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Arresting Sounds: What UK Soundsystem Culture Teaches us about Police Racism and Public Life

Music and racism rarely lead separate lives — however convenient it might be to parcel them out as analytically distinguishable or politically unrelated. While music could be confined to the realm of the arts and racism could equally be contained within the political arena, forms of creative expression and modes of governance (racial or otherwise) frequently trespass into each other's territory. The policing of music through law enforcement testifies to such a reality; whether we consider the policing of street music in 18th century France (Attali, 1985: 72-3), the clampdown on acid house raves in 20th century Britain (Collin, 1997), or the criminalisation of rap around the world today (Nielson and Dennis, 2019; Lippman, 2019; Fatsis, 2019a; 2019b; 2021a). No other form of music-making has been repressed more, however, than Black or Afro-diasporic music¹, as its ongoing prosecution vividly illustrates (Fatsis, 2021a). Drawing on the policing and criminalisation of two Black music genres, namely UK reggae and UK drill, this chapter will explore their discriminatory suppression as an indicative case study of institutional racism within the British criminal justice system.

Apart from their common Afro-diasporic roots (and routes) — UK reggae and UK drill meet the same fate at the hands of the police, prosecutors and judges as art forms that are pursued as suspicious, dangerous, threatening and undesirable. Such hostile attention from criminal justice institutions, not only betrays the discriminatory logic which creates criminal offences out of Black musical expression. It also invites questions about why Black music is so heavily policed — or indeed about what exactly is policed when Black music is policed. It will therefore be argued that the rationale behind the over-policing of Black music (sub)culture(s) exposes the prevalence of institutional racism within the UK's criminal justice system (Fatsis, 2019b: 1306-8). This in turn reveals long-standing stereotypical associations between 'blackness' and 'criminality' that endure, despite emphatic protestations to the contrary (Gilroy, 1982; Owusu-Bempah, 2017; Williams and

¹ The term 'Black' is used here in the strict Afro-diasporic sense of the word, to refer to the people and cultures of the African diaspora. This is not to strip the term of its coalitional potential, by including other visible minority ethnic communities who are also oppressed by racism, but to stress the specific usage adopted here.

Clarke, 2018; Phillips *et al.*, 2020; Fatsis, 2020; 2021b). To address these issues, the remainder of this chapter is divided into three sections. The first, will introduce UK reggae and UK drill by placing them in the Afro-diasporic context of UK soundsystem culture. The second section of this chapter, will discuss the penal practices through which UK soundsystem culture is policed out of ‘white civil society’ (Martinot and Sexton, 2003: 172). Finally, the third section of the chapter will reintroduce soundsystem culture as a curiously under-*mined* resource for radical thought and public life; through its rhythmic lyrics, heavy-bass sonics and radical politics.

In condemning the state-sanctioned silencing of soundsystem culture, while also celebrating it as a neglected ingredient of scholarship and citizenship, the overarching aim of this chapter is to ‘thin[k] with’ (Back, 2016) as well as through Black music; to better understand how and why ‘the law’ outlaws Black minds and bodies from public space and public culture more broadly. Reflecting on the casting out of Black culture in this manner, not only gives voice to renewed calls to decolonise curricula and defund the police². It also forces us to see the devaluation of and the policing *against* Black culture as two sides of the same coin. In doing so, the ideological function of racism, as a tool for cultural and political subjugation, becomes audible through the penalisation of UK soundsystem culture — demanding an urgent retuning and unwhitening of our scholarly and civic imagination (Back and Tate, 2015). The remainder of this chapter therefore represents an attempt at a soundsystem epistemology³, through which to reintroduce Black music as a rich repository of knowledge on how the social world is made and how it can be remade in a different, more exciting and more equalitarian register — that is not complicit in perpetuating social injustice, through scholarly thinking habits that reproduce what W.E.B Du Bois (1917: 437) appropriately described as the ‘deliberately educated ignorance of white schools’.

Introducing UK Soundsystem Culture

² This chapter was written in the immediate aftermath of the most recent wave of Black Lives Matter protests, following the murder of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor killing by US in May 2020.

