Recherches anglaises et nord-américaines

58 | 2024
Anti-Monarchism in the British Isles and Beyond

Ruling the Airwaves: Anti-Monarchism in British Grime Subculture

Régner sur les ondes : l'antimonarchisme dans la scène grime au Royaume-Uni

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Electronic version
URL: https://journals.openedition.org/ranam/1198
DOI: 10.4000/11uzi
ISSN: 3000-4411

Publisher
Presses universitaires de Strasbourg

Printed version
Date of publication: June 30, 2024
Number of pages: 89-112
ISBN: 979-10-344-0236-6
ISSN: 0557-6989

Electronic reference
James Strowman, "Ruling the Airwaves: Anti-Monarchism in British Grime Subculture", *Recherches anglaises et nord-américaines* [Online], 58 | 2024, Online since 30 June 2024, connection on 07 May 2025. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/ranam/1198 ; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/11uzi

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Ruling the Airwaves: Anti-Monarchism in British Grime Subculture

James Strowman♦

The release of the Sex Pistols' "God Save the Queen" (27 May 1977) marked a watershed moment in British music history due to the song's explicit anti-monarchism, which, for Jon Savage, left "an entire culture convulsed and quaking" (Savage, 1991: xiii). Reissued on 3 June 2022 to mark the Queen's Platinum Jubilee, the song almost instantly hit the number 1 spot in the UK Singles Chart. The success of its re-release is not only a testament to the Sex Pistols' enduring popularity, but also an indicator of the degree of anti-royalist sentiment in Britain today. In *Crown and People*, Philip Ziegler observes that in May 1976 statistics provided by *Gallup* show that 10% of the British public wanted the monarchy to be abolished (Ziegler, 1978: 127). NatCen (The National Centre for Social Research) has been collecting data regarding British attitudes towards the royal family since 1983 and figures for 2023 indicate that the number of people who consider the monarchy to be "very important" has dropped to 29%, the lowest it has been since the survey began.[1] While 26% of Britons said the monarchy was "quite important," 20% thought it was "not very important," and 25% said it was "not at all important/abolish" (NatCen, 28 April 2023). On the eve of the recent coronation celebrations of King Charles III, television presenter Piers Morgan quoted on *Piers Morgan Uncensored* a tweet from his son's Twitter account: "You may not care about the coronation, but I can very much assure you, nobody cares that you don't care". For Piers Morgan, the coronation was set to be "the stuff of fairytales" because it reflected "the history of this great country" (Morgan, 5 May 2023).[2] But whose fairytale does the monarchy represent?

This article explores anti-monarchism in British music in more recent years by tracing its evolution through grime subculture, with particular reference to

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1 Only 12% of 18-34-year-olds view the monarchy as "very important" compared to 42% of the 55+ age group.

2 This recalls Lars J. Kristiansen's description of Queen Elizabeth II's Jubilee celebrations as the nation's attempt to revive its "commonwealth glory days by romanticising its glorious history" (Kristiansen *et al.*, 2010: 74).

Britain's issues concerning race and class. Grime is an urban music subgenre that originated in East London (Bow and other East End locations) in the early 2000s.[3] This was in the midst of the New Labour administration under Tony Blair, which, from the late 1990s onwards, aimed to transform Britain's welfare state to a welfare society, with the promise of prosperity for all (Ashford, 1998: 32). New Labour's more centrist position inevitably left a lot of British working-class communities disillusioned. Following the "colour-blind" policies pursued by John Major's Conservative Party, New Labour made a commitment to tackling social injustice and racial inequality (Tomlinson, 2005: 153–154). Yet, well into the new millennium, ethnic minority groups were (and still are) being over-policed and denied equal opportunities (Ilan, 2012: 42). My initial focus here is on the practical means by which grime subculture has sought to circumvent the hegemonic power structures in twenty-first century Britain, and self-consciously stylise itself as a sort of "counter empire" built on a "pirate mentality". My attention then turns to the specific aesthetic strategies used by grime artists to oppose the British establishment and its monarchy, which distinguish grime from its "blingier" counterparts UK garage, bashment, and hip hop (Fatsis, 2019: 453). Instead of striving to imitate or outdo the upper classes' display of wealth, epitomised by royal celebrations, grime artists have been committed to offering social commentary on the "grimey" (dark or gritty) reality of urban living—particularly for young, black, working-class communities—without glamorising it.[4] I argue that this approach constitutes an uncompromising form of subcultural self-affirmation that gives listeners an "emic" (insider's) perspective into the motivating factors behind grime artists' provocative evasion of hegemonic public space and appropriation of the major symbols of the dominant culture.

"Pirate Mentality" and Empire

From the bedrooms of East London council estates, amid the shadows of re-urbanisation projects and gentrification, the sound of a predominately young, black social underclass emerged, as disruptive and powerful as 1970s punk (Riley, 2017: 9).[5] Grime also epitomises the punk DIY aesthetic, given that its pioneers had to make do with the most rudimentary music software: the now celebrated

3 Grime artists often graduated from a host of other urban music subgenres, such as UK garage, jungle, bashment, and hip hop.

4 This contrasts with the glamorisation of British working-class life by middle-class Britpop bands, like Blur, in the 1990s, constituting a form of class voyeurism famously critiqued by Pulp in "Common People" (1995).

