Northumbria Research Link

The Sound of Street Corner Society: UK Grime Music as Ethnography

Abstract

This article explores the ways in which popular music can be linked with ethnography and the ethnographic enterprise. While there is a tradition of connecting popular music with sociology, this article posits a further sociological resonance, one that is not so much theoretical as methodological. The article suggests that forms of contemporary popular music parallel key facets of ethnography, not simply in terms of the sociological analysis of popular music employing ethnography, but with regard to popular music as an ethnographic resource, as 'data,' *and* as the reflexive expression of Paul Willis' conception of the 'ethnographic imagination.' Although popular music generally may exhibit ethnographic qualities, the article argues that contemporary British Hip Hop in the form of 'Grime' is a potent exemplar. This is because of the resolutely cultural, spatial nature of Grime music, a factor that marks out grime as a distinctive musical form and a distinctive ethnographic form. This article stresses that Grime is a twenty-first century form of music that explicitly and deliberately consists of experientially-rooted narratives of particular modes of British urban life. It is music about urban locations made from *within* those urban locations.

The Sound of Street Corner Society: UK Grime Music as Ethnography

"MCs better start chatting about what's really happening" (Dizzee Rascal, 'Brand New Day').

"I sat and listened" (William Foote Whyte, *Street Corner Society*: 303).

Robert Park's exhortation to undergraduate students at the University of Chicago in the 1920s perhaps still best articulates the essence of ethnography, and sets the scene and subject for this article rather cogently:

> You have been told to go grubbing in the library thereby accumulating a mass of notes and a liberal coating of Grime. You have been told to choose problems wherever you can find musty stacks of routine records. This is called 'getting your hands dirty in real research.' Those who counsel you thus are wise and honourable men. But one thing more is needful: first hand observation. Go sit in the lounges of luxury hotels and on the doorsteps of the flop-houses; sit on the Gold Coast settees and in the slum shakedowns; sit in the orchestra hall and in the Star and Garter Burlesque. In short, gentlemen, go get the seat of your pants dirty in real research (In Brewer, 2000: 13).

Although a somewhat obvious play on Park's words, this article is going to unite the 'grime' aspect of Park's evaluation with his latter advice for students to engage in direct ethnographic research: to study the social world from the level of agency. The reference to grime is also to be seized upon, because Grime and Hip Hop music will serve as the primary focus of discussion and analysis within this article. This is

because I will suggest that there is proximity between British Hip Hop/Grime music and key aspects of ethnography. The article will explore this connection in two ways: that this form of music can represent a distinctive ethnographic artefact. Grime, and its related antecedent modes, Garage and Hip-Hop, are musical expressions of urban environments and urban lived experiences. The article will also draw attention to American Rap and Hip Hop music to contextualise British forms, particularly with regard to the lyrical focus made upon space and urban spatial configurations. This is the key aspect that will be applied to UK Grime: its lyrical tendency to be micro-focused. It can and does allude to structural issues and themes which link it to its U.S. counterparts, but most consistently, Grime is centrally concerned with the everyday; it is about life as it is experienced by the artists themselves. Indicating a thematic resonance with the Chicago School and its urban interests, Grime music predominantly hails from the major conurbations of Britain, and starkly expresses inner-city urban experience. Accordingly, Grime songs articulate urban worlds as they are seen through the eyes of those who live within these social environments. In this sense, such recordings can and should be added to the repertoire of ethnography because they constitute qualitative 'documents of life.' However, the article will explore the extent to which the Grime genre or Hip Hop subgenre accords with the spirit of ethnography itself, particularly that expressed by Paul Willis and his conception of the 'ethnographic imagination' – a social vision that discerns an overlap between an everyday art, everyday culture and the ethnographic enterprise.

By mapping the development of Grime and identifying artist key exemplars, such as: Dizzee Rascal, The Streets, Wiley, Lethal Bizzle, Kano Lady Sovereign and Professor Green, I will argue that this style of music enables listeners to gain insights into meanings of human existence from the standpoint of insiders and "to uncover the

world of everyday life" (Jorgensen, 1989: 14-15). Therefore, Grime *is* effectively ethnographic in nature - it *is* derived from 'participant observation' in the most immediate, 'lived' sense because its leitmotif is the 'streets' and the status of performers will be likened that that of Gramsci's idea of the 'organic intellectual'. Consequently, when listening to Grime, we can observe and experience unfamiliar social environments and social conditions, as seen through the eyes of its 'participant' observers and communicated in musical form.

Ethnography to Grime, Grime to Ethnography

Emerging from anthropology, ethnography would become a key component within the methodological underpinning of sociology, particularly in the 1920s. Conventionally positioned as the Manichean opposite of the quantitative methodological tradition, the qualitative foundations of ethnography were based upon interpretivism, the seeking of subjective meaning(s) in social action, and drawing upon Max Weber's 'verstehen'. As Hammersely (1990) notes, ethnography is perhaps the loosest of all the social sciences methodologies, as it is not so much a method as an 'approach' characterized by diverseness. Hence, unstructured interviews, case studies, participant observation, secondary documentary analysis and the life history all constitute ethnography. But, underscoring such methodological variety is the 'meta' conception that a social actor's behaviour must be studied in everyday contexts, in an unstructured manner, and on a relatively small-scale. The motivating drive would be (and continues to be) the attempt to gain naturalistic insight and understanding into "a social group's observable patterns of behaviour, customs and way of life," to achieve a compelling sense of the emic perspective - the social actor's/insider's distinctive "perspective of reality" (Fetterman, 1989: 27- 30). As a

consequence, the primary goal within ethnographic research was, and is, of assuming the position of 'seeing through the eyes of' of particular social group, to discover the 'precise nuances of meaning within particular cultural milieux' (Ferrell, 1999: 399).