³ The term ‘soundsystem epistemology’ is introduced here as a friendly counterpoint to Clyde Wood’s idea of ‘the blues epistemology’ to inspire an alternative ‘traditio[n] of interpretation’, ‘system of explanation’ and form of ‘social criticism’ (Woods, 2017: 16, 18) which will be discussed in more detail in the last section of this chapter.

Having provided an itinerary for this chapter, another preamble seems unavoidable before setting sail towards the main contents of this chapter. This temporary diversion will take the form of a terminological checklist, to ensure that references to ‘UK reggae’ and ‘soundsystem’ culture are clearly defined at the outset, to justify the specific usage adopted here. ‘Soundsystem culture’ will be used as an umbrella term to describe musical cultures, genres or styles whose roots originate from Jamaican soundsystems, but have branched out and changed form according to place, time and aesthetics. The term ‘soundsystem’ will refer to a music collective, or an ecology of sound, which consists of: people (producers, sound engineers, session musicians, selectors, DJs, boxmen, roadies), equipment (speaker boxes, amplifiers, records, microphones, sound effects), as well as distribution networks (record labels, record shops) and events (soundsystem dances).

Soundsystems emerged in Jamaica as a countercultural invention to overcome working-class Jamaicans’ inability to afford records and personal hi-fis, or even listen to music that was not dictated by radio playlists which largely excluded many forms of Black music, even after Jamaica’s independence from the British crown in 1962. Soundsystems therefore became informal broadcasting networks, as well as hubs of entertainment and community life. Run by entrepreneurial record shop and recording studio owners, soundsystems initially played American rhythm and blues or ‘shuffle’ records —until Jamaican music started being recorded for and played in soundsystem dances. These dances were organised by soundsystem owners, featuring selectors who played records and DJs who chatted or toasted (=rapped) over the records to represent and ‘big up’ their soundsystem, as well as energise the crowd by drawing attention to new tunes that were exclusively recorded for and played at the soundsystem⁴.

This tradition of Jamaican soundsystem culture grew and spread as Jamaican people and their music migrated to the US and the UK, where Jamaican soundsystem culture was preserved but also evolved as successive generations of soundsystem affiliates took that tradition up, blended it with other styles (e.g. jazz, soul and funk) and created something

⁴ For recorded examples of what soundsystem sessions sound like, visit: <https://www.whocorkthedance.com/>

new. Some of those styles include the birth of American hip-hop, rap⁵ and their various offshoots in the US (e.g. trap, Miami bass), the UK (e.g. UK hip-hop, jungle, dubstep, garage, grime) or both (e.g. US and UK drill). Throughout this chapter, UK soundsystem culture is approached as a product of the African-diaspora that is rooted in Jamaica, but routed through Britain's major conurbations. It is therefore an 'intercultural' and 'transnational' (Gilroy, 1993: ix) hybrid that syncretises multiple rhythmic and oral traditions from Africa and its diaspora(s).

UK reggae is also approached from the same Afro-diasporic perspective and refers to music that is produced in Jamaica or Britain, but is played by UK soundsystems. 'UK reggae' is therefore understood here as a form of Jamaican or Jamaican-influenced music that is played in UK soundsystems and traverses the whole gamut of styles that precede and succeed it. These include: ska (early 1960s), rocksteady (mid-1960s), reggae (late 1960s), roots reggae (early-late 1970s), late seventies rub-a-dub (late 1970s) and dancehall (1980s onwards)⁶. As this timeline demonstrates — contrary to common (mis)perceptions — reggae is actually a distinct genre of Jamaican music, not a synonym for all Jamaican music. Regrettably however, it will be used generically here to include all variants of Jamaican music from the late 1950s onwards — given that police raids on UK soundsystems did not discriminate between what kind of Black music was played; being more preoccupied instead with the very playing of Black music, as unwanted and unwelcome noise. UK soundsystem culture therefore encompasses all Black or Afro-diasporic music genres that are tailored to the disco-centric nature of soundsystems, from early Jamaican music to its multiple stylistic variations around the Afro-Atlantic world.