5 Ruth Adams suggest that although the contribution of black culture and experience cannot be overstated, grime subculture reflects multicultural Britain as it is open to any young urbanite (with the right values and codes) regardless of their ethnicity (Adams, 2019: 19).

grime artist Dizzee Rascal (b. Dylan Kwabena Mills) produced almost the whole of his breakthrough album *Boy in da Corner* (2003) on FruityLoops, while others resorted to using mobile phones or Sony PlayStations.[6] Some called this new sound "eskibeat," alluding to its cold lyrics and sparse beats; others dubbed it "sublow" to denote its low bass frequencies and low-fi aesthetic. The subgenre ultimately became known as "grime," reflecting its practitioners' predilection for grimey subject matter, which partly explains why the subgenre is "still struggling to transform negative perceptions" in British mainstream media (Riley, 2017: 9).

Pirate radio played a key role in the emergence of grime music at the turn of the millennium, in the same way it had done for UK garage and jungle in the 1980s and 1990s.[7] Alex de Lacey states that resorting to illegal forms of broadcasting was unavoidable, given "FM radio licences are often expensive and difficult to obtain—London is also in 'Population Category A', meaning [broadcasting] tariffs fall into the highest bracket—and dominant media in the United Kingdom, aside from BBC Radio 1Xtra, set up in 2002,[8] do not cater for Black audiences" (de Lacey, 2021: 202).[9] Running these pirate radio stations successfully, de Lacey continues, "required a team of highly skilled individuals who would place aerials and transmitters in hard-to-find places: tower block roofs, lift shafts and ventilation units" (203). For example, Dizzee Rascal recalls as a teenager having followed friends up onto the roof of a council building to help with the rig in what seemed like a rite of passage for any young grime artist seeking to ingratiate themselves into the scene (Dizzee Rascal, 8 March 2023). DJ Geeneus, co-founder of Rinse FM, remarks how these illicit operations inevitably led to scrapes with the police as he and others sought to dodge the raids carried out by the Office of Communications (Ofcom) (Topping, 10 October 2010).[10]

Although the pirate setup has a fundamentally ephemeral character akin to street art, it has reinforced the material conditions of grime subculture in ways which oppose the dominant culture. In a recent *Channel 4* documentary on grime subculture in Britain entitled *Pirate Mentality* (2016), MC Frisco (b.

6 This made grime accessible in the same way the DIY punk aesthetic "spawned thousands of local bands" throughout Britain in the 1970s (Mullen, 2017: 8)

7 Other underground means of dissemination include: mixtapes, self-released albums, DVDs, independent record shops, youth clubs, pop-up shows, and raves (Fatsis, 2019: 449).

8 BBC Radio 1Xtra was founded in 2002 to offer a legal means of broadcasting urban music, including grime, from different regions in the UK. While this was a major sign of acknowledgement, it did not fully suffice the grime scene and many pirate setups continued to thrive.

9 This recalls the emergence of popular pirate radio stations (i.e. Radio Caroline and Radio London) during the 1960s. Although illegal, these broadcasters were perceived by many as influential and legitimate, given they catered for a demand for pop and rock in the UK that was not met by BBC Radio services.

10 Rinse FM launched in 1994 and became a major pirate radio station for grime. It was awarded a community FM broadcast licence by Ofcom in 2010.

Deshane Cornwall) underlines that "the pirate mentality is about empowerment, is about ownership—this is about independence" (SBTV, 2016). Frisco's remarks bring into focus de Lacey's Gramscian formulation that pirate radio allows grime artists to "bypass the strictures of hegemonic public space" (de Lacey, 2021: 202). Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony is indebted to the Marxian notion that "[t]he ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force" (Marx and Engels, 1970: 64). Pirate radio serves as an example of how subcultures such as grime "expand discursive space" by establishing "subaltern counterpublics," which allow members to "invent and circulate counterdiscources" (Fraser, 1999: 67).

Pirate radio is grime subculture in its rawest form. MC Ghetts (b. Samuel Justin Jude Clarke) remarks that within a small room or kitchen of a council flat "there is nothing to hide behind," and the minimalist mise-en-scène (two turntables, a mixer, and a mic) puts the emphasis on human interaction (SBTV, 2016). This type of subaltern counterpublic fosters improvisatory modes of creativity, whereby a microphone is passed through a fluctuating congregation of performers. However, certain rules of engagement apply that give order to group performance practice. As de Lacey illustrates, performance etiquette requires a specific knowledge of multiple components, such as DJ gestures, body language, and techniques like the "reload" and the "through ball," which help shape group interplay and performance trajectory.[11] Moreover, there are also more general dress and behavioural codes, which point to what Dick Hebdige terms stylistic "homology" (Hebdige, 2008: 115).[12] In this regard, *Boy in da Corner* (2003) set a precedent for an entire generation of grime artists: its album cover depicts Dizzee Rascal in a plain black tracksuit (hood up) and matching Nike Air Max trainers, crouching down in a corner, with his index fingers making devil horns. Although pirate radio is a non-visual broadcasting medium, it still places a high premium on such "subcultural capital," which is "objectified" in the form of the anonymous black uniform and "embodied" in the body language of the rebellious posture (Thornton, 1995: 11-12).[13] With the advent of technological advancements in radio broadcasting in more recent years, the importance of (pirate) radio in grime is still strong.[14] It is a hub for artists and is often the first place many

11 See chapters 2, 3, and 4 of *Level Up! Live Performance and Creative Process in Grime Music* (2023).

12 Hebdige discusses "homology" in regard to the punk subculture which "signified chaos at every level, but this was only possible because the style itself was so thoroughly ordered" (Hebdige, 2008: 113).

13 Thornton's coinage of "subcultural capital" extends Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital" to subcultures, and also includes one's command of subcultural vernacular which, in grime subculture, comprises street slang and Jamaican patois.

