool of routinisation and continuity-a handmaiden of social order'.

It has here been argued that grime has been held hostage to an outlook that merges it with its stereotype as a musical genre that ostensibly celebrates violent crime, without entertaining the possibility that such a depiction might be the product of generalising from isolated incidents and reasoning from widely held but fixed and oversimplified images that interpret grime as little more than the cultural expression of criminal gang membership. By contrast, this article rejects such a view; illustrating instead how grime functions as a provocative musical genre that alerts audiences to iniquities in our socio-political arrangements, with grime MCs acting as Socratic gadflies whose words may sting or do violence to illusory fantasies of social equality but do not induce listeners to perform acts of deliberate and unprovoked violence any more than other cultural "texts" would; be it political propaganda or literary and artistic genres.

Criminologists in general and cultural criminologists in particular, would therefore profit from an invitation to 'listen' (Back, 2007), 'look up', and 'take notice' (White, 2018: 2) of grime as a musical genre that is also a rich 'data resource', given that grime lyrics 'expre[ss] social milieus which grant the listener a distinctly emic perspective: the ability to share an insider's perception of social reality'; thereby allowing criminologists, and social scientists more broadly, to 'follow the researched to their 'most inaccessible lairs' (Barron, 2013: 12, 7, 9, 13). Barron's apt observation becomes increasingly important, theoretically as well as methodologically, if grime lyrics are used to help researchers obtain otherwise partly or wholly inaccessible research data, due to difficulties of access and the reluctance of participants to speak their minds freely. Listening to and thinking about grime as a research tool, therefore, allows 'in-depth', 'thickly-described' (Geertz, 1973: 14) contextual analyses of the realities that are portrayed in the lyrics, while also creating opportunities for introducing the use of music as a worthy source of empirical data on experiences *as they are lived* in the contexts *where they are lived*. Such a proposition is consistent with the logic and practice of research as a commitment to understanding how 'any social group' develops 'a life of their own that becomes meaningful, reasonable, and normal once you get close to it' (Goffman, 1961: 7). This, however, requires us to 'relinquish [our] comfortable position in the long chair on the veranda of the missionary compound' (Malinowski, 1948: 122-3), in order to engage in close-up scholarship rather than 'car window' social science (Du Bois, 2007: 105); allowing us to understand, appreciate, and feel our way into the 'rhythm of human deed' (Du Bois, 1905) by studying people 'outside of any law-enforcement context' that serves to render them deviant (Polsky, 1969: 125).

To conclude, this article has demonstrated how and why grime has been criminalised by the London Metropolitan Police through the use of risk assessment "innovations" in policing, like Form 696, that reveal and expose stereotypical assumptions about imagined links between black musical subcultures and criminal behaviour that are shown to be racially-driven and discriminatory. Apart from renewing discussions about the persistence of institutional racism in the Met's organisational culture and associated policing practices, the example of grime offers ample scope for critical investigations into the limits and possibilities of gaining citizens' trust in a police force and a broader socio-cultural context that "profiles" the activities, movement, and expression of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic

(BAME) groups as dangerous and threatening; thereby adding another link to a long, historical chain of mistrust and dislike in the relationship between BAME people and the police in post-war Britain. In contradistinction to such prejudicial attitudes that lead to discriminatory policing and social marginalisation, due to an unwillingness to recognise unconventional cultural practices as valid, meaningful, and desirable, grime is being granted a fairer hearing in this article; as a form of publicly-engaged cultural expression that is being penalised and stigmatised for what conventional artistic practices fail to do. The genre's "rough and tough" attitude, therefore, is celebrated here as an indication of its ability to stimulate debate on and encourage public engagement with social problems that range from experiences of social inequality and exclusion to hostile police tactics, as suffered by the 'urban outcasts' (Wacquant, 2007) that grime MCs speak of. Drawing on grime, and the questionable police attention that it receives, offers (cultural) criminology a unique handle with which to grasp details of our criminal justice culture and its effects on citizens that might otherwise go unnoticed much to the detriment of attentive, critical research that holds law enforcement agencies and their criminological scrutinisers into account. It is therefore hoped that the analysis that is hereby offered will open up new seams of inquiry, and prompt further scholarly work in an area that is intellectually exciting and socio-politically urgent.

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## Discography

Dizzee Rascal, *Showtime*

Dizzee Rascal, *Brand New Day*

## Filmography

Adam Smith, *Wot Do U Call It?* Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xiMZAPIfZxl> (Accessed: 23 February, 2018)

Simon Wheatley, *Don't Call Me Urban! The Time of Grime* Available at:

<https://vimeo.com/100053938> (Accessed: 23 February, 2018)