

ETHNOGRAPHER SOUNDCLASH: A UK RAP AND GRIME STORY

Joy White and Jonathan Ilan

Introduction

Ethnography is a form of social research that generates insight from engagements with the lives of those being researched (see Brewer 2000; Hammersley and Atkinson 2019). Reliant on the relationships that form between researcher and participant, ethnography seeks to build deep findings over time which tend to reflect the specific people involved. As two different researchers of UK Rap and Grime, we are using the format of the soundclash to tell a story of the genres we study. Our identities, approaches to study, and musical tastes inform the tracks that we have chosen for this purpose and in dialogue they tell a more expansive story that we might have come up with alone.

Rationale

The ethnographic imperative to immerse oneself in a field and culture of study manifests in a great variety of practices, experiences and data. For those of us who study music scenes and cultures, it involves finding a means of 'tuning into' the lived experience of being a part of them, whether as musicians or fans. In the contemporary Black British music forms of Grime, UK Rap and UK Drill, lyrics and creative content can themselves be forms of ethnographic data (see Barron 2013). As scholars of these genres, however, we are too often restricted to more conventional forms of presenting our research and findings. It can be difficult to find the space to explore, process and showcase insight outside of the rigid format of standard academic journals and books. How can we research music scenes with creativity and conviviality at their hearts if it is challenging to become excited about the ways we present? With this ethnographer soundclash we present an ethnographic picture of the genres and scenes we study, trading YouTube videos, 'tune fi tune' (song for song).

Our decision to present research-gained insight in the form of a soundclash is born of our appreciation of and affinity for the lifestyles, heritage, and modes of practice that gave rise to these musical forms in the first place. UK Rap and Grime music are imbued with the stylistic one-up-manship of street



culture to the extent that ‘clashing’ and lyrical ‘beef’ are woven through them. Clashing presents as an adversarial component where lyrics are spoken or sung over the same beat, often building an interaction between the performers and the audience. Performers will often throw down a lyrical challenge and ‘send for’ (challenge) another artist (see Ilan 2012; White 2016; White 2020b). They are, moreover, heavily indebted to the legacy of reggae soundsystem culture where rivals compete for supremacy through their capacity to select and play the most apt and current records (see Stolzoff 2000; Bradley 2001; Henry 2006; White 2016). The clash is steeped in the language of competition, violence, and war, it is however anything but a declaration of true antagonism. Rather, the clash is part of a rich circuitry of mutual respect, camaraderie, conviviality, care and support through which music scenes develop and foster talent (see Bramwell 2015; White 2016). The ethnographic eye can pierce through the thick layer of racism and stereotype that perceives Black youth leisure through unhelpful clichés of violence and indeed ‘the gang’ (Gunter 2017). What can appear to be aggressive can in fact be a much more ambivalent and mournful expression of suffering and a prefiguration of what is required to overcome it (White 2017; Ilan 2020).

Although black music videos had been in existence since the 1980s, YouTube offers an accessible way to share musical output. UK Rap and Grime are established Black musical forms, drawing on a sonic genealogy of Hip Hop, Reggae, Jungle, and UK Garage, nourished by Black Atlantic flows (see Gilroy 1993). Our point of entry in this article is via YouTube music videos which, since 2005, have offered an accessible way to share musical output. As Malcolm James explains in *Sonic Intimacy*:

‘YouTube music videos tell a story of a moment in the transformation of black diasporic sound culture in Britain, in which autonomous infrastructures are absorbed by capitalist imperatives, treble supplants bass, hyperlocal presence is embedded, social media becomes the centre and the screen starts to sing’ (James 2020: 81)

As ethnographers our selections reflect both the hyperlocal presence as well as the global reach of Black Atlantic musical flows. Ethnographers, furthermore, are open to research questions and strategies taking shape in the field while research is ongoing and truthfully we were unsure where our convivial musical sparring would take us. We are different as people and as scholars. Joy is a Black British woman of Jamaican heritage with working-class roots and hails from the original dancehall generation. Johnny is a white Irish man from a middle-class background and the same age as the original Grime generation. Joy’s ethnographic engagement with the Grime and Rap scenes has been centred on traditional participant observation and interviews together with exploring material across a range of media. Johnny meanwhile combined insights from years DJing and promoting with experiences of ethnographically researching urban marginality to inform his immersive media analysis. As we ‘trade discs’ (or more accurately YouTube videos) we show how ethnographic difference can be generative, how iterative exchange can build more fulsome insight, and that what appears to be musical conflict can in fact be collaboration and development.