14 Other radio stations and online digital media sites include: Channel U/Channel AKA, Deja Vu, Flex FM, GRM Daily, NTS Radio, Raw UK, and SBTV.

have their formative experiences. Audience engagement is high, and snippets of broadcasts are shared via social media platforms. This helps to create what L. K. Mann describes as a "collective intimacy," especially with the live responses from listening audiences on telephone lines and online messaging (Mann, 2019: 385).

The breakthrough tracks of grime pioneers emerged out of pirate radio. On his debut single "Wot Do U Call It?" (2004), Wiley (a.k.a. the "Godfather" of grime, b. Richard Kylea Cowie Jr.) plants grime's flag in the ground, placing a stress on "empire" at the heart of his counterdiscourse:

> I want everybody to follow this sound so
> Don't deny the power of my empire
> When I'm hit I strike back with my empire
> No more crew, so what? We got an empire
> (Wiley, "Wot Do U Call It?," 2004)

Wiley here underlines grime's intention to redefine the very concept of empire in post-colonial Britain. The idea of striking back recalls the notion that subcultures are subsumed within the ruling culture, against which they strive for autonomy (Hall *et al.*, 1991: 6). Grime subculture has taken numerous "hits" itself, delivered by the British establishment, throughout its emergence, notably through Risk Assessment Form 696, which was used by the Metropolitan Police from 2008 until it was discontinued in 2017, following a review that revealed its discriminatory targeting of black youth culture. Form 696 required promoters to provide event details from hosts, which included the genre, target audience, and, in its original version, the performers' ethnicity. Over its decade-long application, it served as a "key instrument in suppressing the scene's growth in the capital," and, throughout the twenty-one London boroughs concerned, "disproportionately affect[ed] black artists," resulting in countless event cancellations and club closures (Bramwell, 2015: 63).[15] This highlights the deep-rooted racial prejudices in British law enforcement, which, in Paul Gilroy's terms, views "black culture" as not only incompatible with mainstream values, but also as a threat to the "homogeneous, white, national 'we'" (Gilroy, 1987: 49).[16] Confronted by such institutional discrimination, it is not surprising that many young, aspiring grime artists—often growing up on the most deprived council estates in Britain—have already generated a "pirate mentality" before their entry into grime.

The ways in which British mainstream culture has engaged with grime subculture have also vividly reflected Britain's institutionalised racism. As

15 Punk groups and clubs suffered similar treatment (although not marked by racism) in the 1970s.

16 An independent review of culture and standards in the Metropolitan Police, led by Dame Louise Casey (2021–2023), concluded it was guilty of institutional racism, misogyny, and homophobia.

Dan Hancox notes, "[a]t times, the embrace offered by parts of the British establishment to grime's first generation of pop stars was conditional on their humiliation" (Hancox, 2018: 204). Hancox recalls the "tone-deaf Radio 4 comedies" which sought to imitate "black youth speak," the moment when Prince Harry met Dizzee Rascal backstage at a musical festival and engaged him in what onlookers described as "an excruciating display of shadow boxing and 'street' handshakes," as well as the rise of Ali G, the stereotype of the "macho idiot rapper,"[17] performed by a white public schoolboy and Cambridge graduate "as a kind of minstrel avatar for that idiocy, clowning for a mass gallery of sniggering white Britons" (Hancox, 2018: 204). The Queen Mother—known to have referred to black people as "nig-nogs" or "blackamoors"—also enjoyed performing Ali G impressions with Princes William and Harry (Flinch *et al.*, 2002: 42). However, more recent attempts have been made to reverse these trends. Upon receiving his invitation to be appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) at the 2018 New Year's Honours for his services to music, Wiley posted on Instagram: "Big up the Queen thank you" (29 December 2017). Although the appointment represented a victory of sorts—an unambiguously positive acknowledgement from the establishment—the monarchy was (and still is) regarded by many as the symbol of the British white elite and Britain's colonial past. In his aptly titled song "Hypocrisy" (2017), MC Skepta (b. Joseph Olaitan Adenuga Jr.) explains why he rejected the Queen's honour: "Just came back from the Ivors / And look at what we collected / The MBE got rejected / I'm not trying to be accepted".[18] Wiley in turn ended up publicly recognising the "hypocrisy" in accepting his honour and said he was willing to give it up as he had never felt "comfortable" receiving it because of Britain's "colonialism history" (Phillips, 29 July 2020).[19] While some may consider the monarchy's efforts to address the imbalance of hereditary privilege as an encouraging sign of progress, the bestowal of such honours on individuals from black minority groups may also be interpreted as a token gesture, which ultimately serves to paint a rosy picture of the nation and distract it from tackling its systemic racism and acknowledging its imperialist past.[20]

17 In 2003, Home Secretary David Blunkett described grime crews as "boasting macho idiot rappers".

18 The Ivor Novello Awards are judged and awarded annually by acclaimed songwriters and composers.

19 In his autobiography, Wiley writes: "[*M*]*y* home is Nowhere. […] Because me and my people shouldn't be here, we should be back in Africa. And we're not. We're scattered across the earth" (Cowie, 2017: 250).

20 In 2015, GRM Daily created an annual grime award ceremony, the Rated Awards. There has also been a dedicated category to grime at the MOBO Awards (Music of Black Origin) since 2014.