The most conspicuous method within the ethnographic enterprise would be participant observation, the immersion by the researcher(s) within the culture/social milieu of a chosen subject group. Most famously, the University of Chicago in the 1930s and 1940s produced a series of classic ethnographic observational studies, principally Whyte's participant observation study of gangs in the Italian neighbourhood of Boston. This focus was especially apparent within the later British Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) tradition which produced a series of ethnographic subcultural studies of various youth subcultures from the 1970s, emphasising the way in which ethnography became a key tool for exploring patterns of cultural expression (Brown, 2005). Yet, although participant observation is the most common ethnographic component, "interviews, conversational and discourse analysis, documentary analysis, film and photography and life histories all have their place in the ethnographer's repertoire' (Hobbs, 2006: 101). For Plummer, 'human documents' and 'story telling' represent a key component within the ethnographic enterprise: letters and diaries, biographies and life histories, the self-reflexive 'biographies from below' (2001: 2). The value of such 'documents of life,' argues Plummer, are that they can represent 'stories from the margins,' stories and accounts that serve to challenge social and class boundaries. Furthermore, to these documents one can also add music or 'audio ethnography.' As Stokes states, "whilst social experience insistently privileges the visual, and ethnographies unerringly continue to reproduce this fact…what we know about ourselves and others and the spaces we create for ourselves is also built out of sounds" (1995: 673). Stokes stresses the

centrality of music as an ethnographic tool within a consideration of the ways in which music, from traditional to pop, informs his cultural conceptions of Turkey and its various places, people and history, because:

> Popular musics in Turkey have for a long time born the mark of the routines and itineraries of everyday life in a very direct way, weaving places and views into the very fabric of the musical text and into the very texture of the musical performance, implicating the musician and the listener in these places and views (1995: 687).

If visual cultural artifacts can give explicit cultural insights into cultures 'from below' or as they either are or experienced and interpreted by social actors within such cultures, so, Stokes argues, can popular music. There are of course examples of ethnography being employed in relation to popular music in terms of exploring the 'subcultural' nature of fans of various forms of music, studies such as: punk and contemporary protest music, heavy/extreme metal, Goth, Dance, Northern Soul, and aspiring Hip Hop artists (Hamm, 1995; Arnett, 1996; Weinstein, 1991; Harris, 1997; Halnon, 2004 & 2006; Hodkinson, 2002; Thornton, 1995; Wilson, 2007; Lee, 2009). Nonetheless, as Stokes infers, music *itself* can and should be utilized as an ethnographic resource, as a 'dataset.' And it is from such a view I wish to argue that Hip Hop music represents a musical mode that can reflect ethnographic principles and cultural insights, particularly the British sun-genre, Grime.

US Hip Hop as the sound of urban space

Although it would become progressively more multi-faceted and sub-generic, in terms of a standard definition of the form, Melville describes Hip Hop as a musical type which 'marries the production techniques of scratching and sampling, to spoken word rapping' (2004: 30). It is this latter 'rapping' component that designates Hip Hop's extensive musical heritage traceable to the griots of Nigeria and the Gambia, the scat talkovers of Cab Calloway, the 'street talk boasts' of Bo Diddley, children's skip rope rhymes, the 'jive' of Muhammad Ali and the narrative poems or 'toasts' of prison and army rhyming stories (Toop, 1984). While it was in October 1979 that Rap music 'officially' gained cultural visibility with the chart success of the Sugarhill Gang's 'Rapper's Delight', Miyakawa (2005) states that rap music had been developing in African American and Latino neighbourhoods since the early 1970s. Rap and Hip Hop would commercially develop throughout the 1980s via performers such as: Flash and the Furious Five, Run D.M.C., Afrika Bambaataa and KRS-One, artists which developed not merely a fresh musical sound, but incorporated new political expression into this music, directly and potently articulating the experiences of oppression and struggle in the black urban environments (Kellner, 1995). In terms of cultural visibility, Hip Hop was discernible particularly in New York (Sullivan, 2003), hence, it was a musical form that emerged 'from the streets of inner-city neighborhoods as a genuine reflection of hopes, concerns, and aspirations of urban Black youth' (Tabb Powell, 1991: 245).

Although persistently embroiled in 'moral panics' and social anxieties concerning lyrical content and image, particularly with regard to representations of women (Toop, 1991; Binder, 1993; Springhall, 1998; Ogbar, 1999; Armstrong, 2001;

Abu-Jamal, 2006; McFarland, 2008; Conrad, Dixon, and Zhang, 2009; Weitzer and Kubrin, 2009), several notable Hip Hop performers, such as N.W.A., Public Enemy, Ice-T, and Ice-Cube, potently articulated "experiences and conditions of black Americans living in violent ghetto conditions" (Kellner, 1995: 176). As such, Forman (2002) identifies a close connection between lyrics and urban space in the formative years of Hip Hop's development. Central to the music are expressions of the city, and more specifically, the spatial zones of "the ghetto", the "inner city" and "the 'hood" because, within Hip Hop, 'space is a dominant concern, occupying a central role in the definition of value, meaning, and practice' (Forman, 2002: 3); it is a music that potently and consistently describes a "hardcore" urban reality of urban boroughs, housing projects and areas of 'extreme ghettocentricity'. Therefore, although ultimately a global musical form in terms of consumption and marketing, Hip Hop's:

> Connections to local contexts, social environments, and sites of significance are also entwined in local systems that form a foundation for its cultural production. These include street corners, basketball courts, schools, and neighbourhood nightclubs and dance halls…These are often the sites unseen... They are, by and large, anonymous spaces…of little interest or relevance to the broader society and to much of the consuming public. Hip-hop, however, stands out for the urgency with which its creators address the urban environment around them, describing in often painstaking detail the activities that occur there or mapping the cultural byways that delineate their localities and give space meaning (Forman, 2002: 67).

In other words, one can argue that Hip Hop artists were effectively ethnographers, because many of the key purveyors of Hip Hop music emerged from city spaces and lyrically expressed the lived realities and material conditions of those spaces, in an avowedly ethnographic fashion. However, as the style progressed and evolved through the 1980s, 1990s and into twenty-first century Hip Hop has developed into an influential global musical form (Baker, 2005; Alim, Samy and Pennycook, 2008; Fernandes, 2011; Terkourafi, 2012), but the spatial expressions Forman attributes to US Hip Hop would be especially discernible in the United Kingdom, which, arguably, developed an 'ethnographic' Hip Hop seam just as the US genre was evolving into something quite different. As US Hip Hop and Rap progressed into the twenty-first century, many critics argued that it progressively lost much of its cultural and political edge. As Murray (2004) states, Hip Hop's materialism and "bling-bling" excesses came to dominate the music, with overt and excessive displays of wealth. Thus Melville argues:

> Lost in a haze of bling bling materialism: the social realism of say Grandmaster Flash's 'The Message' (1982), or the radicalism of Public Enemy's 'Fight The Power' (1989) have been drowned out by the rise of the celebrity ghetto fabulous anti-hero, Jay Z, 50-Cent, DMX, Master P et al, for whom 'life ain't nothing but bitches and money' (2004: 10).

