Class/ Race: Class, Race and Marginality: Informal Street Performances in the City

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<u>Introduction</u>

In April 2014 I took a long-planned trip to New York City with my mother. We stayed in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and took the J Train into Manhattan most days. Unexpectedly – for I had little interest before my visit in reading up on the subway system, beyond tips on how best to use it – the underground was alive with arts and performance practice. The throbbing thwack of bucket drumming and the surprising copper crocodile[1] that emerges from a manhole cover on the L train platform at 14th Street-8th Avenue were more thrilling to me than the iconic cultural scene above ground. As Susie Tanenbaum articulates in her 1995 ethnography of the subway music scene, *Underground Harmonies*, New York's subway system has long been a space in which a heterogeneous range of amateur and professional artists hone their craft and seek to make a living. A space where the social and political structures of the city are reflected in the cultures, rituals, policing, legislation and law enforcement practiced there. The rich music scene described by Tanenbaum still exists underground, but I was moved most profoundly by the subway dance culture.

Two incidents from that trip have stayed with me:

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[1] A permanent sculpture, installed in the station as part of *Life Underground* (2011), an artwork by the sculptor Tom Otterness. It was commissioned by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's 'Art for Transit' programme (now known as MTA Arts & Design), a collection which includes more than 300 public artworks made for subway and commuter rails stations.

The first occurred as I changed trains at Union Square station and came across a group of break-dancers setting up an amp on the mezzanine. An older gentleman, a woman and three boys: two teenagers and one who was just three or four years old. As the music spiralled out of the speakers they began dancing. It quickly became clear that the small boy was the star of the show: the money maker. He cocked his head with confident 'street' attitude and took up the b-boy stance[2] before breaking into a routine that included a perfectly executed four-turn head-spin. A large crowd gathered, filming the scene on their mobile phones, before the group finished the routine and encouraged the crowd to donate.

The second incident took place on the subway train itself. As we rode around – confused, navigating a system that seemed indifferent to tourists (what is an express train? Why is there more than one station called 103rd st?), three teenage boys boarded the train and shouted 'Showtime!' They pumped tinny, upbeat, digitally enhanced hip-hop from small speakers, and took it in turns to perform gymnastic dance feats, including somersaults, backflips, and aerial contortion using the safety poles. 'What is this?' I asked my mother. I was completely mesmerised by the vitality, skill and exuberance of the performance, which seemed both designed for us as tourists and an utterly indulgent and joyous means of expression for the dancers themselves.

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[2] b-boy is the breakdancing style developed as part of the hip hop movement in the 1970s and 80s; the b-boy stance is starting move where the dancer stands with head backwards, as if resting on a wall, and arms crossed over the chest

I later learned the small boy I had seen on the mezzanine at Union Square was known as 'Kid Break' and was self-taught through watching break dance videos online. He was affiliated with WAFFLE, a crew of dancers mostly practicing a form of dance known as litefeet. WAFFLE regularly perform on subway trains, announcing their presence with the call 'Showtime!' These incidents on the subway reminded me of the garage MCs and grime rappers who would recite their rhymes on the top decks of the London buses I used as a teenager, using public transport to practice and perfect emerging lyrical techniques that would also appear in music played on pirate radio stations, broadcast across London while I was growing up.

I offer the anecdotes above as a way of introducing what I call 'informal street performance' — a term intended to encompass those unsanctioned, seemingly spontaneous performances that take place on the street or in other public spaces, or that emerge from so-called street culture, and that are often carried out by ethnically and economically marginalised groups. The informal street performance practices happening in London, New York and elsewhere provide an interesting way in to thinking about how politics operates through space — and to understanding the relationship between class, race and politics in the city.

This chapter, then, takes as its starting point the assumption that acts that are ostensibly frivolous or destructive, including dancing, busking, graffiti and even expressions of violence, nonetheless intervene in the social, cultural and political life of the city. Although practices may begin informally, they often become woven into formal culture (through commercial exploitation and in historical narratives), and come to shape how spaces and places within cities are understood. In both London

and New York, cities I have come to know well as a resident and a tourist/researcher respectively, street expressions of performative creativity that cut across race and class and responses to them by authorities make visible structural inequalities, and imbue perhaps unlikely spaces (the subway car, the sidewalk, the council estate, the bus) with the energy of revolution. Informal performance practices, therefore, play a significant role in both structuring and responding to the political organisation of city spaces.

