

TITLE: From Rhythm and Blues to Grime: Black Atlantic Exchanges and the Performance of Identity

Abstract: In Gilroy's black Atlantic trope, black identities are part of an ongoing process of travel and exchange. Here, in the United Kingdom, the discourse regarding urban music is one that centres on ethnicity and underachievement. Less consideration is given to the role of music in shaping and creating identities.

When DJ Kool Herc brought Hip Hop to the Bronx, he was reinterpreting a musical genre from his childhood in Jamaica, which had its roots/routes in American RnB. The post war migrants from the Jamaican countryside adapted the sound system format for the enclosed spaces of England. By the start of the 21st century, grime artists such as Chipmunk had extended the concept of the sound system, 'spitting' over disrupted, disjointed beats, reworking all that had gone before and creating anew.

Grime is, in Gilroy's terms, an 'invented UK musical expression', it is an urban music genre which has its origins in two of the most economically and socially deprived areas in England, the east London Boroughs of Newham and Tower Hamlets. It draws on the cultural, political and economic history of having parents and grandparents from elsewhere and staking a claim to the lived experience of a specific and particular place. Grime is predominantly young, male and black and it has a growing global significance.

Yet, the social, economic and cultural impact - both locally and globally - of these artists performance practices has been subsumed within a discourse that focuses on aggressive behaviour and violent lyrics.

Drawing on primary ethnographic research undertaken in England and Cyprus, this paper takes three events as its starting point:

1. Chipmunk ft. Chris Brown 'Champion' is used as the WWE Tough Enough 2011 theme song.
2. An interview in September 2009 with DJ Marcus Nasty, a founder member of an east London grime crew, where he describes his experience of playing UK Funky in the Gambia.
3. June 2010; I am sitting by the poolside in Ocho Rios in Jamaica. The DJ is playing a mix of popular dancehall tunes, and then I hear it... the first bars of Donaeo's 'Party Hard'. Donaeo is a singer/songwriter from north west London.

This paper considers how this sonic, psychic and physical movement by people of African descent from Europe to the Caribbean, Africa and the Americas has enabled the performance of new embodied identities.

Key words: Hip Hop, black Atlantic, identity, Grime, UK Funky

Grime is, in Gilroy's terms, an 'invented UK musical expression' (P. Gilroy 1999, p.76). It draws on the cultural, political and economic history of having parents and grandparents from elsewhere. This genre lays a claim to the lived experience of a specific and particular place, in this case urban east London (P. Gilroy 1999, p.3; Simon Hampson 2009). It provides a rare opportunity for its practitioners to tell stories about themselves and their life events and thus assert black urban identities that are rooted in, for example, the London Borough of Newham rather than Africa or the Caribbean; using a persona that they have created.

Grime draws its influences from the sound systems of Jamaica, filtered through the last few decades of Hip Hop, Drum and Bass and UK Garage. It has its origins in the hybridity of Jamaican Reggae, American RnB and Hip Hop – which itself grew out of the mix between American and Caribbean musical expression (Bradley 2000). It has created a space that enables sonic, psychic and physical movement for its practitioners and yet the sound itself, wherever it is heard, remains the same. This genre has also created the conditions for other black UK creative expression to be heard on a wider scale.

As a black Atlantic creative expression, grime exists in a field of tension which enables a further exploration of a number of oppositional positions including; persona and its relationship to legality and illegality, the antagonistic relationship between insularity and specificity while at the same time having a global reach and an 'underground' scene which is in effect, regulated and highly visible. The focus of this paper, however, which comes out of a wider research project¹ looking at entrepreneurship in the urban music economy, is how grime enables the performance of identity as creative practitioners, artists and entrepreneurs.

¹With a specific focus on the informal music economy in east London, the aim of this project is to explore to what extent entrepreneurship exists within the 'creative underground' or 'informal creative economy'. As the starting point for this research is east London, this location as a site for innovative developments in urban music genres such as grime is also considered. The methodology used consisted of a literature review, internet research, semi structured interviews, participant observation and the collection and archiving of selected merchandise and promotional material. As well as a library of photographs, I also have 'behind the scenes' film footage of a model shoot, a pirate radio station and a music video. I have created a forty minute film documenting the urban music scene in Ayia Napa. Twenty-four interviews were carried out with respondents who are involved in most aspects of the urban music industry: artists/performers, event promoters, models and filmmakers. One of the findings from the initial research was the global reach of what was considered to be a hyper local activity.

Grime started in east London, an area that has a long history of movement and migration, from the French Huguenots who came to Spitalfields in the seventeenth century to the 20th century migration from the Caribbean, Africa and the Indian sub-continent. Despite recent regeneration, the east end of London still contains some of the poorest areas in the UK. (Tames 2006; London Borough of Hackney 2005; London Borough of Newham 2005; London Borough of Tower Hamlets 2005).