Over the course of two weeks we traded tracks and commentaries at regular intervals. In this way our story took shape in dialogue as we appreciated the other’s contribution and developed our subsequent selections. The tracks we have drawn may say something about who we are as individuals and scholars, how we tell stories and how we have reflected on some of the social issues that the music is affected by or comments on. The reader will have to judge.

We have presented our soundclash choices in a slightly idiosyncratic way, beginning with Johnny’s selected five and then turning to Joy’s. A picture of the scenes and genres emerges that is ethnographic in depth and attention to detail (Bramwell and Butterworth 2019). This approach to understanding the music seems particularly important and apt given the ongoing criminalisation of the genres that have seen extremes of censorship, restrictions on performances and the use of

lyrics and videos (shorn of appropriate context) to convict young marginalised (usually Black) men of crimes they might not have otherwise been prosecuted for (see e.g. White 2017; Fatsis 2019; Ilan 2020). As part of this we begin to explore scene participation as a form of ‘care’, a concept that is arguably bound up with femininity and tending to the vulnerable (see e.g. Fine 2005). In the material below we see tough men showing interest in their youngers, their communities and culture and committing their energies in the hope of securing better outcomes. Music provides the space for a wider range of emotional states to be experienced and explored in contexts where strong street cultures might otherwise seem mostly hospitable to anger and conflict (Ilan 2015; Stuart 2020).

We have also created a Spotify playlist of this soundclash, which is available through the following QR code:



Selected Tracks

Johnny Ilan



Sticky ft. Tubby T- Tales Of The Hood (2002, Social Circles)

First up from me, a UK Garage track released at the dawn of the Grime era, its upfront bassline and street themes share something with the newer more pugnacious genre. Singer Tubby T’s uplifting vocals in a Jamaican Dancehall style highlight the rich cosmopolitan backstory possessed by all the genres of Black Atlantic music. The lyrical content further sets this piece apart, unabashedly conscious, an older head shares the advice he received from his own mother: avoid the pitfalls of life ‘on road’ through eschewing violence and conspicuous consumption.

Ethnographers are often left with the unenviable task of making sense of contradictions they observe in the field and going beyond an ‘impressionistic’ account of what is most striking. Conscious lyricism is not abundantly common either in aspirational Garage or confrontational Grime, but certainly in the case of the latter, careful listening reveals Grime artists valuing craft, creative entrepreneurialism, and education. Moreover, there are clear ethics of care in operation, where senior figures guide and mentor up-and-coming artists with much the same love exhibited by Tubby T’s narrator. Ultimately, much like Rap, Grime needs to be understood as shot through with ‘dissonance’ (Jeffries 2011), the simultaneous adoption and display of seemingly contradictory tropes. It has been too easy to dismiss Grime as ‘violence music’ but it also (or perhaps more accurately) community music, care music, and music to bridge generations.

Ghetto – Mountain (2008, J Clarke Enterprises)

For my second tune I have selected a gold standard battle (clash) track by one of the MCs I rate most in the Grime scene. Ghetts (as he is now) has numerous different flows, with word-play and clarity for days and days. Spitting vitriol over a jumpy riddim [instrumental track] he has scorn for the scene and its supporters as much as rival MCs.

Ghetts is essentially daring anyone else in the scene to match him in flow and lyricism. He boosts the quality even of his lesser lyrics [32 bar verses are considered superior to the shorter 16 bar variant]. Later in the song he makes thinly veiled references to top MCs ensuring that his challenge cannot be ignored. He equivocates in his prognosis of the scene, proclaiming on the one hand his passion and belief, whilst decrying on the other the lack of support (financial and otherwise) provided to him by it. He boasts that he can best any other MC but that his musical profession would never see him able to apply for a mortgage. Much later in 'Listen' (2019, Sony) he corrects himself on the latter point, admitting that his musical career has allowed him to buy a five-bedroom house. Ghetts embodies the transformation of UK Rap and Grime music. Once underground, niche and concerned so centrally with internecine rivalry, it is now big business. Ghetto once rapped about the lengths he is willing to go to defeat other artists in the lyrical clash – now Ghetts speaks of attending art galleries and his success in the industry.