In this chapter, I explore how we might understand cities as political, mapping the intersections between class, space and marginality, before offering an overview of two modes of informal street performance in two cities: litefeet dance (New York) and grime music (London). These forms were both pioneered by young men of colour, and, as I discuss below, they are useful examples of performance that help us to think about the city as a political space. I argue that these examples show us how the expression of 'revolutionary' politics need not rely on total systemic change or ideological purity from practitioners, but on what scholar Lisa McKenzie calls 'a process', in which revolution manifests as 'a turning, a whirling, an about change from one position to the opposite position' (2018). The work in this chapter draws on my studies of hip hop and related cultures in London and New York, including periods of time shadowing both WAFFLE and the theatre company Beats & Elements. It reveals how we can use performance analysis to understand the ways those marginalised from mainstream cultural activity find connections within and to the city space — and even ways to (re)shape and change cities through performance. This relies on thinking about what the spatial philosopher Henri Lefebvre called 'social space' (1991) as inherently political.

Space, Politics and Injustice: Class, Race and Marginality in the City

The notion of politics that I articulate here moves beyond centring formal structures of governance as the site of the political, and instead, drawing on Grant Tyler Peterson's definition, sees the 'political' as 'helpful in articulating the overarching arrangements of power' (2011: 386). Stephan Collini defines politics as, 'the important, inescapable, and difficult attempt to determine relations of power in a given space' (Collini in Kelleher 2009: 3) — this quotation begins to suggest the ways that city 'space' is not only a means through which we can understand relations of power, but through which we can actively challenge existing power structures. This is because, as theatre scholar Kim Solga proposes, the spaces in which we live and perform both organize and are organized by existing formations of power. Space, therefore, is a paradoxically 'abstract' and 'concrete' entity that comprises our worlds, physical and imaginary (Solga 2019: 2).

Lefebvre, one of the most influential figures to write about the relationship between space and politics in the 20th Century described the spaces of interaction between individual bodies, and between bodies and objects as 'social space'. Clearly, the (human) body and its experience of the world is important in social space, and in our experiences of the places in which we live: indeed, 'it is through the body that one comes to know the world' (Beswick 2011: 428). But although this suggests that the experience of space is highly individual, the 'social' in 'social space' emphasizes that the internal individual experience is rooted in a shared external world (Peuquet 2002: 32). Importantly this shared externality is created as spaces are shaped by the forces of control and domination that we see operating through society and history in

various ways. The idea of social space therefore relies on an understanding that politics is inherently *spatial* just as space is inherently political — and that individual human actors as well as overarching power structures create the spaces we live in and how we are able to live in them. Lefebvre, like many scholars seeking to analyse relations between power and injustice, draws on ideas rooted in Marxism — highlighting the injustices produced by social and economic inequality under capitalism. Such injustices, as Imogen Tyler has argued, intersect across race, class and gender to ensure that distinct groups of people (women, migrants, people of colour) are far less likely to accumulate wealth and resources than other groups of people (2013: 156).

Nowhere are the political injustices of social space under capitalism more visible than in our cities, where inequalities are played out in the street — not always noticed, though rarely hidden from view for those who care to look. In our city streets the lack of access to resources afforded to some groups sits directly alongside the obscene abundance of others. In New York City for example, poverty moves alongside wealth outside Trump Tower, a 58-storey skyscraper, whose lobby is adorned with ostentatious gold finishings, representing the extreme riches hoarded by the Trump Organization, headed by current (at the time of writing) US President Donald Trump (a neat illustration of the way space and power are intertwined). In the streets below the Tower, and in Central Park, visible from the windows of the higher floors, those in extreme poverty and need, including the homeless, beg for money, or work for wages which barely cover the cost of living as street cleaners, hot dog vendors and subway attendants. Although it is important not to conflate London and New York, which are different places with different histories that produce distinct

conditions of inequality (Waquant 2009), it is the case that in both cities the crises of capitalism continue apace. In these cities too the raced nature of class injustice is often rendered most visible. The lowest paid jobs are often carried out by black, Hispanic and Asian workers, who also struggle to find secure employment more frequently than their white counterparts (McGeehan 2012, TrustforLondon 2018), while run down and under-resourced neighbourhoods overwhelmingly occupied by people of colour (Goldenberg 2018, Hanley 2017). In London (and other English cities) race inequality plays out in the vertical life of the city as well as on the streets, with black and Asian families far more likely to be allocated high-rise social housing, which is often stigmatised and poorly maintained, than white families (Hanley 2017). Although — as Trump Tower indicates — high rise living, in terms of the luxury penthouse apartment, is also associated with wealth, high rise social housing is frequently stigmatised, and understood as producing crime, antisocial behaviour and ill health: pointing to how our understandings of space are socially (and politically) constructed in relation to how perceptions of wealth and power circulate in different types of spaces.