"Strik[ing] Back" Against the Establishment

Debunking patriotic myths of Britain has been a major preoccupation for grime artists, in the same way it was for their punk predecessors, who cried "England's Dreaming" and set out to disrupt the status quo like "Socratic gadflies" (Fatsis, 2019: 13). Wiley has remarked on the indebtedness grime has to punk and suggested that "[p]unk rock is the root of everything we do: I honestly believe that without punk there'd be no grime" (Duggins, 30 December 2017). Both subcultures have proven to be adept at striking back against the establishment by appropriating Britain's dominant cultural symbols through what Grey Carey calls "discursive hybridization," whereby the subculture "appropriates the standard discourse in order to abrogate its fundamental categories, aesthetic values, and syntactic rules" (Carey, 2006: 176). This type of aesthetic subterfuge counters standardised cultural norms which typically marginalise variants, reinforce hierarchy, and control parameters of truth and meaning (Ashcroft *et al.*, 1989: 7). An interesting example is found in the song "Jerusalem" (2009) by grime artist MC Nobody (a.k.a. Sway, b. Derek Andrew Safo). The music video opens with a close-up shot of a uniformed black schoolboy singing the hymn "Jerusalem"—the musical setting of William Blake's poem "Jerusalem" (c. 1808)[21] as composed by Hubert Parry (1916)—during a school assembly (MC Nobody, 2009):

> And did those feet in ancient time,
> Walk upon Englands mountains green:
> And was the holy Lamb of God,
> On Englands pleasant pastures seen!
> (William Blake, "Jerusalem," c. 1808)

Nobody's "Jerusalem" clearly evokes the Sex Pistols' use of "God Save the Queen" as the metonymic symbol for the monarchy.[22] "Jerusalem" (poem and hymn) has a complex history that exposes the conflicting narratives of British patriotism. For example, on 15 August 1803, shortly before writing the poem, Blake was brought before magistrates in Sussex on charges of sedition for his radical activism and support for the French Revolution. As Jason Whittaker points out, while the poem has been interpreted to be in keeping with the poet's revolutionary ideals of building a better society "On Englands pleasant pastures seen," from the twentieth century onwards, "Jerusalem" also came to be considered "the epitome

21 "Jerusalem" originally bore the title "And did those feet in ancient time" and was used by William Blake to preface his epic poem: *A Poem in Two Books* (c. 1808).

22 As England has no official national anthem, the hymn "Jerusalem" is often used when, for example, the nation competes in major sporting events. Following the BBC Four documentary *Jerusalem: An Anthem for England* (2005), a case was made for its adoption as the national anthem of England.

of English loyalty," particularly by conservatives nostalgic for a lost empire (Whittaker, 2022: 2).[23] At a time when the economic crash of 2008 began to hit Britons the hardest, "Nobody called upon the ambivalent nature of 'Jerusalem', a hymn both of the Establishment and of the resistance" to illustrate the stark divisions in British society (173).

As the camera pans out in Nobody's "Jerusalem" video, the viewer is able to see "Queen Elizabeth II" sitting amongst rows of schoolchildren. Nobody bursts into the assembly hall wearing a balaclava and kidnaps the monarch while rapping the voice over:

> We know about life in England
> I've been living my life in England
> Scotland, Wales, and Ireland
> But we ain't all united in the United Kingdom
> (MC Nobody, "Jerusalem," 2009)

The monarch is then piled into a white van and taken to "where the Queen ain't never been": Nobody escorts her through a run-down council estate, takes her to a budget supermarket, watches the *EastEnders* omnibus with her slumped on a couch, hungover, and finally exposes her on a toilet seat instead of a throne. It is through these "incongruous images" that MC Nobody uses what Bramwell describes as a "grotesque aesthetic" to critically "question the relation between the nation's elite and people's everyday lives" (Bramwell, 2015: 125). Nobody then raps:

> Welcome into Jerusalem
> Let's see what's on the *News at Ten*
> Kids have kids, kids kill kids
> They're just kids, use your head
> ("Jerusalem," 2009)

While the Church of England has used Jerusalem as a metaphor for paradise, Nobody here employs it—despite the song's comic overtones—to describe a living hell epitomised by extreme forms of juvenile delinquency.

Rapper slowthai (b. Tyron Kaymone Frampton) is as much concerned with parodying major symbols of the dominant culture, like the monarchy, as he is invested in lacerating them through his music. Frampton was raised on a council estate in Lings (Northampton), primarily by his half Barbadian mother, Gaynor, whom he describes on "Northampton's Child" as the "only queen" he has ever

23 "Jerusalem" was referred to frequently throughout the European referendum debate by those who "saw it unproblematically as representative of a particular type of patriotism that was supportive of Brexit" (Whittaker, 2022: 2).

known.[24] The song was released on slowthai's debut album *Nothing Great About Britain* (2019), which received widespread critical acclaim and was nominated for the Mercury Prize (2019).[25] During his performance at the ceremony, slowthai sparked controversy by appearing on stage heavily inebriated waving a fake severed head of former Prime Minister Boris Johnson.[26] The album cover of *Nothing Great About Britain* depicts the rapper chained to a set of stocks outside a council estate, grinning maniacally, recalling the famous photo of Johnny Rotten (1977), crucified on a makeshift cross and leering at the camera. Both self-consciously styled images of the social pariah reflect Timothy Heron's observation regarding the cultivation of the "abject outsider" in Northern Irish punk subculture. Heron notes that his use of the term "abject" borrows from Julia Kristeva's concept of the same name, which refers to something more than "unpleasant," "sick and filthy," "degenerate": "it is something that the 'I' does not recognize as a thing" (Heron, 2021: 3–4). In other words, slowthai taps into a punk tradition of presenting oneself as the epitome of marginality as a means of countering mainstream ideology. To promote the release of the album, the rapper had an array of politically charged billboards put up around London, revealing damning statistics about Britain: "In 1883, 46,000 slave owners were paid £20M (equivalent of £17BN in 2018) to compensate them for the loss of their 'human property', nothing was paid to the slaves themselves," or "If you're black you are 8 times more likely to be the subject of a stop and search than if you're white". Like the pirate activities of his predecessors, slowthai's politicised gestures are about eluding the strictures of hegemonic public space.