⁵ Hip-hop and rap are interrelated but they are often mistaken for or reduced to each other, despite subtle differences that set them apart. Hip-hop describes a music genre that involves heavy, 'fat'/'phat' rhythms/beats that are taken/sampled from chunks of pre-recorded music tracks which are blended with other sampled bits of sound, be it vocals, horns, or spoken word. Rap usually refers to the practice of rhyming over beats/pre-recorded tracks and could be described as the lyrical/rhymed component of hip-hop

⁶ For a taste of the entire sweep of Jamaican music, listen to Linton Kwesi Johnson's ten-part history of Jamaican music for BBC Radio 6: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00sl252/episodes/player>, or a similar broadcast for radiobubble featuring MC Trooper on the mic and Boulevard Soundsystem on the turntables and the music selection: <https://www.mixcloud.com/lambrosfatsis/history-of-jamaican-music-feat-mc-trooper-part-1/> (Part I) and: <https://www.mixcloud.com/lambrosfatsis/history-of-jamaican-music-pt2-feat-boulevard-soundsystem-mc-trooper/> (Part II)

UK reggae and UK drill are both products of UK soundsystem culture, and share the same heritage as members of the Afro-diasporic music family. As such, they both draw on a common sonic vocabulary, unique aesthetic differences notwithstanding. If (UK) reggae sounds like a marriage of jazz horns and soulful vocals set to a distinct drumbeat, heavy basslines and innovative dub mixing⁷, UK drill echoes but also restages that tradition. The bass-heavy feel of reggae is retained, but blended with slow-paced rhymes and dissonant melodies created by music software synthesisers that lend UK drill its dark, haunting and disquieting sonic 'feel'⁸. Apart from their shared genealogy, however, UK reggae and UK drill are also bound(ed) politically due to the discriminatory policing that has been levelled at them. Such similarities in the policing against UK reggae and UK drill could be perceived as unfortunate mishaps, irrelevant accidents or transient deviations from the norm. Yet, the unfavourable, unjust and illegitimate treatment they suffer at the hands of criminal justice institutions, is as inherent in and intrinsic to the historical mission and function of policing as the Afro-diasporic currents that run through these two Black music genres. The following section takes this issue up, by chronicling the policing against Black Britons and their music as textbook cases of institutional racism that are rarely afforded a close reading within and beyond mainstream social science.

Policing against UK Soundsystem Culture Beat by Beat

The making and the patrolling of beats are seldom brought and thought together, despite a long and disreputable history of drumming Black music out of public culture from the days of slavery and colonial rule (Fatsis, 2021a) to the current allegedly 'post-racial' era (Fatsis, 2019b: 1301, 1311). UK reggae and UK drill are just two characteristic examples, not the only Black British music genres to have been disproportionately targeted, monitored, surveilled, disciplined and controlled as signs of trouble, danger and disorder. Their policing, therefore, has to be understood in the broader context of 'Britain's race politics' (Gilroy, 2002: 311) and the 'policing against black people' in Britain (Fryer, 1984:

⁷ For an indicative example of the sound of reggae described here, listen to Roman Stewart's *Hit Song* in its original, vocal version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hi3AK6QyLIM>, followed by a rhymed (DJ) and instrumental (dub) version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PC3mnJHGCM>

⁸ For an indicative example of UK drill, listen to Harlem Spartans' *Kennington Where It Started*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ed-oXKDMca0>

391–399; IRR, 1987), since the migration of Jamaican soundsystem culture in the UK in the late 1950s.