The state of affairs I outline above indicates how class and race operate in conjunction with one another, in ways that often produce greater injustices for people of colour as the injustices of their class position are compounded by racism. As Solga argues, 'racism and White privilege depend upon the reproduction of certain normative spatial structures for their violent power' (2019: 14). This idea of 'normativity' can be seen in the way injustices of class and race are reflected in the criminal justice system, where both the working class in general and the black working class in particular are overrepresented as criminals, portrayed as the 'natural' occupiers of prisons and courthouses. Scholar Deidre O'Neill (2017)

illustrates how society is structured so as to produce the behaviour of the working class as criminal, and to suggest that this criminality is 'natural', rather than the result of injustices that mean the working class are far more likely to experience 'poverty, isolation, boredom, an inability to cope, drink problems and mental illness' (Farell in O'Neill:) and to have their behaviour categorised as criminal (see also Kitossa 2012). As O'Neill points out the criminalisation of the (black) working class is the result of a 'system of historically embedded beliefs and common sense rationalities', 'that are drawn upon to justify and reinforce the apparatus of capitalism [and] serve to deflect attention away from the behavior of the rich and powerful' (O'Neill 2018: 27)

Writing in 1967, Lefebvre pointed to the increasing commodification and commercialism of the city space under the capitalist regime in his essay *The Right to the City.* As David Harvey points out the idea of the 'right to the city' was 'both a cry and a demand':

> The cry was a response to the existential pain of a withering crisis of everyday life in the city. The demand was really a command to look that crisis clearly in the eye and to create urban life that is less alienated, more meaningful and playful but, as always with Lefebvre, conflictual and dialectical, open to becoming, to encounters (both fearful and pleasurable), and to the perpetual pursuit of unknowable novelty.
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> (Harvey 2013: X)

When we understand that our social spaces are structured in ways that marginalize and criminalise sections of the population, it can be easy to feel hopelessness, or

despair at the prevailing order. But even as capitalism accelerates into crisis, producing economic, ecological and social chaos, we find those dwelling in the city's marginal spaces clamouring to assert their right to city space. As bell hooks reminds us, just as it is a space of repression and pain, so too the 'margin' occupied by those oppressed by the injustices of capitalism, can be understood as a radical space of resistance (1989). hooks reminds us of the dangers of pessimism about marginality, 'if we only view the margin as a sign, marking the condition of our pain and deprivation' she writes, 'then a certain hopelessness and despair, a deep nihilism penetrates in a destructive way' (hooks 1989, 21). For hooks, to stay located at the margins is a radical choice; she makes a 'definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance – as location of radical openness and possibility' (23). In London, New York, and other cities structured by the capitalist system, the places, cultures and ideas often marginalised by the dominant forces of capitalism become sites from which to speak back to power, and through which citizens might assert their own power in the face of structural inequality.

This is not to suggest that creative, informal street acts bring about wholesale change to the structures of the capitalist city; indeed, the impulses towards and means of resistance played out in informal street performance are often born of a need for survival: in conditions of abjection, poverty and pain, to survive and to find ways to do so joyfully is also an act of resistance. So too it is often difficult to understand the kinds of performance I describe below as entirely revolutionary, because the cultural forms expressed in street dance, rap and other means of informal expression are often in tension with, and subject to co-option by, the

capitalist system they exist within. Nonetheless, despite such tensions, these forms of expression can provide moments we might understand as revolutionary in the sense of what McKenzie (2018) describes as a 'turning wheel'; where the toxicity of capitalism compels those oppressed by it to make movements towards change. McKenzie is not optimistic about the destination towards which this revolution in the face of toxic capitalism is travelling — and the tensions inherent in street performance forms suggest the difficulty of transcending the status quo entirely — nonetheless, her writing does encourage us to think about political struggles as they play out in the everyday lives and spaces of the working classes, and to view acts that participate in the slow transformation of our societies as 'revolutionary'. Litefeet, emerging from the streets and subways of New York, and grime, developed in East London's tower blocks, provide examples of informal street performance practices that contribute to the revolutionary 'wheel turning' compelled by late capitalism.