Although there were continuing examples of contemporary U.S. Hip Hop performers that remained highly political (The Coup, Immortal Technique and Dead Prez, for example) Melville argues that a centrally critical and vibrant mode of Hip Hop would become identifiable in the UK, where it constituted a response similar to social

conditions that sired Hip Hop in New York in the mid-Seventies", and which would represent an example of a genuinely indigenous form of 'street' music (Anonymous, 2003). The initial 1980s genesis of UK Hip Hop consisted of performers such as: Derek B, Monie Love, Silver Bullet, the Cookie Crew, Kiss AMC and M.C. Tunes, followed by the likes of Tricky, Mark B & Blade, Blak Twang and Roots Manuva. But for Melville, there were two notable contemporary examples of British Hip Hop, The Streets and Dizzee Rascal, who did not merely illustrate the visibility of the British form, but which also demonstrated a distinctive progression within the 'genre' – the offshoot ultimately dubbed 'Grime.'

Grime: The Sound of the Ethnographic Imagination

Grime, a hybrid of American Rap/Hip Hop and Jamaican dancehall, but with aspects of punk, 1990s rave (Campion, 2004), Drum 'n' Bass and Garage (McKinnon, 2005), was initially represented by So Solid Crew, an ensemble outfit including numerous MCs which would attain a UK #1 hit single, but would become embroiled in charges of gun crime and street violence (Jackson, 2005). The defining characteristic of Grime is that it constituted a distinctly British musical style that 'resignifies Hip Hop not as the consumerist bling bling soundtrack to upward mobility, but as the *cri de couer* of the dispossessed, the narrative form of urban life' (Melville, 2004: 31). The primary example of this specific ethos was initially conveyed by The Streets, a Hip Hop project based around the vocals and production of Mike Skinner, whose recordings (*Original Pirate Material* and *A Grand Don't Come For Free*) sought to articulate a determinedly routine, but specifically-class based lived experience. With reference to the album *A Grand Don't Come For Free*, essentially a 'concept album' with all of the tracks 'thematically and conceptually linked' (Rose, 1998: 15), the recording

concerns a male protagonist's search for a missing £1000 set within an urban environment of beer can-strewn grotty flats, mobile telephones running out of credit, bets upon football matches, and televisions in need of repair. Thus, the environment of The Streets is resolutely urban, consisting of corner shop off-licenses, pizza and burger establishments, and visits to cash-point machines - a 'lived culture' rooted in a recognizable British social reality – but set to a Hip Hop beat.

However, Grime developed apace with the recordings of Dizzee Rascal (real name, Dylan Mills), Grime's primary 'star,' a status confirmed when his album *Boy in da Corner* won the Mercury Music Award - an album described as "a jagged, disenfranchised world alien to the experience of most Britons" (Campion, 2004: 3). The rapid-fire raps of Rascal reflected the urban environment he grew up within, the East End of London, and more specifically, the South Bow council estate. This was an urban space characterized by deprivation and street violence, as the lyrics for the track 'Brand New Day' illustrate: Looks like I'm loosin' mates\There's a lot of hostility near my gates\We used 2 fight wid kids 4rm other estates\Now 8 millimetres settle debates." Later in the song, the social horizons and life chances of living in such an area are further emphasized with a potent tinge of social hopelessness:

When we ain't kids no more\Will it still be about wot is rite now\Like backscams, street robbery\Shottas, plottas or HMP\When we ain't kids no more\Will it still be about wot it is rite now\Pregnant girls who think they luv\Useless mans wid no plans.

The Grime musical expressions of Dizzee Rascal and The Streets (in differing ways and differing interpretations) consistently articulate specific urban milieus. As Melville asserts:

> Dizzee Rascal's world is based around the urban setting of multiracial Bow – the closest Britain gets to an Americanised ghetto. Skinner's is distinctly sub-urban – the land of *asbos*, *twockers* and daytime drinkers. Both artists have found distinctive ways to render their surroundings sonically through word, accent and music (2004: 31).

Such sensibilities and lyrical content/inspiration is similarly manifest within a range of alternative Grime performers, many who began performing in their teens, the most prominent of which include: Roll Deep, Trim, Ghetto, Sticky, Tinchy Stryder, Shystie, More Fire Crew, Geeneus, DJ Spooky, Wretch 32, Nico Lindsay, Clipson, Lethal Bizzle, Nasty Crew, Kano, Wiley and Professor Green. Although not as culturally or commcerically visible as The Streets, Dizzee Rascal or Professor Green, these performers similarly represent inner-city UK urban life within their music, and, given their ostensibly underground status, they articulate grittier evocations of social life. More significantly, many of these artists produce distinctly ethnic perspectives based upon 'Black British' ethnic identities and are (in many instances) produced by the descendants of the labour migrants to the UK in the 1950s who ultimately formed working class populations housed in the 'inner rings' of London estates such as Paddington and Brixton, and who faced not only the rigours of low-paid employment, but also racial abuse and violence from sectors of British society (Hall et al, 1978: 349). Consequently, many Grime artists are the inheritors of their parents' 'grievances of certain inner-city [racial] populations' in 1980's Britain and a culture that

constructed the 'black presence' as a 'threat' to the homogenous 'white, national 'we' (Gilroy, 1992: 27 and 48). Moreover, Grime music intimates that the 'moral panics' directed towards specific ethnic communities in the 1970s and 1980s are still prevalent within these ethnic urban spaces in the form of knife crime fears and youth-created disorder (exemplified by the rioting and public disorder that occurred within London in 2011). Historically, a significant political and institutional response to the 'panics', amplified, as Hall et al (1978) argue, by newspaper reports, lead to:

> The attempt to informally exclude blacks from certain central districts was matched by intense and aggressive policing in their home territory. The Special Patrol Group (SPG) was used in several of these operations, and particularly in South London and hackney became the focus of community antipathy to the police (Gilroy, 1992: 98).