The policing of UK reggae primarily took the form of police raids that targeted house parties (blues dances or shebeens), youth clubs and other venues where ska, rocksteady and roots reggae were played (Bradley, 2001: 427-8; Gilroy, 2002: 95–104, 115-6; Gilroy, 2007: 152; Ward, 2018). Charged with breaching licensing laws, exceeding permitted noise levels (Gilroy, 2002: 128; Campbell, 2007: 200) and encouraging drug consumption, UK reggae soon became ‘police shorthand for dangerous individuals smoking illegal substances’ (Bradley, 2001: 428). Perceived as a form of sonic and social disturbance, reggae dances in the UK were energetically pursued by police officers who often violently raided such events, turned soundsystems down, damaged sound equipment, attacked partygoers and made arrests for disorderly behaviour (Gutzmore, 1993: 208, *Transpontine*, 2015)⁹. Such hostility towards soundsystem dances, combined with discriminatory attitudes towards the ‘criminalised dreadlocked subculture’ (Campbell, 2007: 5, 191-5) of Rastafarians — creating the impression that the influence of Rastafari on the music (and vice versa) amounted to an ‘open commitment to terrorist violence’, as a West Midlands police report stated (Campbell, 2007: 194). Mistaking the liberation theology and radical philosophy of Rastafari (Chevannes, 1994; Campbell, 2007) for terrorism or conflating UK reggae with criminality, may be thought as untypical deviations from the professional or ethical standards of British policing. The history of policing against Black Britons (Fryer, 1984: 391–399; IRR, 1987) *through* the discriminatory suppression of Black cultural life (Fatsis, 2019a: 451), however, suggests otherwise. In fact, the policing tactics that disproportionately affected Black people in the heyday of UK reggae soundsystems (1950s-1980s) were the same tactics that monitored, regulated and controlled Black British cultural life during the same period. These include a heavy police presence in Black cultural events and the harassment of Black people in entertainment

⁹ For several documentaries on the policing of blues dances in Birmingham and on Black club closures in London see, Saffron Saffron’s YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66r5B573vOE&t=3s> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vownU4oXEyA>. For two fictional, yet factually accurate, cinematic glimpses into the policing against UK soundsystems, see Horace Ové’s (1975) *Pressure* and Franco Rosso’s (1980) *Babylon*.

venues and public urban space, through disciplinary methods that continue apace today with the same (Black) suspects in mind (Talbot, 2004, 2011; Talbot and Böse, 2007; Martiniello and Lafleur, 2008; Charles, 2016: 205-225; Chowdhury, 2019; Fatsis, 2019a; 2019b; Scott, 2020).

Several decades later, a newcomer in the UK soundsystem scene — UK drill — finds itself similarly maligned through media portrayals that liken it to a ‘demonic’ and ‘nihilistic’ ‘soundtrack to London’s murders’ or even describe it as ‘knife crime rap’, implying a link between the music and a rise in knife crime (Fatsis, 2019c) in ways that summon up racist stereotypes of “blackness” as the embodiment of violence, aggression and criminality through recurrent tropes of ‘the Black urban threat’ (Rose, 1991: 284)¹⁰. Following a number of violent incidents which involved drill rappers, the music soon became associated with fatal stabbings in the public and penal imagination (Fatsis, 2019b: 1304). In the aftermath of such brutal killings, the lyrical content and imagery of drill unsurprisingly came under police scrutiny, not unlike its stylistic predecessors — namely, garage and grime (Talbot, 2004, 2011; Talbot and Böse, 2007; Charles, 2016: 205-225; Fatsis, 2019a). Video clips emerged of masked-up drill rappers issuing threats to rivals from different ‘crews’ or neighbourhoods and keeping a tally of stabbings on YouTube ‘scoreboards.’ The response to such fatalities was fast and it involved consolidating a new Serious Violence Strategy and pursuing ‘drillers’ as ‘terror suspects’ under the Terrorism Act 2000. In addition to such measures, drill rappers became targeted by, threatened with and subjected to Criminal Behaviour Orders, gang injunctions, suspended prison sentences and the increased use of stop and search. Drillers were also banned from entire postcodes and forbidden to use certain words, or refer to specific people and places in their lyrics. They were also prohibited from contacting or associating with certain people, wearing hoods, using social media or unregistered mobile phones, and they even had their videos removed from YouTube (Fatsis, 2019: 1302-5). Despite the lack of any tangible

¹⁰ Such a statement might invite objections on the grounds that other youth subcultures are also routinely blamed for sowing disorder and signifying social decline (see, e.g. Cohen, 2002). However, there is a unique context in the disproportionate targeting, surveillance and policing of Black music subcultures that cannot be reduced to youth (sub)culture(s) in general without doing violence to the historical specificity of the policing against Black people and their music(s) (Fatsis, 2019a; 2019b; 2021a; 2021b).