Litefeet and Grime: A Brief History

Litefeet and Grime were propelled by hip hop — indeed it is impossible to write about race, urban marginality and informal performance without mentioning hip hop: a now global cultural form which famously began in the impoverished inner city neighbourhoods (then: the Bronx, Harlem and Brooklyn) of New York City in the early 1970s. As Murray Forman notes, 'hip hop's discourses have an impressive influence among North Americans […] of all races and ethnicities, providing a distinctive understanding of the social terrains and conditions under which "real" black cultural identities are formed and experienced' (2002: 9). Murray's work — and the growing scholarship on hip hop, now spanning a number of disciplinary fields —

demonstrates how street practices are both profoundly local and, yet, frequently co-opted, appropriated and caught up within globalised economic systems and capitalist imperatives that complicate and blur the boundaries between the margins and the mainstream. This complication is compounded by the race and class politics that play out through hip hop culture in the dominant cultural sphere, where the often working class black, Asian and ethnic minority practitioners of the form are frequently presented as 'outward manifestations of an "outlaw culture" that is perceived as dangerous, if not outrightly criminal' (Fatsis 2018: 1). This plays out in the evolution of Litefeet, a practice that has been explicitly criminalised in city law. Litefeet is a dance and music form that began in Harlem, New York in around 2006 and spread through the Bronx and elsewhere. Practitioners of the form describe is as 'the re-emergence of hip hop through dance' (my interview with Andrew Saunders, 2015). It emerged as part of organised and spontaneous 'battles', where dancers aged from 11 or 12 up to about 30 would gather on the streets, in the courtyards of housing projects or in warehouses, studios and gymnasiums, and moving away from the traditional b-boy, develop new and innovative moves in order to impress and, at organised battles, win kudos and respect from their peers. Signature moves include the 'Harlem Shake', 'Chicken Noodle Soup' and the 'Toe Wop' (or 'Tone Wop'), but it is probably most well known as the dance style performed on the subway trains of New York City. Groups of predominately Hispanic and African-American teenagers, from housing projects and mostly low-income neighbourhoods on the city's edges, perform gymnastic feats using the walls, seats, poles and floors of subway cars — they often form 'crews' (groups) and dance to music produced by fellow crew members. In a research trip I took to the city in 2014, dancers from the WAFFLE crew explained to me that they began performing on trains to make the ten dollar fee

to attend battles, but were soon earning between 100 and 150 dollars a day and contributing to their families' household expenses. As most of the boys and men live in the projects and other low-income housing, dancing quickly became a low-risk illegal way to make cash quickly. Panhandling (soliciting money from the public) has long been illegal on the subway system (the penalty was usually a fine), but in 2014, in response to the continued use of subway trains as a platform for panhandling by litefeet dancers, New York City's Police Commissioner, William Bratton, announced that dancers caught performing on trains would be charged with 'Reckless Endangerment', a Misdemeanour A offence that carries a penalty of up to a year in prison. It is difficult to see this move as divorced from the wider culture of classed and racialised criminalisation of young black men in the USA, where according to the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP), black people are incarcerated at 5 times the rate of whites (2019).

The scholars Chris Richardson and Hans Skott-Myhre position hip hop as a form of 'cultural politics', which, despite its co-option by the forces of capital and its exploitation to naturalise the working class (black) body as criminal, articulates resistance 'against the forces of control and domination'. This is because, in hip hop, 'networks of self-production [are] no longer constrained by the axiomatic discipline of the dominant media, the state, or the market' (Richardson and Skott-Myhre 2012: 19). In other words what Marx would call the 'means of production' of hip hop are readily available to those living at the margins and subject to systemic racism, compounded by their class position (see also: Huq 2006, KItwara 2005). Perhaps this is why, even as it becomes a capitalist product, in cities and towns all over the world, hip hop pushes against capitalist forces: shaping the cultural landscape

produced by urban marginality. The paradox here is that even as hip hop is co-opted by capitalism, it continues to find ways to resist. Hip hop's means of expression, including MCing (rapping), break dance, graffiti and DJing, continue to be adopted and developed by those struggling to overcome the hardships of late capitalism.