While the infamous days of the SPG are long gone, the perception that urban areas and specific ethnic groups are still disproportionately singled out for police attention is identifiable within Grime lyrics. For instance, Lethal Bizzle's 'Police On My Back' tells the "true story" of excessive police stop-and-search procedures in inner-city London areas (with a promotional video featuring police dressed in riot gear). In other instances, Grime tracks articulate lives lived within 'decaying environments' in ways that connect with the major ethnic issues and conflicts that marked British society in its recent past, and as such, represent documents of lives lived within those areas within the twenty-first century. The over-arching perception that emerges is one that suggests that little has changed. For example, Kano's track 'London Town' communicates an account of social and urban struggle, hustling and the need for

young men to be street wise and tough. Meanwhile, Wiley's 'Bow E3 'invokes the council estate he came from, itemizing the various streets which comprise the urban zone, the nature of which are expressed in the lyric: "I go places you won't go." As McKinnon states of both Wiley and Grime, it is "clean and steely but filthy and ragged, all at once, like battlefield surgery. It is young, rebel music, with more songs about survival than love" (2005: 1). Therefore, as Quirk (2004) explains, Grime is a genuinely powerful musical movement produced by the hardest circumstances, or in the words of Chantelle Fiddy within the inner sleeve notes for the Roll Deep collection, *Grimey Vol. 1*: "It's Grime by name and It's Grime by nature, the music born on the estates of London." And it is not only London, as Flirta D & Lethal's 'London 2 Bradford' illustrates, Grime music maps out social life in a variety of British urban spaces. As such, this marks out Grime not merely as a distinctive musical form, but also as a distinctive ethnographic musical expression. All Hip Hop (and popular music) is not intrinsically ethnographic, but Grime, because of its cultural and spatial specificity, I argue, *is*, and it is a music that presents documents of urban spaces that are marked by deprivation, but also characterized by ethnic perspectives and standpoints.

As Campion (2004) states, Grime was initially produced by the 'bastard sons of Blair's Britain,' young people rooted in urban areas where violent crime is endemic. Although there are a number of established Grime artists who have attained major recording deals and critical acclaim, Grime has from its inception been characterized by its rootedness in local cultures. In addition to the release of recordings through record companies and local-community-level distribution of Grime tracks, as Quirk (2004) emphasizes, the status of Grime performers as distinctly local stars was assisted by their ability to appear on digital music forums

such as *Channel U* (now called Channel AKA), a British music channel that was built upon a commitment to broadcasting homegrown garage, Hip Hop and Grime videos, ensuring that unsigned and less established performers were/are able to get low-budget, self-produced promotional videos broadcast and fanbases built. This medium is augmented by online forums such as *Grimedaily* that also specializes in showing Grime videos (McInnes, 2010). Thus, as an avowedly 'urban sound,' Grime articulates social realities that are akin to the environments William Foote Whyte immersed himself within in his seminal ethnographic study, *Street Corner Society* (published in 1943). Methodologically, within *Street Corner Society*, Whyte entered the world of 'Cornerville,' a slum district he dubbed "a mysterious, dangerous, and depressing area" (1993: iv). Whyte lived for an extended period within the community of Cornerville, socially interacting with the Norton Street Gang to learn of the 'lived lives' undertaken within this community. Articulating his ethnographic endeavour, Whyte stated that the "general pattern of life is important, but it can be constructed only through observing the individuals whose actions make up that pattern" (1993: xix).

Therefore, the musical output of Grime artists such as Lady Sovereign, the 'Queen of Grime' (Jeffries, 2005), reflects the council estate ethos (her childhood was spent on an estate in Wembley). For instance, within 'My England,' Sovereign articulates her version of London, as she sings: "Big up Oliver Twist, letting us know the nitty gritty of what London really is/It ain't all pretty, deal with the realness, it's all gritty, deal with the realness," as Sovereign mixes accounts if life within inner city London with a gendered urban perspective. As Phillips et al. (2005) argue, although women played a vital role in the development of the genre (for example, ShaRock, Lady B, Queen Lisa Lee, Lady Tee, Salt-n-Pepa, Sister Soulja, Queen Latifah and

Missy Elliott), Hip Hop music is predominantly a masculine discourse, with the exclusion of women a common trait. However, while agreeing with this assessment, Gupta-Carlson (2010) argues that there are contemporary examples of an alignment between US Hip Hop music and female empowerment (the Planet B-Girl network, for instance) that utilizes the sound as an empowering political feminist force. With regard to Grime, the presence of a female social viewpoint is significant, and there are a number of prominent UK female Grime artists, ranging from Ms Dynamite Nolay, Baby Blue, Mz Bratt, and Lady Leshurr, to Amplify Dot (aka A.Dot), Shimmer Baby, The Diva Twins, Lady Pariz, and Lioness. Videos made by these rappers frequently emphasize female empowerment and equality with male MCs (A.Dot's collaboration with Kano on 'Semantics', for example, with Kano's refrain that A.Dot "Don't do the dishes/She don't do the food"). Similarly, the lyrics and video of A.Dot's 'Rah Rah South London Madness' essays life within the metropolis in a style that as brash as any male MC. With a different accent upon combining singing with deft word skill, Lioness' raps concern personal relationships combined with promotional videos that are set within urban street spaces, while alternatively, The Diva Twins alternatively emphasize sexually-boastful lyrics, provocative posturing and garish, revealing outfits.

On the other hand, Lioness 'spits' about her underground status and the ways in which her songs reflect her life and, as evidenced on tracks such as 'Don't Tell Me', her aspirations as a young, black female MC determined to express her own artistic freedom. Similarly, Shystie's aggressive, fast-paced, expletive-loaded rhymes combine a Ragga-infused sound and delivery with lyrics that stress her sexual independence, and which communicate, in amongst tales of hedonism, messages of female empowerment. For instance, 'Woman's World (Gurlz Stand Up)', rails against the issue of sexual objectification of woman (tabloid Page 3 spreads, idealized body images) and institutional

blocks of female political power, and effectively calls for a gender revolution. As such, although there is no thematic solidarity regarding gendered viewpoints (for example, Shystie and Lady Fury have recorded insult 'dis' tracks directed at each other, part of which involves questioning each other's London 'street authenticity'), the prevalence of female Grime MCs signifies that there are numerous gendered standpoints within the music. In view of this, Grime is a genre that is characterized by the emphasis upon a culture articulated from the level of the individual 'upwards,' from performers whose music and most significantly, lyrics, are about particular urban areas of British society, effectively the inner-city zone of Gans' (1968) 'deprived' urban dweller. But, given the gendered quality of the genre, that it contains numerous and significant female MCs, and from differing ethnic backgrounds, Grime, from an ethnographic perspective, offers a holistic social, ethnic, and gendered perception on British culture from the standpoint of Grime rappers.