evidence to establish anything other than a coincidental link between knife crime and drill music (Fatsis, 2019a: 1305; Ilan, 2020), what was once an obscure Black music subculture became synonymous with violent crime through a variety of discriminatory and illiberal policing tactics and prosecuting strategies that continue unabated. The latest development in the criminalisation of UK drill involves the use of drill lyrics as evidence for the prosecution (Quinn, 2018), despite difficulties in proving a direct link between lyrics and specific acts of violence (Nielson and Dennis, 2019). None of the above is intended to downplay, deny or condone the violence in some, but by no means all, drill lyrics. What is pointed out instead is the extraordinary breadth and weight of criminal justice responses that fail to meet the standards of evidence-based policy. Such responses have been described as ‘inaccurate’, ‘unhelpful’, ‘counterproductive’ and ‘street-illiterate’ (Ilan, 2020), dismissed as ‘a populist distraction’ (Youth Violence Commission, 2018: 5) and likened to an attack on civil liberties (*The Guardian*, 2019), social justice and a criminal justice system whose legitimacy is called into question.

Such a thumbnail account of the clampdown on UK reggae and UK drill provides a general outline of the hostility against the two genres by law enforcement agencies, but also prompts the question of what exactly is policed when Black music genres like UK reggae and UK drill are policed. Their selective criminalisation casts doubt on their culpability as high-risk sources of danger, confirming instead their suitability as convenient police suspects due to prejudicial assumptions about blackness and criminality. What turns UK reggae and UK drill into sources of nuisance, symbols of incivility and signs of disorder is not their actual potential to incite violence, more than any other form of cultural expression (Nielson and Dennis, 2019: 114), but their ability to excite the imagination of the police, prosecutors and judges as a siren call of danger and a sign of sonic, cultural and racial difference. Such selective suspicion of Black music (Chowdhury, 2019) mirrors the overrepresentation of Black Britons in all aspects of the criminal justice system, with policing being the worst offender (Fatsis, 2019b: 1305; Phillips *et al.*, 2020; Brown, 2019; Race Disparity Unit, 2020; Liberty, 2020). This depressingly familiar picture illustrates the ongoing discrimination against Black Britons within criminal justice institutions and other spheres of social life (EHRC, 2018; UN, 2018). What also becomes apparent however is

that when Black music is policed, what is actually policed isn't just the 'sounds [that] Black bodies emit, produce and create' (Scott, 2020: 57) — but those Black bodies themselves (Hattery and Smith, 2017). In such a context, Black music becomes a form of unwanted and unwelcome noise because of its unique sonic signature and distinctive social presence. Policed as noise to be eliminated rather than as music to be appreciated, Black music becomes an 'entrenched sign of disorder and criminality of a hedonistic and vicious black culture which [is] not recognisably British' (Gilroy, 2002: 130) and therefore endangers the 'homogeneous, white, national "we"' (Gilroy, 2002: 49) through its sonic presence as a disturbing audible sign of Blackness; aesthetically, culturally and politically too. Against such damaging portrayals of UK reggae and drill as the undisputed property of criminal law, the following section of this chapter offers a positive and reconstructive interpretation of UK soundsystem culture as a valuable yet under-*mined* resource for theorising, creating and sustaining public life through the words (lyrics), sound (sonics) and power (politics) that are rooted in Afro-diasporic traditions of making associational life through music. Before exploring this argument in turn, it is essential to stress that there is nothing new in what is proposed below, theoretically or methodologically, other than (as) an invitation to pay attention to forms of Afro-diasporic political culture that are often overlooked in white mainstream scholarship — to the detriment of our ability to think about, know and participate in the social world in ways that Eurocentric interpretations of public intellectual life discourage (Fatsis, 2018).