The expression "nothing great about Britain" first appeared on the song "England" (2011) by UK hip hop artist Jehst, in which the rapper also pleads: "Dear England, please confess your sins now". Slowthai carries this theme over to his own album, notably on the title track, in which he takes aim at the monarchy and imagines himself as the rightful heir to the throne. The music video captures this deposition via a series of mise-en-abymes, drawing from the legendary story of King Arthur and his sword, Excalibur. Slowthai's lyrics shift through a range of national symbols, from the patriotic ("St. George's flag" and "three lions") to the culinary ("tea 'n biscuits," "mash," "jellied eels," "korma"), often with the aim of evoking Britain's deep-seated socio-economic issues and colonial heritage. In the song's opening line ("Bottle of Bucky in Buckingham Palace"), the rapper instantly alludes to Britain's "binge drinking" and "antisocial behaviour" problems with "Bottle of Bucky" referring to the discredited Buckfast Tonic

24 On 30 November 2021, Barbados became a Republic and swore in its first president, Sandra Mason, 55 years after the Caribbean island gained independence from Britain.

25 The Mercury Prize is awarded annually for the best album released by a musical act from the UK or Ireland.

26 During his press campaign, slowthai declared himself a "Brexit bandit" set out to expose Brexit as a "weapon of mass distraction" from the nation's healthcare and housing issues.

Wine.[27] As slowthai continues, this "laddish" culture travels abroad each summer to popular British tourist destinations like "Ayia Napa," where predominately working-class Brits amuse themselves "popping bottles". If Ayia Napa was not enough to underline Britain's problem of knife crime (it is where the almost fatal 2003 stabbing incident involving Dizzee Rascal and members of a rival gang occurred), slowthai makes his point through another popular culture reference, this time to *EastEnders*' personification of "toxic masculinity," Phil Mitchell, who narrowly escaped serious harm when his wife lunged at him with a "Phillips" knife. The rapper thus creates incongruous combinations of British symbols, such as Buckfast wine and Buckingham Palace, to again evoke an aesthetic of the grotesque. While MC Nobody's "Jerusalem" strategically integrates the Queen into working-class environments, slowthai strives towards the opposite, transcending the "localized" territorial boundaries of grime subculture by penetrating the royal residence and ascending to the throne (Hall *et al.*, 1991: 14).

Slowthai again combines intoxication and criminal activity to critical effect later in the song:

> I ain't Dizzee, I'm just a boy in a corner
> Call me "King Whitey," puking up off a corner
> All I tasted is korma, ASBO restraining order
> (slowthai, "Nothing Great About Britain," 2019)

Here the rapper clearly pays homage to Dizzee Rascal and *Boy in da Corner* while describing himself not as the boy in *the* corner, but boy in *a* corner. His self-deprecating style continues with "King Whitey," a moniker he coined for himself on Twitter after vomiting on stage while supporting the punk group Slave (25 November 2018). The metaphorical use of "corner" is then taken further with "ASBO restraining order" ("anti-social behaviour order"), which refers to the controversial form of civil order in the UK introduced in 1998 to punish mainly juvenile delinquents.[28] As the ASBO came to be considered a discriminatory method of further marginalising offenders (abolished in 2014), the use of "corner" strikes up the image of the marginal misfit being made to stand in the corner. The reference to slowthai "pulling a whitey" also evokes the idea of the rapper becoming obedient to society's expectations of him, which is a thematic source of conflict pervading "Nothing Great About Britain":

27 A recent investigation into binge drinking in Glasgow revealed a strong preference for Buckfast Tonic Wine among street drinkers because of its high alcohol content (15%) and glass bottles, frequently used as weapons (Galloway *et al.*, 2008: 4).

28 DJ Slimzee (b. Dean Fullman), co-founder of Rinse FM, received an ASBO in 2005 for his pirate radio activity, banning him from rooftops throughout the borough of Tower Hamlets.

I was waiting on my friends outside the local shops
See the feathers turning red, white beauty, oh the swan
Walking 'cross the Thames
Firing slingshots 'cause its nee-naw, nee-naw
Then we're in cuffs, POME
I'm a product, yeah, they made me
I wear chains like my grandad did in slavery
("Nothing Great About Britain," 2019)

The symbol of the swan is worth noting as it alludes to the monarch's ownership not only of public spaces, but also of living beings. The species became the symbolic property of the Crown in the 12th century in order to protect them from poachers, and killing a swan used to be considered treason until it became an ordinary criminal offense in 1998. When slowthai raps "See the feathers turning red," he stirs the image of himself committing a heinous act of violence, underlining his refusal to abide by the laws of Her Majesty's queendom while recalling the punk horror fetish that occasionally "reduced [the horror aesthetic] to the gratuitous act of violence itself" (Heron, 2021: 7).