Returning to Stokes' (1997) analysis, music can and should be added to the 'cocktail' of ethnographic methods because music can communicate such a potent sense of place and culture – an ethos I argue is the central nature of UK Grime. The subject matter of this music fundamentally concerns human agency and the social and environmental contexts in which this agency lives and expresses itself. For this reason, rich, ethnographic insight can be gained from such music. Grime expresses social milieus which grants the listener a distinctly emic perspective, that ability to share an insider's perception of social reality and specific cultures. While artists such as Dizzee Rascal have attained commercial success, Grime has consistently been characterized by strong local-level involvement and expression, with performances involving numerous locally-based MCs, often taking place within back rooms in council flats and broadcast through pirate radio mediums such as Heat FM (Campion,

2004) - a process that recalls the pared down 'DIY' culture of 1970s punk rock (Hebdige, 1988). However, there is a further dimension to the link between UK Grime and ethnography. Because of the agency-level articulations and because those who produce Grime invariably come from the very environments represented within the music, arguably such artists routinely articulate Paul Willis' conception of the essence of ethnography. Having produced one of *the* classic works of British ethnographic sociology - *Learning to Labour* (1977) – the study of why 'oppositional' working class school children aspire to 'working class' employment – Willis (2000) subsequently related this study to the ethos of ethnography itself, to what he dubs the 'ethnographic imagination:' a lived form of artistic production rooted in the lives ordinary people lead. The focus of the ethnographic imagination is (as Willis argues) to reclaim 'art' as a living, not textual thing, a project that is (or should be) an inherently social and democratic factor in the 'poetry' of social life and activity (2000: 3). As Willis explains:

> I share an interest in a human creativity which is capable of transcending position and context, but I also have an ethnographically imagined interest in a situated human creativity which exists not despite, but because of, finger printed from the inside by, outside structuration and determination, or which finds a local and lived transcendence in and through a kind of sensuous awareness of contexts, seen and unseen (2000: 4-5).

Arguably, Grime, emerging from within local social contexts, articulates and represents urban worlds that are invariably and culturally unseen spaces which resonate with Willis' ethnographic imagination, those "rare and special components

of the symbolic stresses of the common and everyday that ethnography so routinely picks up and records" (2000: 6). Indeed, the ethnographic imagination captures the constitution of everyday life, it uncovers contain creative cultural practices comparable to those of artistic production and produces specific class insights of specific lived lives, such as: 'work, neighbourhood, home, peer and leisure experiences' (2000: 106-110). And so does Grime. As Blackman notes of The Streets debut album *Original Pirate Material*, released in 2002, and premised upon the concept of the "day in the life of a geezer," the album conveys a social world that 'is peppered with everyday drug reference, not for sensation but as descriptions of 'leisurescape' pleasures and risks' (2004: 88). This is because the everyday is the dominant province of Grime and it subsequently resonates with the theoretical aspects Willis draws upon to contextualize the ethnographic imagination: that of Raymond Williams' approach to the ontology of culture which stresses the ways in which culture is ordinary and stands as a whole way of life. In this regard, The Streets can be interpreted as the music of Willis' Hammertown 'lads,' with their perennial themes of "symbolic and physical violence, roughness, and the [presence] of a certain kind of masculinity" (1977: 36). Ultimately, 'authentic' living for the 'lads' lay beyond the formal conventions of school, and within the 'streets:'

> The pressure to go out at night, to go to a commercial dance rather than a youth club, to go to pubs rather than stop in, to buy modern clothes, smoke, and take girls out – all these things which were felt to constitute 'what life is really about' (1977: 39).

Representations of such a social world can equally be found within the track listings of The Streets' *Original Pirate Material* and *A Grand Don't Come For Free*, both of which reflect an "ordinary social astuteness" (Wolcott, 1999: 281) that closely parallels ethnographic social articulations. Accordingly, in drawing out the temporal differences between Willis' perspective in the mid-1970s to that of twenty-first century British society, the onus is not upon the search of a 'new' working class, but rather to understand the emergence of new 'nodal points' in the social landscape, such as labour, masculinity, work, leisure and collectivity. And for Willis, ethnography remains the key to uncovering such points. But Grime music also potently articulates all of these points too, because it *is* a cultural articulation that is defined by an ethnographic 'poetry' of social life.

Lived Culture and Grime: "At Street Level, Real People"

Examining Paul Gilroy's assessment of rap music, McRobbie notes that the prevailing perception is one that focuses upon multimedia entertainment, drive-by violence, the 'normativity of death' and representing 'largely a masculinist gangster paradigm, where the female figure is the grieving mother or girlfriend, all of which reflects the decimation of the poor black community' (2005: 63). While there is much within the historical discourse of Rap and Hip Hop music to agree with here, UK Grime is different, and certainly more multi-faceted than this critical evaluation suggests. Grime lyrics range from harsh urban spaces marked by class, gender and ethnic conflicts and oppression, financial hardships and gang violence, to the components of everyday life, from the pleasure of dancing and music, fashion and personal pride, to the forming of relationships, the hedonism of weekend clubbing and the good times of 'late night shopping on Thursdays' (Roll Deep's 'Good Times' and Wiley's

'Heatwave', for example). In other words: life from a social actor's perspective framed within the context of real lives.