Whilst acknowledging that aspects of its fearsome reputation may be deserved, it cannot be denied that grime has created a space to express individuality in a public or community space (Carroll 2008, p.184). It provides an opportunity for collaboration at a time when working across geographical boundaries is deemed to be problematic².

This genre also serves as an interstice where creative practice and commerce come together and enable the sale of black creative expression in a national and global market place (Hill Collins 2006). Also, as practitioners were less able to perform ‘out there’ they had to find ways to broadcast to a wider audience. They have therefore used technology, particularly social media, to broadcast their creative expression to a wider audience in the UK, Europe and worldwide. In doing so, they have become artists, performers and entrepreneurs.

²The ‘postcode wars’ and the related knife and gun crime has been a persistent refrain in UK inner cities in recent years. The articles by (Glendinning 2008 and De Castella 2007) provide an outline of the problem.

As a musical genre, grime requires an introduction. Although it has been referred to as ‘British Hip Hop’, it is more than Hip Hop with an English accent (Wood 2011). It is an urban music genre that emerged, in the early part of the 21st century, from east London an area which has historically continued to experience poverty and deprivation³. Indeed, as one of my respondents, Steven - a 23-year-old music producer - told me when asked to describe his east London; ‘on a good day, it’s vibrant; on a bad day, it’s red’.

In 2003, at the age of 19, Dizze Rascal, a grime MC from Bow in Tower Hamlets, won the Mercury Music Prize for his debut album ‘Boy in da Corner’(Rascal 2003). At the time, it was difficult for the ‘mainstream’ music industry to categorise his creative expression, finally settling for ‘UK rapper’(BBC News Channel 2003). Dizze Rascal was originally mentored by Wiley - a founder member of the east London grime crew - Roll Deep⁴.

A key component of the grime scene was, and is, the crew. In the urban music sector a crew is a group of like-minded individuals who (usually) have been friends and share a common interest in this case – music. Predominantly male, a crew is a space which provides an opportunity to learn your craft and develop tacit knowledge about the scene and how it operates⁵. Roles and responsibilities are delineated and can comprise, beatmakers, MCs, vocalists and producers, however, members can, and do, cross boundaries.

³In the “*Thinkpiece*” the current situation of east London is outlined thus:

Since the nineteenth century east London has provided the location for manufacturing industries and the cities docklands. It remained, [...] relatively poor compared to the rich west of London. When the docks closed in the 1970’s, the area suffered major job losses in traditional [...]. By the beginning of the twenty first century, [...] regeneration of London’s Docklands [...] had created an area that is socially polarized, containing pockets of relative affluence within an area that has a high concentration of relative poverty and deprivation. (MacRury & Poynter 2009, p.5)

⁴Roll Deep are a crew of approximately 12 young men from Tower Hamlets and are credited, along with N.A.S.T.Y crew – from Newham, with being innovators of the grime genre (Melisa Tang 2005; Simon Hampson 2009; Petridis 2003). N.A.S.T.Y is an acronym for Natural Artistic Sounds Touching You and Marcus Nasty is a founder member.

⁵However, a distinction needs to be drawn here between a ‘gang’ which may or may not have ‘crew’ in its name and a crew in the context of urban music. A gang is seen to have come together for other activities and usually nefarious purposes.

Like Roll Deep, N.A.S.T.Y⁶ performs both as a crew and as individual artists, combining individual pursuits with collaborative activity and enterprise (grimepedia 2005; MySpace 2005). Their output includes an internet radio station which has DJs broadcasting from Italy, Toronto, Rotterdam, Montreal and the Czech Republic as well as across the UK (Anon n.d.).

Grime is predominantly young, male and black, with the female presence in this sector as exemplified by Nolay and Shystie, significant but less visible (Kitty Empire 2003). Grime sits outside the usual musical conventions. It can be hard on the ear, the beats can be disturbing and brutal and the lyrics can be lost or disguised.

Pirate radio stations, club events, social media such as MySpace, Facebook and now Twitter; as well as Channel AKA (formerly Channel U), a digital TV channel form an influential and integral part of the marketing and promotion of urban music of all kinds, including grime. These avenues have been made possible by advances in technology. Participation in this arena therefore requires technological skill, collaborative activity and the exchange or barter of goods and services (Banks & Humphreys 2008, p.405). Artists work together – often for no payment - in order to disseminate their creative product to a wider audience.

Historically though, live performance has been problematic for grime artists. The regulating authorities experienced these events as troublesome, therefore most artists were unable to perform in inner London (unless on a pirate radio station). However, while pirate radio stations are viewed by the authorities to be a front for illegal activity – particularly drug dealing, these same official bodies use these stations for ‘community interest’ broadcasts, such as Operation Trident, Crimestoppers and even the Department of Health Swine Flu initiative⁷. Instead, through necessity, the performance locations for this creative expression spread outwards, first to the suburbs, then across the UK, to Europe, North America and Africa.