Although slowthai puts a childish spin on his inevitable clashes with authority, using the onomatopoeic "nee-naw, nee-naw" to indicate the approaching sirens as he fires "slingshots" across the Thames, the sense of feeling unfairly victimised becomes further manifest in the following lines. While POME is used as an abbreviation for the expression "Prisoner of Mother England," here it may also allude to the phrase "Product of My Environment".[29] England is slowthai's homeland, but it is also a country in which racism still runs deep. The rise of populist political parties such as UKIP (UK Independence Party), the ultra-nationalist ideology of the "EDL" (English Defence League), and the Conservative Party's recent handling of Britain's immigration issues, are strong indicators of the country's problematic race relations. Moreover, Britain's colonial past still weighs heavily over the nation's conscience, and as slowthai's billboards highlight, the former imperial power has not made reparations to either slaves or to their descendants. The Bajan-British rapper therefore feels like a product of an environment with which he is himself in conflict. There is a strong sense of impotence evoked here, as slowthai appears as a prisoner akin to his grandfather during slavery. His chains may be a powerful status symbol in an advanced capitalist country, but appear in this instance to symbolise bearing the weight of the world as if they were metal shackles. Slowthai concludes "Nothing Great About Britain" with one final (undeniably misogynistic) swipe at the monarchy, delivering the following lyrics in a mock-bourgeois accent:

29 The terms pommy, pommie, and pom(e) are used pejoratively in Australia, South Africa, and New Zealand to denote a British immigrant.

Kate Middleton now
(I'd wifey her I would)
I wouldn't lie, you're an English rose, I wouldn't lie to you
I tell you how it is
I will treat you with the utmost respect
Only if you respect me a little bit Elizabeth
You cunt
("Nothing Great About Britain," 2019)

The term "English rose" is commonly used to refer to a beautiful English woman of fair complexion, which derives from the cultural symbolism of the rose as the national flower of England. Yet slowthai is again here attempting to deconstruct such patriotic symbols, and while he addresses the "English rose" Kate Middleton, he swears to tell the truth with the same brutal means he uses to describe British society in his music. By adopting a *faux* accent, slowthai grapples with another distinctive marker of class division, which forms part of his sardonic display of compliance with the upper-class royals that he rounds off with a cutting expletive aimed at the Queen. His plea to an apparently indifferent Elizabeth resonates strongly as it evokes Britain's problems concerning wealth disparity and the deaf ear the establishment has often turned in regard to neglected communities.[30] When slowthai's biological father asked him how he could call the Queen such names, he responded: "But I didn't ever say I wanted a queen. […] It's a primitive thing, kings and queens" (Lynskey, 11 May 2019). By debasing the royals, slowthai rejects the social mores of what he considers an antiquated former imperialist institution that shackled his ancestors and for which it never suffered the consequences.

The song's coda takes place in a local pub in Northampton, as slowthai and friends give a rendition of the national anthem "God Save the Queen" with spadesful of irony. The public house is an especially symbolic venue to choose given that the history of the royal family is entwined with the nation's hostelries.[31] Despite often having been named after the presiding monarch, pubs are of course run and frequented by the people. In anticipation of the album's release, slowthai organized a "99p tour" of pubs in small-town Britain by writing to fans on Twitter: "I'll come to every pub; your dad's working men's club – I just wanna see all of you and connect". This direct approach to undercutting the stronghold

30 The "Levelling Up" scheme, introduced by the Conservative Party under Boris Johnson (2019), for example, was meant to improve development in Britain's most neglected regions; however, such initiatives often create the reverse effect "by homogenising these regions and imposing top-down narratives about their demographic and political nature" (Jones, 2024: 5).

31 In 1393, King Richard II passed a law making it mandatory for all public houses to display a sign bearing a white stag (his personal emblem) in order for them to be readily identifiable.

of the British (musical) establishment forms an integral part of the rapper's aim to bond people across divides and ensure his penetrating music reaches the unsung corners of the nation.

Incendiary Insight

Slowthai's billboards are indicative of how anti-monarchist expression in grime music is commonly oriented around discerning viewpoints backed up by facts and figures. This is especially pronounced in the musical output of the English grime-punk duo, Bob Vylan, composed of vocalist/guitarist Bobby Vylan (Pascal Robinson-Foster) and drummer Bobbie Vylan (anonymous).[32] Like the previous acts discussed above, the group offers social commentary on some of Britain's most sensitive political issues, with a strong didactic emphasis, as Bobby Vylan states: "We offer insights into certain things. It's more than music" (Winwood, 1 December 2021). Not only do their albums include reading lists and miscellaneous recommendations in the liner notes, their song lyrics are also full of edifying information. For example, "Health is Wealth," from their recent album *Bob Vylan Presents the Price of Life* (2022), provides a fresh alternative to the punk cliché that romanticises ruination,[33] and also captures Bob Vylan's vegan-friendly lifestyle through a class-conscious critique of health awareness:

> The killing of kids with £2 chicken and chips
> Is a tactic of war, waged on the poor […]
> I was killing myself till I realised danger
> Brain, heart, liver and lungs can hit failure
> Now season daal and veg with fresh herbs
> Cut caffeine because it messed with nerves
> Plenty lentils and chickpea curry
> 20-minute meal for a man in a hurry
> (Bob Vylan, "Health is Wealth," 2022)[34]

Like many grime or punk acts before them, Bob Vylan encountered radio stations and PR agencies that refused to endorse their music and indictments of British society. Bobby Vylan comments on these difficulties, relating them to racial prejudices in "Turn Off the Radio" (2022):

32 The homonyms "Vylan" and "villain" contribute to the band's image of the "abject outsider".
33 See Lou Reed "Heroin" (1967) or Dee Dee Ramone "Chinese Rocks" (1975).
34 The backing track evokes reggae and 2-tone sounds close to the equally committed music of the Specials.

> Turn off the radio, they won't play this
> Bands singing all day long but don't say shit
> Streaming's just as bad—I gotta remix
> Two white boys to make the New Punk playlist
> It's too urban, it's too this, too that
> What they wanna say is too Black (Too bumboclaat Black for them)[35]
> I guess real don't get rotation
> So fuck your radio station. Turn it off
> ("Turn Off the Radio," 2022)

Despite these initial knockbacks, the duo continued to pursue their artistic vision, without concession, as Bobby Vylan explains:

> I don't see [current punk music] as being very challenging to listen to. I almost feel like punk music should make you feel somewhat uncomfortable because the topics that are being discussed in a lot of it [are] serious issues. But it just seems like they're being discussed, if at all, in a very happy-go-lucky way. […] So we wanted to make it as confrontational as possible, as confrontational as it was when it first started (Chaudhry, 14 March 2022).