In assessing the ways in which anthropologists can utlise media forms as fieldwork, Spitulnik argues that ways with which to approach mass media anthropologically include: "as institutions, as workplaces, as communicative practices, as cultural products, as social activities, as aesthetic forms, and as historical developments" (1993: 293). With reference to 'communicative practices' and 'cultural products', this article has argued that UK Grime music exhibits key facets of ethnography; that it constitutes a means with which to facilitate "the study of a culture" (ibid) through recorded music. As Ferrell stresses, ethnography is traditionally rooted in Max Weber's conception of verstehen, the process of "interpretative understanding" and "sympathetic participation" (1999: 400). Consequently, Grime arguably serves as a key secondary ethnographic resource that can provide acute insight into urban social existences, eliciting that Weberian condition of "sympathetic participation", a vicarious means by which to undertake a William Foote Whyte-like urban excursion, not via participant observation, but through *iTune* downloads, CDs, album artwork, MP3 players, I-Pods, pirate radio, Channel U/Channel AKA or *Grimedaily*. As Smitherman states, Hip Hop music from its inception was a 'blend of reality and fiction…a contemporary response to conditions of joblessness, poverty, and disempowerment' (1997: 5), but whilst Smitherman's definition refers to American examples of Hip Hop, as I have discussed, UK variants are equally focused upon such social conditions: urban living conditions, community expression, social aspirations, gender relations, crime and drugs, to the urban milieu itself. Indeed, it is specifically spatially focused, as McKinnon notes: "Grime is a music that was born in East London, lives in East

London…and maybe only makes sense in East London" (2005: 1). Thus, to listen to, and study the lyrics and imagery of UK Grime artists, from The Streets, Dizzee Rascal, Lady Sovereign, Kano, Roll Deep, Lethal Bizzle, Wiley, to newer artists such as Tinchy Stryder, Low Deep, Bashy and Professor Green, is to be immersed within a distinctive genre of music that is fundamentally rooted in the articulation of culturally *specific* and *particular* urban ways life, or, in Quirk's words, it is a 'genuinely powerful musical movement produced by the hardest of circumstances' (2004: 2).

Music, as Stokes suggests, is a secondary ethnographic source of information that can facilitate the understanding of social cultures and localities. But whilst numerous forms of music may achieve this, from folk to pop (as in Stokes' analysis), Grime realises this in a specific manner. Consequently, as a data resource, many recordings which fall under the generic tag of Grime represent a series of 'documents' that convey the historical, social and cultural moment in which the music was produced. This is because (albeit without any premeditated ethnographic agenda) Grime constitutes a collective body of music which is centrally about the mapping of distinctive socio-economic spatial and cultural configurations. The tracks produced by Grime performers consistently reflect specific modes of living and particular social conditions, frequently experienced by performers themselves. Invariably, it is a mode of musical expression directly inspired by distinctly British metropolitan zones. Consequently, because of this consistent focus, I suggest by way of Willis' conception of the 'ethnographic imagination' that Grime centrally reflects this ethos. Whether expressing sexual/criminal braggadocio, 'bling' consumerist lifestyles, gang violence or racial politics, Hip Hop music is characterized by being consistently (and often very abrasively) rooted in lived realities.

However, this is not to overlook the political economy of the marketing of Grime. As Attali points out in relation to the economic basis of the music industry: "wherever there is music, there is money" (1977: 3) and indeed, the 'gritty' urban milieu of Rap and Hip Hop has long been a marketable factor, as Toop wryly notes: "street culture has always been a good sales pitch for pushing vicarious thrills on the mass market" (1991: 22). This is a factor also reinforced by Wilson (2008) with regard to the widespread embrace and consumption of 'ghetto' Gangsta Rap by white, middle-class suburban teenagers rebelliously attracted by 'Parental Advisory' warnings. In this context, Grime, like any genre, is, if not defined by the industry, then strategically marketed as a distinctive form or genre (Negus, 1999). Certainly, Grime has taken on a more commercial edge in recent years, most notably with chart topping variants such as the North London act, N-Dubz (their name a play on the NW1 Camden postcode – the area the band members hailed from). However, with regard to N-Dubz, although they were more chart-friendly than most Grime artists (as are the subsequent solo careers of Tulisa and Dappy), the background of the band is nevertheless rooted within council estate London urban zones. As lead vocalist Tulisa Contostavlos states within her autobiography of the social reality that created the band:

> Not everyone I came across back then was a truly bad person. Like me, many of them were simply products of their environment, and although most people are very quick to generalize and judge the people who live in that dark world they only hear about on the news, you can never understand it properly unless you've lived it (2012: 91).

Thus, even within the more commercially visible expressions of the form, the fundamental Grime ethos remains. For instance, the East London performer, Professor Green (initially signed to Mike Skinner's The Beats record label), has produced chart-friendly pop-sampled tracks ('I Need You Tonight' and 'Just Be Good To Green', featuring Lily Allen) and collaborated with Emeli Sandé, but has also recorded Grime-oriented songs such as 'Upper Clapton Dance', that speaks of life and conditions in inner-city London life and youth-gang violence – the fundamental Grime motifs.

Grime, therefore, can not only be approached as an ethnographic resource to map specific spaces and places, as Stokes suggests music can be utilised, but in significant ways, it *is* ethnography. It *is* a form of popular music that is inductively produced 'from below.' At its grittiest, it articulates and represents discourses on modes of living within contemporary urban spaces akin to the inner concentric rings of the classic Chicago School spatial model. And, just as the various ethnographers of this School were centrally concerned with the character of their city (Hammersley, 1990), so too are Grime artists: that of London and further urban spaces. It is difficult to cite another contemporary mode of music which authentically achieves such a consistent geographically and socially distinctive focus upon localized urban experiences. Indeed, in the view of McKinnon (2005), this very urban rootedness is perhaps why Grime artists experience difficulty in achieving mainstream success, and especially in the transatlantic market.