As I argued above, both Litefeet and grime are rooted in hip hop traditions, although as I will trace below, they are also products of the specific spaces where they emerged. London and New York are very different places, where national histories, climate, local laws, traditions and cultural practices mean citizens come to experience and resist injustice in different ways. Litefeet and grime movements have some overlaps, but in their specific iterations draw attention to the precise ways that inequality manifests in and is produced by distinct spaces. In other words, both reflect the distinct cultures of the cities where they began, and the particular spaces through which they were given life, as well as speaking to the wider global context of urban marginality.

Litefeet

The pioneers of litefeet are primarily from Harlem and the Bronx. Much like 'first wave' hip hop culture, litefeet is a grass-roots practice that has evolved from an informal street practice to a mainstream movement co-opted, globally, by brands and prominent entertainers. Its signature moves (or 'trends'), including the 'Harlem Shake', have 'gone viral' – with videos shared online in their millions and high profile entertainers reproducing trends in music videos. Dancers are regularly asked to perform at events including New York Fashion week and in commercials and corporate events for global brands including Nike and Redbull. In 2019, members of the WAFFLE crew appeared on the popular entertainment show *Ellen*. Seven

documentaries about litfeet have been made and the form has been the subject of articles in the Huffington Post, New York Magazine and The Daily Mail.

Litefeet is also known as 'getting lite', which signals its move away from some of the stereotypes of East Coast 'gangster' hip hop that dominated the mainstream in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Unlike b-boy, the traditional form of break dancing, which makes virtuosic use of the floor and often sees practitioners adopt a confident street-swagger epitomised by the 'b-boy stance', litefeet is comical and ostensibly flippant in style. Dancers often accompany moves with exaggerated facial expressions, and make use of height — if break dancing is known for floor work, litefeet is known for its aerial displays as dancers somersault, contort themselves using safety poles on subway cars as elevation, and carry out tricks using baseball caps and sneakers thrown in an upwards motion. This move towards lightness can be considered political — an attempt to overturn negative images of young black men that dominate commercial hip hop culture (Rose 2008). Unlike the gangsta rap that sought to portray the harsh realities of life in the impoverished inner city, litefeet dancers use the lightness of form to draw attention to the positive and playful potentials of inner-city living. As the dancers remind viewers on a Channel 12, local Bronx news station interview that I watched them record, 'dance is positive.' This turn to liteness might itself be understood as a softening of the politics of hip hop — and indeed there are tensions between the 'revolutionary' nature of the litefeet form, and the way in which it presents an 'acceptable', unthreatening version of black masculinity that is easily co-opted by brands, televisions shows and other commercial interests. The dancers are clear that making money from their work is an aim: this is about survival not only through creative and emotional freedom, but

through 'economic capital' (Bourdieu 1986: ?) that allows financial freedom.

It would be misleading, then, to suggest that Litefeet dancers are motivated by an ideological socialist purity (indeed I saw no indication that they are socialist at all in any individual or collective sense), or that they are consciously Marxist in their attempts at disrupting power. Nonetheless, dancers do use the form to contest their treatment by those in positions of power, particularly the police. Knafo and Kassie describe a dance sequence performed by WAFFLE's Andrew 'Goofy' Saunders:

> running in place to the skittering beat of a typical litefeet track while repeatedly glancing over his shoulder, his eyes cartoonishly wide with fear. Anyone who dances on the trains would have grasped the reference. 'Running from the cops,' Saunders said, spelling it out. 'That's what's cool about litefeet. You can put anything into it.'

In this way litefeet is not only a frivolous form, but serves as a means to address overarching systems of domination and control, and to draw attention to injustices that structure the lives of working class black men in the city, such as dealing with harassment from the police based on the way that black working class bodies, as I describe above, are 'naturalised' as criminal in the capitalist system.