UK Soundsystem Culture as Black Radical Thought in Sound

Having hitherto explored the policing of UK reggae and UK drill as case studies of institutional racism within law enforcement, this last section of the chapter aims at decriminalising, reintroducing and re-*cognising*¹¹ soundsystem culture as a valuable

¹¹ The word 'recognise' is used playfully here to denote a process of thinking and knowing again (*re-cognise*) as well as acknowledging and valorising soundsystem culture as a worthy ingredient of intellectual life

contribution to knowledge, scholarship and citizenship that challenges conventional Eurocentric interpretations of intellectual life (Fatsis, 2018; 2019a: 452-456). The distinct lyrics, sonics and politics of soundsystem culture will therefore be presented as a form of radical epistemology for social change. Inspired by Clyde Woods' (2017: 16-20) notion of the 'blues epistemology', the term is lovingly borrowed, conceptually remixed and paraphrased here as 'soundsystem epistemology' to reflect (on) the unique sonic, lyrical and political properties of soundsystem culture. Not unlike the 'theory of change' that is expressed through the blues as a 'vision' for a society that is 'dialectically polyrhythmic' (Woods, 2017: 103, 288), the aesthetics and philosophy of soundsystem culture are also participatory and transformative. By combining words (lyrics), sound (sonics) and power (politics), soundsystem culture is imbued with a view of public social life — as an assembly for performing citizenship and articulating politics through the medium of music.

What makes soundsystem culture unique as a 'practice of citizenship' (Avelar and Dunn, 2011) is its unique blend of orality, music and radical political imagination in the interest of associational life (see, e.g. Glissant, 1989; esp. pp. 248-9). Monique Charles' (2016, 2018) innovative analysis of the narrative, sonic and spatial ingredients of UK grime music highlights the distinct use of words/lyrics, in sound/sonics as ingredients for power/politics that give a different spin on how citizenship can be understood and performed¹². In the context of soundsystem culture, this participatory approach to the life of the commons takes shape in the form of the DJ or rapper/MC's¹³ interactive use of lyrics and rhymes, their dialogic interaction with their audience and the open, public space in which such interplay usually takes place. Soundsystem rhymesmiths act as (inter)active participants who do not simply address their audiences but engage them in direct dialogue through antiphonic rhetorical strategies in the form of stock phrases (e.g. "are

¹² For a similar argument about how grime creates and sustains active public life through a unique combination and use of spoken word (*logos*), public space (*topos*), craft (*techne*) and entrepreneurial spirit (*ethos*) see, Fatsis' (2019a: 452-6)

¹³ In soundsystem reggae terminology, the DJ refers to the person who talks or rhymes over a record. In hip-hop culture, the same person is the rapper or the 'MC' (Master of Ceremonies, Microphone Chanter and other similar variations)

you feeling it?”, “make some noise”, “put your hands/lighters up”) that are consistent with the call-and-response habits of Afro-diasporic music traditions (Gilroy, 1993: 78). Audiences in turn become co-producers of meaning, knowledge and culture whose reaction to the DJ/MC’s lyrics shapes and becomes part of the performance itself by shouting ‘brap’ and ‘bo, bo, bo’ to express their appreciation, even demanding ‘rewinds’ or ‘reloads’ of tracks they enjoy thereby forcing the performers to restart the track from the beginning¹⁴. The performance of music in such a context depends on audience participation so much that performing before an audience actually involves the audience in the performance. As words/lyrics and sound/sonics become a shared language between performers and audiences the use of space which allows such interactions is also approached in an open-ended and public-oriented manner as exemplified by the practice of cyphers/ciphers. In rap culture, ciphers refer to ‘battling rappers or dancers as they improvise for each other’ (Chang, 2009: pg?) in parks, streetcorners, parties in non-commercial venues, and tower block rooftops. As lyrics are used to create a sense of collective participation through ‘[c]ollectively rapped discourse’ (Bowles, 1999: 14), the sonic outcome of such rhymed, rhythmic speech reshapes the relationship between artists, fans and the social space they interact in by stressing the mutuality among them. This makes soundsystem culture (inescapably) political by redefining music as life in public — a shared experience which emerges as the outcome of collective expression, rather than the result of individual performance or the sole property of the artist.