Popular music can be utilized as ethnographic tools, but some forms of popular music *are* distinctly ethnography, most manifestly, Hip Hop and British Hip Hop as exemplified by Grime. But this is not to glibly underestimate the methodological nature and tradition of ethnography, which has often found itself

denigrated in comparison to 'harder' quantitative methods. It is a methodology that has its roots within ethnology and anthropology, and is traceable as a method of understanding humans individually and as a "mass" to ancient Greece (Pike, 1870-71: v). As Puddlephatt, Shaffir and Kleinknecht state, although ethnographers are frequently critically perceived as being little more than "poor journalists" who produce work that is theoretically lacking, it is a research approach that robustly produces in-depth examinations of everyday situations. It is a methodology that enables researchers to gain an intimate familiarity with a locale that "provides a better sense of how social life works" (2009: 1). In Malinowski's view, it is a means with which the researcher can follow the researched to their "most inaccessible lairs" (2007: 48). Therefore, my linkage of Grime to this classic ethnographic tradition could be read as a similar denigration, an implication that the method is simply one of 'hanging around' social contexts, rather than representing a rigourous instrument of social inquiry. But, the basis of Hip Hop and Grime music within lived urban environments does suggest an ethnographic air. Indeed, as Hammersley and Atkinson aptly summarise:

> Ethnographic work in its various guises has frequently been employed in the investigation of essentially oral cultures. Be they the non-literate cultures of much social anthropology, or the street cultures and *demi-monde* beloved of many sociological fieldworkers, the social worlds studied by ethnographers have often been devoid of written documents other than those produced by the fieldworkers themselves (1997: 157).

Correspondingly, via Grime recordings, UK street cultures have been similarly and inductively orally articulated 'from below,' as Melville states of The Streets/Mike Skinner: he is not only a gifted MC, he is also 'an anthropological humanist' (2004: 31). Subsequently, if we wish to further theorise this perception of Skinner, we may arguably class him as a cultural and contemporary example of Gramsci's (2007) category of the 'organic intellectual'. Certainly within an American perspective, Rap and Hip Hop has long been seen as source of oppositional political expression (Kellner, 1995; Ogbar, 1999), but the organic intellectual designator can also be extended to Dizzee Rascal, Wiley, Kano, Lady Sovereign, Shystie, Lioness, A.Dot, or Professor Green. These performers are the producers of rich oral cultural, but class-based, urban musical commentaries – the UK variant of US Hip Hop's configuration of the 'Hood. They are artists within a capitalist-organised cultural industry, but they are also articulators of inner-city spaces and inner-city lives, which, marketable as they may be, nevertheless illuminate the social conditions from which the performers hail from. And, even when commercial success signifies a lyrical shift, the various Grime back-catalogues of recorded material represents a documentary legacy of urban commentary.

The connection between a contemporary UK expression of Hip Hop music and a long-standing social sciences methodology rests upon the ways in which Grime emerges from 'street level' as it were, that it is an expression of Willis' ethnographic imagination, that process by which lived urban cultures are translated into works of urban art, art that consists of a series of musically-based but fundamentally emic perspectives that reflect particular view-points of lived social realities. Consequently, as Malinowski stated of the anthropological tradition: "it is good for the Ethnographer sometimes to put aside camera, note book and pencil, and to join in [them-self] in

what is going on" (2007: 55). Hence, reiterating the quote by Park made at the beginning of the article, this experience can be achieved through UK Hip Hop music, whereby contemporary ethnographers and students of urban spaces have a distinctly pop cultural means by which they can obtain a liberal coating of ethnographic Grime.

References

Abu-Jamal, Mumia. (2006) 'A Rap Thing,' On Rapping Rap,' and Hip Hop or Homeland Security, in Basu, Dipannita. Lemelle, Sidney. J. (eds) The Vinyl Ain't Final: Hip Hop and the Globalization of Black Popular Culture. London: Pluto Press, pp. 23-27.

Alim, H. Samy. Ibrahim, Awad. Pennycook, Alastair. (2008) Global Linguistic Flows: Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities, and the Politics of Language. London and New York: Routledge.

Armstrong, Edward. G. (2001) Gangsta Misogyny: A Content Analysis of the Portrayals of Violence Against Women in Rap Music, 1987-1993, Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 96-126.

Anonymous. (2003) Home grown: British hip-hop. *The Times*, July 26.

Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen (1996) Metalheads: Heavy Metal Music and Adolescent Alienation. Boulder: Westview.

Attali, Jacques. (1977) Noise: The Political Economy of Music. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Baker, Geoffrey (2005) '¡Hip Hop, Revolución! Nationalizing Rap in Cuba', *Ethnomusicology,* Vol. 49, No. 49, pp. 368–402.

Binder, Amy (1993) "Constructing Racial Rhetoric: Media Depictions of Harm in Heavy Metal And Rap Music". American Sociological Review. Vol. 58, pp. 753-767.

Blackman, Shane. (2004) Chilling Out: The Cultural Politics of Substance Consumption, Youth and Drug Policy. Berkshire: Open University Press.

Brewer, John. D. (2000) Ethnography. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Brown, Sheila. (2005) Understanding Youth and Crime. Berkshire: Open University Press.

Campion, Chris. (2004) Inside Grime, *The Observer*, Sunday, May 23.

Conrad, Kate. Dixon, Travis. Zhang, Yuanyuan. (2009) Controversial Rap Themes, Gender Portrayals and Skin Tone Distortion: A Content Analysis of Rap Music Videos. Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media, Vol. 53, pp. 134 – 156.

Contostavlos, Tulisa. (2012) Honest: My Story So Far. London: Headline.

Fernandes, Sujatha. (2011) Close to the Edge: In Search of the Global Hip Hop Generation. London: Verso Books.

Ferrell, Jeff. (1999) Cultural Criminology. Annual Review of Sociology, Vol. 25, pp. 395-418.

Fetterman, David. M. (1989) Ethnography. London: Sage Publications.

Foot Whyte, William. (1993) Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of An Italian Slum. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Forman, Murray. (2002) The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.

Gans, Herbert. J. (1968) People and Plans: Essays on Urban Problems and Solutions. New York: Basic Books.

Gilroy, Paul. (1992) The Ain't No Black In The Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation. London and New York: Routledge.

Gramsci, Antonio. (2007) Selections from the Prison Notebooks. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Gupta-Carlson, Himanee (2010) 'Planet B-Girl: Community Building and Feminism in Hip-Hop', *New Political Science*, Vol. 32, No. 4, pp. 515–29.

Hall, Stuart et al. (1978) Policing The Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order. Basingstoke: MacMillan.

Halnon, Karen. Bettez. (2006) Heavy Metal Carnival and Dis-alienation: The Politics of Grotesque Realism. Symbolic Interaction, Vol. 29, No.1, pp. 33-48.