⁷In November 2009, I filmed behind the scenes at a pirate radio station and these advertisements were being broadcast at the time.

It is worth noting that there is, however, a continuity of practice within the current urban music economy in east London and the sound systems, shebeens and blues dances of the previous decades (Bradley 2000). This continuity can be traced through the mass migration from the Caribbean in the 1950's and 1960's, which brought with it particular social and cultural practices, including the sound system. The outdoor sound system, with its sound clash, version excursion, difference and repetition and call and response was reworked and reconfigured for the enclosed dwellings of the UK. In the same way DJ Kool Herc reworked and reinterpreted the sound system format to create Hip Hop in the Bronx (Chang 2007).

In his black Atlantic trope, Gilroy uses the ship as a metaphor for the movement, transformation and relocation which, he argues, is an intrinsic factor in the creation of black identities. In the UK, it is evident that black boys and young black men face 'serious challenges in every sector of society; they are less likely to do well at school, more likely to be unemployed and much more likely to become involved in the criminal justice system' (Communities and Local Government 2007, p.6; Sergeant 2009). During my initial research activity, I started to wonder, how it is that these young black men who, it could be argued, constitute a 'threatened and unwanted community' (Hill Collins 2006, p.298), whose invisible presence gives cause for concern and fear and demands the need for action plans and task forces⁸ are able to make this physical and psychic movement from, for example, urban east London to southern Cyprus and from underachiever to entrepreneur. This mobility is manifest in the following three events:

Firstly, Chipmunk is a 20-year-old grime MC from north London, previously mentored by Wiley of Roll Deep crew. His track 'Champion' features Chris Brown, a US artist (Anon 2010). At a first glance this is simply another record company deal. But, how is it possible that a young man from Tottenham in north London – working within a genre that appears to be particular to the UK, creates a soundtrack to World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) 2011 Tough Enough. Secondly, DJ Marcus Nasty –

⁸Operation Trident, NUT Charter 2007 Breaking Down Barriers, Reach Project including Role Models are some recent well documented examples of the 'trouble with black boys'. In addition, the National Black Boys Can Association exists to raise the academic and social achievement of young boys. The Home Affairs Select Committee Inquiry published a report: Young Black People and the Criminal Justice System in December 2008 focusing on the 'reasons for their over-representation in the system'.

a founder member of an east London grime crew, is interviewed in 2009 by an online magazine. While talking about the countries he has visited throughout his DJ career, more recently playing UK Funky – again a genre which is specific to the UK – he states ‘they [the Gambians]...just get it [...] they went crazy. [...] they were well into the music straight away: nothing long (Blackdown 2009). Finally, in Jamaica, Ocho Rios is the foremost tourist resort. Jamaica punches way above its weight in terms of the outward global impact of its recorded music industry. So, when in June 2010, I hear Donaeo’s track “Party Hard” (Anon 2009), played on rotation, I wonder how has this UK Funky anthem made the journey from London to Jamaica. Donaeo is a singer/songwriter from north-west London.

The contradictions and questions which emerge from an exploration of the grime scene allow for a more complex reading of the significance of urban music. In the UK, the shebeen, blues dance and nomadic rave event, once subjected to the ‘disciplinary procedures which organise social space’ have been all but legislated out of existence (Stanley-Niaah 2004). Yet, it is possible that these ‘disciplinary procedures’, when combined with the discourse regarding urban creative expression, have enabled a countermovement – a musical scene where urban youth and young black men in particular can create a new persona as perhaps an artist or an entrepreneur. This in turn allows entry into a different assemblage – that of the economic market place. This persona while enabling and allowing the creation of a ‘speaking subject’ (Ewans 2008, p.8) emphasises a performance at the borders of legality. So, it not only provides an opportunity to create a persona or performing identity that offers visibility and recognition, but also gives licence to regulators such as the police and local authorities to monitor, survey and curtail activities.

However, although grime travels, the sound remains the same. Grime does not take on a local flavour. Due to technology, the sound can travel unaccompanied by the participants. The practitioners can go or not go to where their creative expression is being heard. Yet when its practitioners perform on a global music stage they operate within different genres, for example, Chipmunk becomes an RnB artist and Marcus Nasty becomes a DJ who plays UK Funky.

This black Atlantic trajectory, which I identified in my initial research, takes us to Cyprus, a place twenty-five miles from Africa where a market has been created through the entrepreneurial activities of these young men of Caribbean and African descent. Travelling from predominantly urban environments in the UK, this exchange also takes us to a global space where young men contained by postcodes and poverty create performing identities which enable them to make movement.

An exploration of grime therefore reconfigures the black Atlantic trope. This reconfiguration is possible because while grime is traceable to a specific and particular location, this genre has been created out of what Gilroy calls the '[...] displacement, relocation and dissemination of black creative expression' (Gilroy 1999, p.80). And yet, while the sound remains the same, it is possible for its practitioners to be transformed.

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