Challenges to the protest value of contemporary punk bands are common in critical discourse: post-punk groups, such as the Idles and Yard Act, have had significant success in recent times, but the authenticity of their committed, class-conscious music is sometimes called into question, with certain musicians accused of being in no position to address working-class issues, actually being from the middle class themselves (Power, 11 November 2021). There is certainly no question mark over Bob Vylan's working-class roots, like those of grime acts in general, which arguably makes them more prone to exploitation. Bobby Vylan compares the band's experiences with the music industry to a journey through "the wild west"—a "dangerous place" full of "dangerous people," ready to exploit musicians with contracts bordering on modern-day "servitude" (Winwood, 1 December 2021). The group's uncompromising stance ultimately meant they had to develop a pirate mentality as independent artists. By establishing their own record label, Ghost Theatre, the duo has maintained its creative freedom and ownership of material.[36] Once again, this cottage industry approach lends itself to

35 "Bumboclaat" literally means "blood cloth" in Jamaican patois and is used as an insult to express disgust or dismay.

36 Bands that sign with established record labels surrender the copyright to their music for seventy years and often have to work within pre-defined creative parameters.

a Marxian reading of the musicians seizing control of their means of production as a source of socio-economic emancipation.

Bob Vylan's musical ethos embraces the DIY punk mind-set by pursuing a rough and ready musical aesthetic (Bobby Vylan is an amateur guitarist), thus recalling the accessibility of working-class punk groups, which often comprised self-taught musicians and privileged musical expression over technical sophistication.[37] To maximise inclusivity and tear down the wall between musicians and concertgoers, Bob Vylan often start their shows by inviting audiences to meditate with them and ending with a group hug to express their gratitude. They also welcome fans to attend their "Sunday Service" held online via Soundcloud, which offers a radical alternative to the Sunday services organised by the Church of England headed by the monarch.[38] On "Church of Vylan," released as the opening track of their EP *Vylan (Villain)* (2017), Bobby Vylan summons all "sinners" ("all are welcome, welcome home") to congregate and commit anarchy under the Vylan banner: "lynch your leaders (free yourself) / blind believers (free yourself) / acts of violence, call his name / Iblis will not fall again".

Complementing the punk subterranean and anarchic style of Bob Vylan's lyrics, the group's music has a visceral "sublow" quality, with Bobby Vylan's heavily distorted, lo-fi, and pre-recorded electric guitar parts hitting audiences square in the gut. Bobby Vylan also acknowledges the influence of grime on his lyrical style, claiming to be attracted to "the cadence, the flow, the wordplay" of this subgenre (Chaudhry, 14 March 2022). The second verse of "Pretty songs" (2022) begins:

> I'm no pacifist, I'm smashing fists
> At every single racist prick I meet
> I'm not having it, there's no "Kum ba yah"
> To be found 'round here, no groovy beat
> ("Pretty Songs," 2022)

While the internal rhymes between "pacifist," "fist," and "racist" are pleasing to the ear, the song's message is hard-hitting, as Bobby Vylan announces in "there's no 'Kum ba yah' / To be found 'round here".[39] In other words, this is not mere entertainment, but again about offering unflinching criticism about British society, hence Bob Vylan's *modus operandi*:

37 "This is a chord. This is another. This is a third. Now form a band" is an oft-cited quote that Jon Savage attributes to the British punk zine *Sideburns* (Savage, 1991: 12).
38 Jarvis Cocker used this same title for his Sunday show on BBC 6 Music.
39 "Kum ba yah" ("Come by here") is an African American spiritual song. In recent decades, singing "Kumbaya" entered idiomatic usage to denote excessively conciliatory behaviour.

> You can be told non-violence, non-violence, non-violence. Violence is not the answer, but if non-violent leaders and non-violent protestors are still being shot, in this day and age, then, speaking for myself, where I come from, I'm not meeting non-violence with non-violence. I've just never seen that work out, ever. I don't see how you can have a country that has promoted nothing but violence to get what it wants, since the birth of the country, tell you that violence is not the answer. Violence is most certainly the answer when you're being violently restrained or violently oppressed. Violence is the only response to violence (Winwood, 1 December 2021).

"Pretty Songs" evocatively captures the disjunction separating violent and non-violent forms of expression by contrasting two different musical genres. The song is framed by a refrain or "pretty little song" sung by Bobby Vylan, in what is a clear parody of indie bands and softer lyrical styles, as he accompanies himself on acoustic guitar:

> I could do this all day long
> Sing a song, a pretty little song
> Blah blah, rah rah rah[40]
> It might be nice
> ("Pretty Songs," 2022)

This fundamentally clashes with the other parts of the song which see the acoustic guitar switched for a heavily amplified one, and the sweet refrains replaced by unrelentingly aggressive ones. Bobby Vylan comments on the way he perceives such musical attributes pertaining to specific genres as reflecting the varying degrees of socio-economic disparity within Britain:

> For us to make music and not try to address those things that affect our lives would just feel wrong, but I wish I could make songs about the more beautiful things in life. I wish that we could have a Top 20 album full of songs about love, just companionship and relationships, like so many of those other bands get to do (Law, 8 August 2022).