Halnon, Karen. Bettez. (2004) Inside Shock Music Carnival: Spectacle as Contested Terrain. Critical Sociology, Vol. 30, No. 3, pp. 743-779.

Hamm, M.S. (1995) Hammer of the Gods revisited: neo-Nazi skinheads, domestic terrorism, and the rise of the new protest music. In Ferrell, J. Sanders, C.R. (eds) Cultural Criminology. Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Hammersley, Martyn. Atkinson, Paul. (1997) Ethnography: Principles in Practice: London and New York: Routledge.

Hammersley, Martyn. (1990) Reading Ethnographic Research. London and New York: Longman.

Harris, Keith. D. (1997) 'Music Is My Life?': Discourse Analysis and the Interview Talk of Members of a Music-Based Subculture. London: Goldsmiths College.

Hebdige, Dick. (1988) Subculture: The Meaning of Style, London: Routledge.

Hobbs, Dick. (2006) Ethnography. In Jupp, Victor. (ed) The Sage Dictionary of Social Research Methods. London: Sage.

Hodkinson, Paul Edward. (2002) Goth: Identity, Style and Subculture. Oxford: Berg.

Jeffries, Stuart. (2005) Grime Pays, *The Guardian*, Thursday, August 4.

Jorgensen, Danny. L. (1989) Participant Observation. London: Sage.

Kellner, Douglas. (1995) Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern. London and New York: Routledge.

Lee, Jooyoung. (2009) Open Mic: Professionalizing the Rap Career. Ethnography. Vol. 10. No. 4, pp 475-495.

Malinowski, Bronislaw. (2007) Method and Scope of Anthropological Fieldwork. In Robben, Antonius. C.G.M. Sluka, Jeffrey. A. Ethnographic Fieldwork: An Anthropological Reader. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 46-59.

McFarland, Pancho. (2008) Chicano Rap: Gender and Violence in the Postindustrial Barrio. Austin: University of Texas Press.

McInnes, Paul. (2010) Are you ready for the British MCs? Guardian.co.uk http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2010/jul/29/british-mcs-paul-macinnes (accessed 15/7/2010).

McKinnon, Matthew. (2005) Grime Wave. http://www.cbc.ca/arts/music/grimewave.html (accessed 21/6/2010)

McRobbie, Angela. (2005) The Uses of Cultural Studies. London: Sage.

Melville, C. (2004) Beats, Rhymes and Grime. New Humanist, Vol. 119, Issue 6. http://newhumanist.org.uk/822/beats-rhymes-and-grime (accessed 12/4/2010)

Miyakawa, Felicia. M. (2005) Five Percenter Rap: God Hop's Music, Message, and Black Muslim Mission. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Murray, Derek. Conrad. (2004) Hip-Hop vs. High Art: Notes on Race as Spectacle, *Art Journal*, Vol. 63, No. 2., pp. 4-19.

Negus, Keith. (1999) Music Genres and Corporate Cultures. London: Routledge.

Ogbar, Jeffrey, O.G. (1999) Slouching Toward Bork: The Culture Wars and Self-Criticism in Hip-Hop Music, Journal of Black Studies, Vol. 30, No. 2, pp. 164-183.

Pike, L. Owen. (1870-71) On the Methods of Anthropological Research, Journal of the Anthropological Society of London, Vol. 8, pp. iii-xiii.

Plummer, Ken. (2001) Documents of Life 2: An Invitation to a critical Humanism. London: Sage Publications.

Puddephatt, Antony. J. Shaffir, William. Kliennecht, Steven. W. (eds) (2009) Ethnographies Revisited: Constructing Theory in the Field. London and New York: Routledge.

Quirk, Justin. (2004) It's Grime's Time, *The Guardian*, Saturday, August 7. http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2004/aug/07/popandrock (accessed 21/6/2010).

Roberts, Brian. (2002) Biographical Research. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Rose, Phil. (1998) Which One's Pink?: An Analysis of Concept Albums of Roger Waters and "Pink Floyd." Collector's Guide Publishing.

Phillips, Layli, Reddick-Morgan, Kerri, and Stephens, Dionne Patricia (2005) 'Oppositional Consciousness Within An Oppositional Realm: The Case of Feminism and Womanism in Rap and Hip Hop, 1976-2004', *Journal of African American History*,Vol. 90, No. 3, 253–77.

Smitherman, Geneva. (1997) "The Chain Remains the Same": Communicative Practices in the Hip Hop Nation Journal of Black Studies, Vol. 28, No. 1. pp. 3-25.

Springhall, John. (1998) Youth, Popular Culture and Moral Panics: Penny Gaffs to Gangsta-Rap, 1830-1996. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Spitulnik, Debra. (1993) Anthropology and Mass Media. The Annual Review of Anthropology, Vol. 22, pp. 293-315.

Stokes, Martin. (1997) Voices and Places: History, Repetition and the Musical Imagination. The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, Vol. 3, No. 4, pp. 673-691.

Tabb Powell, Catherine. (1991) Rap Music: An Education with a beat from the Street. The Journal of Negro Education, Vol. 60, No. 3, pp. 245-259.

Terkourafi, Marina. (ed) (2012) Languages of Global Hip Hop. Continuum.

Thornton, Sarah. (1995) Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Toop, David. (1991) Rap Attack 2: African Rap To Global Hip Hop. London: Serpent's Tail.

Toop, David. (1984) The Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip Hop. London: Pluto Press.

Weinstein, Deena. (1991) Heavy Metal: A Cultural Sociology, New York: Lexington Books.

Weitzer, R. Kubrin, C.E. (2009) Misogyny in Rap Music A Content Analysis of Prevalence and Meanings. Men and Masculinities, Vol. 12, pp. 3 – 29.

Willis, Paul. (1977) Learning To Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs. Westmead: Saxon House.

Willis, Paul. (2000) The Ethnographic Imagination. Cambridge: Polity.

Wilson, Andrew. (2007) Northern Soul: Music, Drugs and Subcultural Identity. Cullompton: Willan.

Wilson, Scott. (2008) Great Satan's Rage: American Negativity and Rap/Metal in the Age of Supercapitalism. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Wolcott, Harry. F. (1999) Ethnography: A Way of Seeing. London: Altamira Press.