67 ft Giggs - Lets Lurk (2016, 6IX 7EVEN)

Given that I have written against the criminalization of Drill Rap (Ilan 2020) I had to draw for a tune from that genre. UK Rap's influences are distinctly American and South London has had a particular heritage in translating US 'gangsta' tropes into a UK context. Brixton's 67 exemplify and indeed pioneered the UK drill sound, delivering cold-hearted tales of drug-selling, stabbing, and shooting. The opening verse by Monkey, for example, could be translated as follows:

I will send a younger associate armed with a gun to find you and they will find you and shoot,
 My associates are authentically street while you rivals are posers/fakers
 The police pursue us and my friend is killing time in prison. It is not fair.
 Selling drugs remains lucrative. Addicts continue to have cravings and phone me to procure drugs.

Poetic in their original, slang heavy form these lyrics are shockingly graphic in their depiction of life on London's roads, and indeed can seem incendiary. And yet for all those in the Drill scene convicted of and victimised by criminal activity – the violence remains more creative rhetoric than literal reality. This song implicitly rebuts lazy assumptions made about young, disadvantaged Black men. Far from revelling in territorial bloodshed, it celebrates collaboration between artists from Brixton and Peckham – areas notorious for their rivalry. Far from embodying predatory behaviour, it is a

moment of care and respect between generations as the well-established 'Landlord' Giggs passes the baton to a new generation of rappers.

Roddy Ricch x Chip x Yxng Bane - How It Is (2019, Kobalt)

This is not just a catchy tune, but an example of the deep reservoirs of creativity and commercial acumen at the heart of UK Rap and Grime. Now in the top-tier, Compton's Roddy Ricch was arguably then underappreciated in the US but had been making an impression here. Executive producer 'The Plug' through his experience of specialist retail had built an extensive contact book of rappers and began to facilitate a string of trans-Atlantic collaborations, of which this is my favourite. On the one hand the song covers familiar themes. Roddy stacks his racks of Dollars, boasting that his Patek Phillippe watch is 'luminescent' with diamonds, but conceding that his wealth might need defending. Simply doing this whilst attributing his authority to speak on matters street to his own origins 'from the bottom', he lays down the hook around which the entire song rests.



The tune also veers away from Rap cliché. Resonances between experienced marginality and material ambition in the US and UK become a major theme as Chip drops a surprising verse. Though once firmly identifiable as the 'Grime scene saviour', here he spits in a melodic trap style better associated with the other artists on the track. Doing this not only showcases his versatility but also confirms his relevance to a new generation of fans. Finally, Yxng Bane comes through to bring the UK Trap Rap sound to the table. He is filmed enjoying the lap of luxury in a mansion, but as his verse ends he sneaks out an admission that he is emotionally numb, using consumerism to distract himself from this and the pain that must exist somewhere. This again confounds accusations of gross materialism. Similarly, in as much as the video (and lyrics) sexualise women, this was an early outing for the supremely talented up-and-coming (female) British film-maker Ashleigh Jadee.

KB - Boys Don't Cry (2021)



My final track is a less obvious selection and has a lot of work to do. It represents for 'the regions' (UK Rap is largely divided between London and outside of it), but arguably Birmingham has a significant Rap/Grime ecosystem of its own. It also represents for music distributed outside of the framework of the music industry, whether independent or major label. KB is incarcerated, explaining the animated video and many of the themes explored in the song. A prime example of the sub-genre becoming known as 'Real Rap', the lyrics in this one are unflinching in their examination of road life and how it is embroiled with various emotional states. KB bares all, admitting that he has experienced so many different painful emotions but reflects on the fact that men living at the tougher end of street culture cannot allow these feelings to come through, sublimating them in favour of aggression. He reminds his

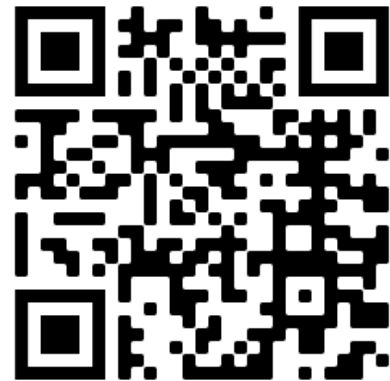
listeners of the high sentences attaching to murder and serious criminality advising young people to avoid it if they are not willing to risk thirty years of imprisonment.