Rethinking soundsystem culture as an expressive form(at) of political (inter)action, therefore, also involves rethinking the way we think about the intellect and public life with and through Black music. The world of the intellect, the habits of public participation and the sound of music assume different meanings that derive from the unique aesthetic, cultural and socio-political traditions of the African diaspora. Deviating as Black or Afro-diasporic music does from European or Western intellectual canons, habits of public participation and ‘soundscape norms’ (Charles, 2018: 7), it also challenges them. Such a realisation makes room for exploring other, equally valid — yet under-*mined*

¹⁴ Charles (2016: 125, 270, 311) offers some rare glimpses into the cultural politics of such dialogic strategies

— resources for making knowledge and political life differently, with soundsystem culture featuring as one such example of Black radical thought in sound.

This is clearly discernible in the lyrics of the soundsystem MC whose rhymes talk back to regimes of racial oppression, coercion, violence and terror that are normalised and legitimised in systems of governance and their criminal justice institutions. Yet the message of the music is also communicated in and through sound too. The sonics of soundsystems are rhythmic, embodied, sensuous and heady rather than (merely) intellectual. They encompass various modes of expression that include, but also move beyond the word. Their media of communication: the decks, the megawatt soundsystem speakers and the sound effects also carve out an alternative public sphere — a different intellectual, aesthetic, cultural space which creates a place for politics to be reimagined, re-considered, reconstructed, felt and attuned to as well as spoken about; as ‘the bass-heavy beat of the soundsystems pump[s] righteous blood to the political heart of the community’ (Gilroy, 2002: 116; Gilroy, 1993: 37-8). The politics in soundsystem culture reside in the lyrical, sonic, ethical and aesthetic elements of the music which restage what politics is or can be (Gilroy, 1993; esp. pp. 72-110). Politics in the soundsystem, however, does not appear in the form a systematic ideology, an organised membership, an appointed leader or plans for winning state power. It features instead as a resource for thinking about social transformation in and through a more communal, co-operative and inescapably public mode than mainstream representational politics allow. Soundsystem culture therefore becomes political through its sonic qualities and Afro-diasporic modes of creative expression that are poly-rhythmic, antiphonic and dialogic. As such, it demands an interactive mode of engagement which hinges on active participation and transforms music into a practice of active citizenship. Soundsystem culture, however, also becomes political even without intending to, through the way it is policed; transforming its lyrics and sonics into political targets of state regulation and social control through law enforcement. Not only does soundsystem culture offer a vision of politics as an informal process and practice of citizenship; exercised in the dance as a way of achieving collective socio-cultural life beyond and without state institutions. It also reminds us that soundsystems become political because they are targeted, monitored, controlled and

pursued as a subversive force which threatens the status quo as an insurrectionary medium which broadcasts dissent to racist oppression.

This rough sketch of the lyrics, sonics and politics of Afro-diasporic (music) culture hopefully illustrates the merits of rethinking the social world with and through soundsystems as a different epistemology or way(s) of knowing how to know (Weheliye, 2005; Henriques, 2011). Defended here as a unique (re)source of knowledge, UK soundsystem culture — be it UK reggae or UK drill — suffuses our scholarly and political imagination with different ways of making sense of police racism, state violence, social injustice and the politics of knowledge itself. As such, thinking with as well as through a soundsystem epistemology alerts us to manifestations of institutional racism that might otherwise not be all that evident or widely known, while also allowing us to respond to racist ideology and practice by re-examining the modes and patterns of thinking that make it possible in the first place. In the light of widespread calls to decolonise university curricula¹⁵ — that became mainstream following the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020 — decolonising our minds and ears takes priority as a process of achieving such epistemic and social justice. Attuning ourselves to UK soundsystem culture, therefore, presents itself as a neglected ingredient for research, teaching and civic participation. Yet it also demonstrates how and why the radical energy of soundsystem (sub)cultures — like UK reggae and UK drill — is turned against them, to criminalise the sonic content of the music, police the social presence of its artists and audiences and silence them as worthy players in the stage of intellectual and public life

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¹⁵ For some rich and stimulating essays on decolonising university curricula and Higher Education institutions more broadly, see: Arday and Mirza (2018), Tate and Page (2018), Bhabra, Gebrial, D. and Nişancioğlu (2018) and Coleman (2020)

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