Indeed, litefeet dancers have been at the forefront of contesting the injustices that play out through subway space. When the law criminalising subway dance was announced, WAFFLE staged a 'last dance' protest to draw attention to the gross unfairness of this legislation. Documented in Scott Carthy's 2014 short-film *Litefeet*, the protest begins in the subway station, as the crew walk slowly up the stairs

towards the platform, the camera following them from behind. Kid Break is in front, dressed in sweat-pants (tracksuit bottoms), with his shirt off, suggesting the heat of a New York Summer. In slow motion the crew move across the platform, laughing and stretching to warm up, while Andrew 'Goofy' Saunders narrates a voice over, describing the formation of WAFFLE and the misrepresentation of subway dancers in the political debate surrounding the form. A train pulls into the platform and the dancers board. They call 'Showtime!' and begin, one by one, to perform. They tell the audience that this is their 'last dance'. The camera is positioned low so as to capture the vertical planes of the dance-form. Despite the sombre tone of the film the dancers are upbeat and smiling; light-hearted for the camera.

Although the 'last dance' wasn't really the final dance WAFFLE dancers ever performed on the subway (indeed they were still dancing on trains when I visited them in New York in 2015, 2016 and 2018), it was a symbolic gesture, drawing attention to the injustices of the 'reckless endangerment' charge. The performance was followed by other tactics to resist the clampdown on dancing, including developing merchandise that allowed the public to show support for the dancers — most strikingly a t-shirt that riffs on the posters placed all over the subway system, warning about the 'dangers' of using the poles for dance ('this pole is for my safety, not your latest dance routine', the posters read). On the t-shirts the image from the MTA poster is re-printed, with the words changed to assert 'this pole is for your safety and my latest dance routine'.

One of the notable features of litefeet as a form is that from its inception during street battles in New York's housing projects, to its current practice by professionals on

reality television programs, commercials and in documentaries, it has been digitally documented. Indeed, the evolution of the practice runs parallel to the rise of YouTube, where the founders of litefeet posted videos of battles and dance sessions – some of which were 'branded' as individuals attempted to secure their place in history as authors of the form. Practitioners now use Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook and Twitter to document and share their litefeet practice. Collectives such as the WAFFLE NYC crew have garnered significant local, national and international attention through their social media activity. As Hector Postigo argues in his examination of online gaming commentary, YouTube videos serve multiple functions for their users '[t]hey are not only performances of expertise […], but they also serve as performances of identity, community conflicts and allegiances, community values, economy and creativity' (2016: 333). In this way we can also understand the documentation of litefeet as intervening poltically in spatial practice not only in its co-option of street and subway space, where the bodies of those usually relegated to the margins assert themselves as virtuosic owners of space, but in its use of digital space as a means with which to make visible the lives and practices of the margins to a global audience. Again, this use of commercial, digital space is not without its tensions — if there is 'revolution' in working class black men claiming ownership of their intellectual and creative contributions to urban dance, there is also a deeply unradical aspect to the choice of corporate social media as the platform through which to leverage this revolution. It is important then to understand that informal street performance forms often enact their politics inadvertently and in compromised ways. The necessity for survival, coupled with the lack of access to alternatives, means those using the street and other public space as the site for action must often make use of what is familiar, accessible and freely available to them. The

compromised nature of this politics illustrates McKenzie's understanding of 'revolution' as a process of turning, rather than an immediate radical shift in practices or perspective.

Grime

'Grime' is the term used to describe a distinctive, and distinctively English (White 2018) form of urban music. Developed in East London, particularly in the boroughs of Tower Hamlets and Newham, grime draws on a range of music influences including dancehall (which also influenced early hip hop music), UK garage, jungle and dub reggae (Collins and Rose 2016), and can also be understood as a UK development of hip hop — despite recent writing about grime (particularly Dan Hancox's *Inner-City Pressure* 2018) downplaying the link with hip hop culture. Examining grime as a form, the link with hip hop is apparent in numerous ways: the primary means of vocal expression used in hip hop (rapping over an instrumental beat) also distinguishes grime, and the semiotics of hip hop music are utilised by grime musicians, who channel the 'hood' style that has its roots in US hip hop: wearing branded sportswear, especially trainers (or sneakers in US parlance) baseball caps, and gold jewellery. So too grime musicians affiliate themselves with highly specific neighbourhoods in the same way that hip hop artists do, with music videos often filmed, or appearing to be filmed, in and around the homes of grime artists (see e.g. Skepta's *Shut Down Video*, and my commentary of it in Beswick 2019: 155). Like hip hop the stories told through grime music are highly specific and often appear 'ethnographic' (Baron 2013) in their narration of urban life. Indeed, as Lambros Fatsis argues, this ethnography is politically inflected, allowing grime rappers to act as 'public intellectuals' who 'lay bear the violence of what is

represented by their lyrics (disturbing images of social exclusion), while also hinting at the social and political violence done to those [often working class people of colour] who are represented in their lyrics' (2018: 6).