So whilst lazy stereotypes view the ‘roadman’/ ‘gang member’ as a coldblooded killer, KB paints a different picture. Not only is the violence at the more extreme ends of road life underpinned by experienced trauma, but participation in that life itself is brutalising, traumatic and removes individuals from the nurturing embrace of family. KB’s lyrics reveal the kinds of complex realities that are signature of the best ethnographies - see Reid (2017) and Bakkali (2019) for rich depictions of life on London’s socio-economic margins. KB urges younger people to think about the privations of prison and the implications of a long sentence. This flies in the face of misunderstandings about Rap ‘glamorising’ violence and criminal lifestyles - KB’s words and the place from where he speaks them are the antithesis of luxury lifestyle and their honesty means that they cannot be dismissed as inauthentic. Whilst the popularity of Rap music is tied up with its supposed embrace of ‘real life’ (as opposed to the artifice of carefully constructed pop music and pop musician personas see Ilan 2015), pondering through contradictions is considerably more authentic (or true to life) than the unreflexive adoption of ‘roadman’ or strong street cultural clichés.

Joy White

Kano - Can’t Hold We Down (feat. Popcaan) - E02 (2019, Parlophone Records & Bigger Picture Music)

Kano is a ‘Grime original’, by that I mean he was there at the outset as Grime emerged in the early years of the twenty-first century. Moving on through almost two decades, Kano continues to be an original in that he cannot be pinned down to one genre. In this track, backed by violins, piano, and a choir, Kano calls in the vocals of Jamaican Dancehall artist - Popcaan. I cite the YouTube episode because, to fully make sense of the track, the visuals have to be seen in combination with the sound. In a previous film, Kano talks about meeting Popcaan in Jamaica, and going to the studio with him. Popcaan also cooked for Kano and his family. While Popcaan is in London, Kano returns the favour.



As he walks into the group setting, Popcaan introduces himself to one of the older women, and in respectful gesture, gives his full name - Andre Sutherland. Turning to introduce his companions, Popcaan sings a line from one of his songs ‘Family’ (Popcaan, 2018), while the rest of group join in. It sets the scene for a domestic setting. ‘Can’t Hold We Down’ is about family, kinship, and community, it is intergenerational, it takes in the past and accounts for the present. Popcaan sings the hook, alluding to the struggle it takes to rise up and move on, Kano continues the theme and gives thanks for being able to make it out. Making it out through music is a common trope (Ilan 2012; White 2016).

Scenes of happiness, laughter, cooking, and sharing food, setting up the jerk pan. Around the table, in the background, we glimpse some legends of contemporary Black British music - Giggs, Lethal B, Ghetts. In each scene, the frame is filled with more and more people, and it is a joyous celebration of Black family life. Then, at 4.09, all who are present room join Popcaan on the chorus which is also the title of the track, offering a truly afro-diasporic moment as young men and women adopt similar gestures and pose.

The final frame takes us outside into the garden, we see the groups of people dancing, drinking, and eating. As Kano draws the track to a close, he provides a moment to reflect on how music offers a sense of belonging that crosses time and space (White 2019).

Chip - Family feat Loick Essien (Official Audio) (2017)



My next track continues the family theme but from a different perspective. It is unusual in my selection as it has no video. However, it is uploaded on the artist's own YouTube channel – offering a nod to the 'DIYness' of these musical forms. Chip (formerly Chipmunk) is another genre crossing veteran of the Grime scene. Loick Essien's vocals provide the chorus and lays out a meaning of family that takes us beyond blood ties.

On 'Family', he revisits themes that he has covered before. He talks about the complex make up of contemporary family life – refusing to use the category of 'half' when referring to his siblings. Chip shouts out his mum and his dad as young parents who gave him a positive upbringing, and instilled the value of a good education. And yet, somehow, his brother ends up with a four-year prison term for a serious offence. Chip's bewilderment regarding his brother's situation is evident.

Another unusual feature is that this track is almost six minutes long. From 4.19, it is Chip's brother's voice that we hear, in a warm, affectionate snatch of conversation. Using nicknames, his brother offers positive feedback on the work that Chip has been doing. He lets him know that the whole wing 'bangs their doors' when they listen [a sign of appreciation]. And we hear an appeal to not glorify jail as if it's something positive. In a society where Black families are stigmatised, framed as a problem and often rendered invisible, the song offers a powerful meditation on what family is, what it means, and why it matters.