Singing about the joyous themes of love is thus interpreted as a middle-class privilege—a luxury not available to Bob Vylan given their lives are preoccupied with more pressing concerns, as Bobby Vylan highlights in the chorus of

40 "Rah" is also an onomatopoeia often used as a derogatory adjective to imitate upper-class "posh" accents.

"England's Ending," a song from the group's first album *We Live Here* (2020): "Work all week, still work on weekends / Still can't pay my rent / Times are tough, I've had enough". Times are indeed tough, as the *Financial Times* recently reported: "Newly let properties are 25 per cent more expensive than before the Covid-19 pandemic hit in 2020" (Oliver, 16 June 2023). In the second verse of "England's Ending," Bobby Vylan even specifies the going rates (c. 2020): "Studio flat 1200 a month / Two bedroom, two grand and above". With the 25% increase, in 2023 this equates to £1500 and £2500 per calendar month. These figures are undeniably extortionate going by working-class affordability, and also put the monarchy's financial allowance in perspective: the Core Sovereign Grant, which is paid annually by the Treasury to fund the monarch's official duties, was £85.8 million in 2022/2023 (£51.3 million plus £34.5 million to fund the Reservicing of Buckingham Palace over a period of ten years).

This degree of economic inequality as symbolised by the monarchy is precisely why Bobby Vylan opens "England's Ending" with:

> This country's in dire need of a fucking spanking, mate
> Look it over, get the fucking dinosaurs out
> Yeah, and kill the fucking Queen
> She killed Diana, we don't love her anyway
> ("England's Ending," 2020)[41]

Much like slowthai, Bob Vylan also targets the royal family because of the imperialist role it played in the slave trade. In "GDP" (2022), Bobby Vylan raps: "I couldn't give a fuck if this country hates me here / They stole our people, displaced and placed us here". And then, to underline the lack of comprehension between the British establishment and the nation's working class, the chorus begins: "Yeah, the BBC are talking 'bout the GDP / That means fuck all to me / I gotta eat". Bobby Vylan dismantles notions such as "we're in this together," claiming that Britain's polarised society has left him "On my ones, no gang, no mob" and so, inevitably, he is "[…] just looking to move this dot [make money]". The rapper is also especially adept at recycling clichéd expressions to reinforce his committed lyrics. Another couplet from the first verse of "GDP" runs: "Cash rules everything around me that matters / So the purse strings are tighter than Thatcher's". The first phrase comes from Wu-Tang Clan's famous song "C.R.E.A.M" (1994), and its appearance here (almost three decades later) illustrates how the status quo remains very similar to the advanced state of American-style capitalism during the 1990s. In the second, Bobby Vylan relates his own poverty to the impoverishment of British society through the successive austerity cuts under Thatcher (and again under George Osborne) (Dorey *et al.*,

41 Bob Vylan alludes to one of numerous conspiracy theories surrounding Princess Diana's death.

2016). Bobby Vylan then reworks the time-worn expression "Desperate times, desperate measures" into "Mandem risking hands in cuffs / Betrayed by land we love". This overriding feeling of anger mixed with deception runs throughout the rapper's rage against the establishment, which is ultimately aimed at making listeners "pick a side," as illustrated by the incendiary shots fired at the monarchy in the song "Take That" (2022):

> You don't know what I do to survive
> Are you with them, are you with us?
> Pick a side
> Burn Britannia, kill the Queen, that's a vibe
> Time to ride Motherfucker, take that
> ("Take That," 2022)

Finding a middle ground is clearly not an option for Bob Vylan: Elvis "was wack" because he was a false king who "hated blacks" and appropriated their music; "Churchill's statue" should be given "the rope" because the former Prime Minister openly cherished the ideals of imperialism. This illustrates how the duo treads the fine line between insight and incitement, as again for example in "Bait The Bear" (2022), listeners are called on to "Wage war against the state / It's a fascist regime". While this echoes the Sex Pistols' seditious lyrics from "God Save the Queen," here the emphasis is on seeking recompense for Britain's colonial past: "From Jamaica to Lahore, stolen land and stolen diamonds / All achieved by violence, and like they're enlightened".

Conclusion

Grime's counter empire continues to expand, spreading regionally throughout the UK, and internationally to countries like Japan and Australia, while at times drifting into the musical mainstream (de Lacey, 2020). British rapper Stormzy (b. Michael Ebenezer Kwadjo Omari Owuo Jr.), who has received the highest public acclaim in recent years, embodies grime's committed political urgency. As part of his activism and philanthropic work for the British black community, he established the Merky Foundation in 2018, which offers scholarships to British black students at the University of Cambridge, and financially supports organisations, such as The Black Heart Foundation, dedicated to fighting for racial equality, justice reform, and black empowerment within the UK. The rapper's public performances have also left their mark on the British cultural landscape, notably his open challenges to Theresa May and her former government over the Grenfell fire disaster (Charles, 2018: 47). For artists like Stormzy, this is where the necessity of grime subculture is found, in its ability to raise awareness about

the uncomfortable truths of black working-class living, which the UK repeatedly fails to recognise and admit, as epitomised by the sort of remarks Bobby Vylan received from the British music industry: "Oh it's too extreme" and "[racism's] not a problem here in England" (Smith, 2020). The monarchy has often been held up by grime artists as the symbol of such whitewashing in Britain. Bobby Vylan captures this in his comments regarding King Charles III's coronation, which critically "does not represent what it tells us it represents" (Vylan, 5 May 2023). While his comments recall Johnny Rotten's famous lines "[…] our figurehead / Is not what she seems," they also bring to mind Christopher Hitchens' anti-monarchist reflexion: "[i]llusions, of course, cannot be abolished. But they can and must be outgrown" (Hitchens, 1990: 31).

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