While some of the links with hip hop I outline above may seem superficial, they are important in understanding the way that hip hop is leveraged as a global political movement. Through fashion, attitude and by drawing on hip hop techniques, UK grime artists affiliate themselves with hip hop culture, and position themselves, in their specific local and national contexts, within a global movement. In this way those in London show solidarity with others living under capitalist systems that oppress them because of their class and race. As I argue elsewhere:

> [grime's] origins in grass-roots hip-hop culture position it as a very obvious […] articulation of the global hood, where modes of resistance and survival developed in the marginalized inner cities of North America are appropriated and articulated globally.

> (Beswick 2019: 155).

The solidarity that runs through hip hop and forms emerging from it is also political, and can also be seen in a variety of practices. Fatsis points to the political potential of the cipher (or 'cypher'), the sharing-circle in which practitioners of hip hop across forms (including both grime and litefeet) come together to improvise, innovate, share and listen. In the cipher, 'space, place and culture […] intertwine to form a public place of assembly where citizenship is exercised in an actively-involved, publicly-situated and 'lived' manner, not unlike the Pnyx in Ancient Athens or Speakers' Corner in London.' (Fatsis 2018: 8). Joy White meanwhile draws attention to the politics of the 'crew' (which is again seen in both grime and litefeet), as a means of

seizing and sharing power, a model that operates outside of the capitalist drive for individual success:

> […] crew membership allows for a creative expression and performance firmly rooted in the black experience. Predominately male, a crew is a space that offers a number of opportunities to learn your craft as a musician as well as develop tacit knowledge about the scene and how it operates.

> (White 2018: 227)

In *Inner-City Pressure* Hancox describes how the artist Wiley, one of grime's leading figures, repeatedly claims that his greatest achievement is the success of other artists he has mentored (2018, ??). An anathema to interviewers, this attitude reveals again the solidarity that underpins grime. Despite these roots in care, solidarity and sharing, grime is nonetheless often characterised as being bound up with crime, particularly violence and drug taking. This belief, while perhaps rooted in the few high profile crimes carried out by grime artists in the early days of the genre's emergence (Fatsis 2018, Hancox 2018, White 2018), nonetheless draws on the kinds of reductive understandings of people marginalised by virtue of their class and race that I describe above. Drawing on the work of Franz Fannon, Fatsis describes the criminalisation of grime music as a 'form of cultural racism [that] has its roots in the belief that "Black" cultural values should be suspected of promoting violent or criminal lifestyles and should therefore be responded to by tactics that have been described as "policing against black people"' (2018: 13).

Like hip hop, grime emerges from the margins of the inner-city, as those people and places overlooked by mainstream culture become sites of creative revolution. In this way grime, like litefeet, can be understood as a spatial practice. If litefeet articulates

its politics in the streets, subways and the digital sphere, then we might understand the spatial politics of grime by thinking about its relationship with housing. Hancox (2018) describes how grime emerged from the council estates of East London, where many of the pioneers lived, made music and in the early days of the genre broadcast music from illegal pirate radio stations that transmitted across London. Grime is intimately intertwined with the culture of inner-city social housing, or 'council housing', itself a stigmatised space, bound up with notions of 'street life', that becomes an ideological container for the stigmas related to class and race that we have seen play out above (Beswick 2019:12). The term grime, while of contested origin, is widely considered to describe the way the form both embodies the 'grimey', gritty quality of the estate, and narrates and often celebrates the pressure of the marginalised inner city and its residents in its lyrics. Even the frenetic pace of the music (MC's rap at 140bpm, significantly faster than most hip hop tracks), seems to comment on the relentless pace of city life, and practitioners will to survive in the face of it.