#7th Snizzy - Home (Music Video) | @MixtapeMadness (2020)

I have written at length about gentrification in Forest Gate in Newham, an outer east London borough (White, 2020a). In 'Home', Snizzy presents another side of the same place. 'Home' offers a soft, sweet sonic backdrop to a profound, narrative reflection on people and places that are gone or forever altered. Looking straight at the camera, and delivered with a wry smile, this is a somewhat melancholic track. Snizzy is accompanied by only one other person in the video – Baseman – a UK rapper that he has musically collaborated with in the past. The rapport between them is evident. Contrasting cut-aways show radio appearances and prison life, as well as local markers by way of street signs and locations. The first 18 seconds of the video, shows scenes outside Forest Gate station. It calls in another track 'Nerve' – Snizzy's 'fresh home' output recorded within days of his release from prison (2020). References to living in a pandemic show how contemporary this track is. We can only imagine the irony of being released from jail during a UK wide lockdown. The prison trope is common in UK Rap, and Snizzy is no different as he talks of his own lived experience of being incarcerated. Knowing that he has recently been released makes these references particularly poignant. Despite some fierce adversarial lyrics, Snizzy states clearly that he is not seeking to glorify the kind of life that will leave you locked up or dead.



At the same time, an unresolved tension exists, with a recognition that life on the outside has its own challenges, even though Forest Gate is home, enemies and treachery still feature. At its heart, 'Home' is a song of mourning, love, and loss. Snizzy articulates poignantly how being in jail disconnects him from his relationship with his child. And when he asks his son for forgiveness, I feel it.

Lady Leshurr - D.I.V (2020)



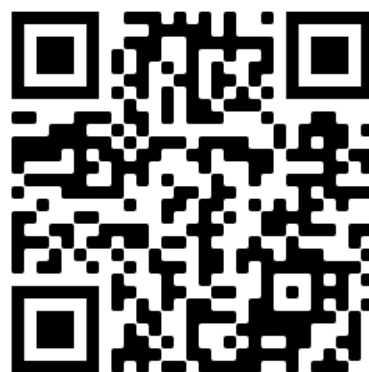
From the first bars to the final bars, Lady Leshurr brings fire to this track. Hailing from Birmingham, Lady Leshurr is a genre-hopping veteran of contemporary Black British music. Lyrically, she's unstoppable, her wordplay is complex, clever, and articulate, opening with a clear statement that she is the best, so do not attempt to test her.

Over a UK drill beat, she responds to UK rapper Ivorian Doll, who implied in a Daily Duppy freestyle that it was time for Lady Leshurr to hang up her crown. As a 'diss' track, it works on a number of levels. In the video, visually Lady Leshurr is dressed for combat, the title of the song is an anagram of Ivorian Doll's other stage name – IVD. DIV (in some places) is also slang for stupid and, as a final reminder, the track is released on Ivorian Doll's birthday - although the original diss was in October, because Leshurr 'didn't want to kill her in Black History Month'. A reference to her previous series *Queen's Speech* 1-7 (Ep.1, 2015; Ep.2, 2015; Ep.3, 2015; Ep.4, 2015; Ep.5, 2015; Ep.6, 2016; Ep.7, 2017), reminds us that whether signed or independent music is often presented as a route out, as well as a way to generate wealth and resources (Ilan 2012; White 2016)

Although it's a rapid-fire response to a perceived verbal slight, and despite the seemingly aggressive posturing, the track exudes humour throughout. And, for three minutes and 41 seconds, not a single swear word is uttered.

FFSYTHO - Bop Through Ya Manor (Official Visual) (2019)

For my final track, I have selected 'Bop Through Ya Manor' by FFSYTHO (pronounced 'for f sake why tho'). Produced by Filthy Gears, it has an old school/new school vibe. It feels like how Grime was in its early days, but it is filtered through a contemporary social media affect. In many ways, FFSYTHO's story is a classic Grime narrative, from spitting a 30 second freestyle from her windowsill in 2017 on Twitter, to being lauded on mainstream channels [BBC 1 Introducing, BBC 1Xtra]. Lyrically, her word play draws on a familiar competitive trope as she revisits her journey so far (Diallo 2015). At the same time, she uses her words to locate her Irish/Caribbean cultural heritage, as well as a sense of place and belonging.



Visually, the first 30 seconds take the form of a phone call, then the video flits between domestic and outdoor scenes, from the kitchen to a graffiti covered underpass, from an armchair to a stairwell in a block of flats. When the police and the regulating authorities cracked down on Grime events in London, areas such as Northampton[1](where FFSYTHO is from) kept going. The

artist embodies that turn of the century Grime spirit and energy. Bop Through Ya Manor is an aggressive, uncompromising rally locating us in Grime past and present. Listen when you need a lift.

Discussion

Our approach takes into account Les Back's suggestion that as ethnographers we should seek 'the outside story that is also the inside story' (2007: 9). In other words, we look and listen beyond the obvious bravado and toughness of the lyrical expression. What emerges from the selection are some common themes. Inherently ethnographic, this is a representation of UK Rap and Grime that goes beyond impressionistic and sensational renderings to consider depths, dissonances and contradictions. Throughout, the ethnographic character of our story is evidenced by descriptions of songs and videos that are rich in detail and analysed for deeper significance. Grime artists and rappers paint an ethnographic picture of matters significant to those at the socio-economic margins of Britain; and as ethnographic researchers ourselves we offer a picture of what is significant within these scenes. Perhaps some of our individual traits have revealed themselves in our selections and story-telling, with Johnny dwelling on genre-classification and historical ordering, whilst Joy teases out how lyrics and life relate to each other.

These are genres shaped by craft, creativity, and entrepreneurialism, themes that can be complicated by the simultaneous embodiment of aspiration and a hyper-individualism. The trope of marginality, coming from the bottom, going through the struggle and rising up through music and enterprise is an aspect of transformation that underpins many of the selected tracks. But what happens when you've stacked the cash, and you are embedded into and wedded to a neoliberal hegemony that does not mitigate against systemic and structural racism (Gilroy 2013)? Even in the most aspirational scenario, success cannot ensure friendship or loyalty. The ways in which transformation takes place are evident. Artists cross borders into the possibility of new identities as lyricists, mentors, voices of reason and as messengers/interlocutors from the 'hood' as well as inside the industry.

Incarceration looms large as a feature, either lived or observed, experienced both as loss of freedom and as an absence of connection (Dyson and Daulatzai 2009). In the rush to take fright at the lyrics, and to curtail the perceived celebration of criminality (see Fatsis 2019), what is often missed is the importance of connectedness and relationships. By placing family, an aspect that is often muted in both academic and popular literature, at the heart of their tracks the significance of ties of kinship, love, and belonging is brought to the fore. Nestled amongst the beat and the swagger, intense conversations can be heard that try to make sense of systems at work and how that relates to individual behaviour, as well as life on the block. Performing Grime, UK Rap, and UK Drill allows individuals to display a sonic rendering of their environment. Usually urban, these perspectives are also gendered, reading as a predominantly masculine narrative (Barron 2013). However, it is important to note an increasing presence of women MCs. In our selection, Lady Leshurr and Ffsytho lyrically cover similar ground in terms of reflecting on their musical achievements, MC skills, family connections, and of course their progress in the industry. What is not evident from these MCs are references to incarceration and coming home, although this may appear in other work.

Conclusion

The story of UK Rap and Grime is one of development, evolution, and perpetual challenge. Styles of music and particular artists have eras of particular popularity, but the themes explored in the music have wider resonance with the experience of being Black in Britain, or being marginalised more generally. Our soundclash has allowed us to tell this story in an original way that pays tribute to the musical heritage of the genres themselves. Outside of the realm of organised competition, clashes

are often designed without a mechanism for determining 'who won'. It might be obvious from crowd reaction, or moot when everyone has enjoyed the music. Similarly in this ethnographer soundclash, our story about Grime and UK Rap has emerged interactively and it may well be of little import to discern a 'winner'. Then again, you might take a view on this question.

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Jonathan Ilan is Senior Lecturer in Criminology at City, University of London. He was awarded a PhD in 2008 for his ethnographic work on marginalized young people, community, crime, justice and policing in inner-city Dublin, Ireland. In 2009 he relocated to the UK where he spent seven years at the University of Kent, developing a deep knowledge of and appreciation for cultural criminology. In 2015 he published *Understanding Street Culture: Poverty, crime, youth and cool* with Palgrave MacMillan. He continues to publish and teach on a range of issues from urban violence to the policing of marginalized communities; from the criminalization of street music to the politics of subcultural practice.

Endnotes

1. Form 696 (a risk assessment form/process that could result in a jail term of up to six months or a £20,000 fine) had been used to curtail or shut down live Grime events in London (Hancox 2010). In Swindon, Bristol and Northampton, the Sidewinder events provided a platform for MCs and DJs (Sidewinder 2006, 2007).

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