A searing example of grime's willingness to speak truth to power occurred at the 2018 Brit Awards, when artist Stormzy used his performance to ask the government why the survivors of a horrific fire in Grenfell Tower, a high-rise tower block on the Lancaster West council estate in West London, had not been re-housed in the months since the tragedy. Turning accusations usually levelled at grime artists back on the government, he called the Prime Minister 'criminal' and accused MPs of drug-taking ('MPs sniff coke/we just smoke a bit of cannabis'). This performance drew attention not only to the gross negligence of those responsible for housing vulnerable people, but also to the decadence and excess of the powerful, whose crimes go

unnoticed and unpunished, while those at the margins have their harmless behaviour (making music, dancing) criminalised. This critique also drew on the space of the council estate, not only because Stormzy evoked Grenfell Tower, but because, in his performance, he stood in front of a large three-tiered structure that resembled an estate (Beswick 2019), and which was populated by rows of backing performers dressed in tracksuits and balaclavas, a nod to the kind of clothing often symbolically associated with 'black gangs' and 'council estate crime' (see: Bell 2014). Stormzy has also used social media platforms to maintain criticism of the government's response to Grenfell. When, in November 2019, following the release of the first report from the public inquiry into the tragedy, the Conservative MP Jacob Reese Mogg suggested he would have escaped the fire by ignoring the advice of fire fighters attending to stay inside the building, Stomzy launched an attack on his position, posted on Twitter and Facebook. His posts blasted politicians as 'evil' and 'wicked', arguing that the fire was the fault of the British Government — 'their fault, and their fault alone' (Stormzy 2019).

Similarly, grime is used in the hip hop theatre performance *High Rise eState of Mind* (Beats & Elements, Battersea Arts Centre 2019), as means to contest the injustices of London's housing crisis — where the Grenfell Tower tragedy I mention above has come to epitomise the wider structural violence towards the working classes, who are frequently expected to dwell in substandard accommodation, and for who a home in the city, where prices are driven to unaffordable levels by wealthy investors, becomes an impossibility. *High Rise eState of Mind* is an adaptation of JG Ballard's dystopian novel *High Rise*, in the play characters compete to ascend to the 'top floor' of the City Heights flats, where they will be granted luxury apartments and win the spoils offered to capitalism's 'winners'. In this performance, which weaves

hip hop, grime and spoken word, the grime number 'So Sick' is a critique on the ways in which capitalism compels a toxic drive to succeed that is ultimately a sickness for those who engage with its logic. The phrase 'so sick' is both a diagnosis for Luke, a character struggling to succeed on the lower floors of City Heights, and a comment on the world outside the reality of the play, where those at the margins are made 'so sick', by a toxic housing system driven by capitalist excesses.

Conclusion

The cultural movements I outline above are rooted in street practice: they are forms that have developed and flourished in the street, in public spaces and at the margins of the cities where capital rules; where those black, Hispanic, working class bodies are left out. This makes tracing the audiences for these kinds of work difficult — as I outline in the opening of this chapter, my own engagement with informal street performance forms has happened as a by product of my practice of the city as a tourist and resident. Views, likes and comments on the social media profiles of litefeet dancers and grime artists alike attest to the wide appeal of these artists and of hip hop forms in general, and similarly make it difficult to identify a demographic audience. Bakari Kitwana (2005) has argued that hip hop's mainstream appeal suggests how those from both sides of the racial and economic divide feel silenced, and see hip hop culture, with its proximity to the street, as a means of finding a political voice. Certainly, my experiences of engaging with litefeet and hip hop culture, both on the street, online and via commercial means such as purchasing music and attending gigs, has been a source of joy and relief. In times that often feel unbearable, to see others move in joy, or to hear public critiques of the systems

through which you too are oppressed, become means of finding meaning in life, and reasons to live.

It should be clear from my accounts above that grime and litefeet have not wrought significant material change in the overarching power structures that class and race inequality in our society: 'reckless endangerment' remains the charge for subway dance at the time of writing; Grenfell Tower survivors were not rehomed more quickly as a result of Stormzy's performance at the Brits; London's housing market remains overinflated, and those who cannot afford to live in London are still forced to move elsewhere, or dwell in unsafe and substandard accommodation. Nonetheless, I maintain that the forms examined above push against the dominant order, drawing attention to the unfairness of city life under capitalism and revealing, often playfully and with great skill, the injustices of the ways things, are and modelling how they might be different. In this way informal street practices contribute to the slow wheel turning that is the process of revolution that may upend the dominant order — or simply help us find bearable ways to survive it.

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