6.1. Breaking the Electronic Sprawl

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Abstract

This paper addresses a contemporary mediation of urban alienation and a delineation of sonic space through DiY electronic music. It thereby aims to find a way to understand associated music scenes beyond the notion of distinct subcultures. It will do so by addressing the intersection of the dub diaspora and post-punk nihilism London's underground electronic music, in specific grime and dub step. The deconstructive musical aesthetic of dub step and grime can produce social empowerment as the articulation of shared social experience. The resulting aesthetic as well as low-tech DiY approach to music resonates with, for example, the minimalist digital sounds of Kuduro in Angola and Gqom in South Africa. Such a raw and broken electronic sound reaches beyond the localised limits of subcultural theory, as common meeting points may be identified across Black Atlantic post-colonial post-human experience, breaking both with and against the alienating complexities of living in an electronic urban sprawl.

Keywords: urban electronic music, DIY, subcultures, post-colonialism.

London's underground electronic music offers, arguably, a range of music styles at the intersection of post-punk nihilism and diasporic dub reggae. Already during the late 1970s, Dick Hebdige (1979) took the postcolonial sound of dub as a starting point for his subcultural approach to London's punk scene, identifying an array of influences that included glitter-rock, and American proto-punk, as well as mod styled music, northern soul, and reggae. Thirty years on, dub step and grime are London's established underground music genres, exported globally to the US, Canada, Australia, and a range of European destinations. Here, one could argue that subcultural capital, a concept defined by Sarah Thornton (1995), is being exported. However, perhaps the situation is more complex for electronic "ghetto music" than a localised notion of subculture versus dominant culture can explain in the context of digitized global post-human culture and shared colonial histories.

Grime and dub step, both electronic music genres that first developed in East London and South London respectively, have a shared genealogy that stems from late 1990s UK Garage, itself a mix of electronic dance club music known in the UK as 'garage' due its lineage to New York's club Paradise Garage, and bass-lines that, via mid-90s drum'n'bass and jungle, resonate with reggae dancehall music. Their path differ in that grime is characterised by a type of rap, which is rooted in the rapid MC style associated with pirate radio stations that, illegally, offered a continuous programme of underground garage, house music and drum'n'bass on London's airwaves. A good example is Wiley's "It's Wiley" on the *Showa Eski EP* (2011), released in Jamaica, on which producer and MC Richard Kylea Cowie, aka Wiley, states his manifesto of daily grime culture in rapid rhyme, at 140 BPM (beats per minute). Lyrics in grime often speak of anger and frustration. Competition seems a priority, in terms of physical strength, fighting fitness and material goods. Mostly they seem to define what it means to be a young man in a world where the working classes no longer can count on a regular job, where brotherhood is valued yet sexual relationships are atomised and objectified in terms of conquests.

On a speculative level, it may well that the resulting misogyny helps produce a false sense of superiority in a world where the social standing of the post-industrial male has been crushed to underclass status. This point is made not to justify masculinism, but may go some way to understand its political-economic underpinning within a neoliberal context. The musical aesthetic of grime, with its rapid rhymes, seems to embrace an accelerated culture, which is described well by Benjamin Nuys in *Malign Velocities* (2014), offering a critical overview of speed cultures, which embrace acceleration as both aesthetic and political tools to vainly stay ahead of the individualism of capitalist machinery. Alienation, then, is articulated here through a DiY approach to music that breaks with pop music conventions, juxtaposing drones and bass-heavy textures with, what are at times, complex rhythms.

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Dub step, by contrast, is often instrumental, emphasizing a deep, almost subsonic bass that echoes the old dub basslines that emerged from Jamaica during the 1970s and which seems to emphasize the half-tempo of a track. This way a dub step track can be heard as being140 BPM when listening to the drums, or 70 BPM when focussing on the bass. When vocals are used, they sound like pastiches of Jamaican dub reggae voice-overs, usually treated with excessive spaced out echoic audio effects. For example, "Anti War Dub" by Digital Mystikz (2006), which features the echoic dub vocals of Spen G. The emotive yet intellectually engaging MC performances of The Spaceape (Stephen Samuel Gordon) who collaborated especially with Hyperdub label boss Steve Goodman, aka Kode9, both from South-London, reflect on the surrealism of post-human existence. On the album *Memories of the Future* (2006), we hear dub poetry underpinned by contemporary philosophy. In these electronically produced tracks, the modern subject is decentred through labyrinthine echoic effects and digitised audio traces, while the musical structures offer a mix of violence and melancholy. As Chris Christodoulou (2011: 44) has argued in the context of drum'n'bass, the deep sound of bas "produces a powerful sense of *jouissance* where identity can seem to unravel on the dance floor and an articulation of contemporary urban space as a place of subjective loss and regression." Simultaneously, the subjective halving of the tempo seems to provide a counterweight to the information overloaded accelerated experience of a digitised and networked urban existence.

In *The Dark Side of Modernity*, social theorist Jeffrey C Alexander resonates with Georges Bataille's discussion of the sacred by stating that "The social creation of evil results not only in efforts to avoid evil but also in the pursuit of it" (2013: p. 120). As young working class men and women lose opportunities to start their lives as independent young adults, prevented from setting up a stable home based on a regular income, a disenfranchised underclass develops that produces its own ecology, accompanied by its own sonic articulations. What seems so right to the state, is perceived as wrong by those who suffer the consequences. In this sense, Hebdidge's subcultural theory still holds fast. A musical aesthetic develops that is partly based on necessity, in particular in the case of grime, utilising affordable electronic music technologies to produce minimalist, yet effective, tracks, turning traditional pop structures upside down and inside out. While bass is emphasized, the vocals either speed up to 140 BPM, in the case of grime, or decelerate to emphasize a tempo of around 70 BPM; this in contrast to the tempo of a pop song, which seems on average between 110 – 125 BPM, the speed of one's heart rate ranging between slightly excited to mild exercise. Such music styles break both with, and against, musical structures to create innovative ways to respond to challenging circumstances. In this sense, we may agree with Michel Foucault (1981) that power, wherever it is directed from, can be productive. And, as Jacques Attali (1985: p. 20) states, "Representation against fear, repetition against harmony, compositions against normality. It is in this interplay of concepts that music invites us to enter, in its capacity as the herald of organizations and their overall political strategies - noise that destroys orders to structure a new order." The deconstructive musical aesthetic of dub step and grime can produce social empowerment through the seduction of their shared secret, to paraphrase Jean Baudrillard (1988). We may even find, in these musical styles, a detoxifying inversion of its sonic articulation of evil.

The participants (the dancers, listeners, MCs, producers, DJs) of stripped down electronic music genres such as dub step and, in particular, grime, share a secret because of a shared life experience. These are articulated within specific affective sonic structures and ways of producing these within the context of a post-colonial and post-human(ist) urban society, where neo-liberalism has partly percolated mutating itself to a particular urban economic configurations of, especially, East and South London. In what Paul Gilroy (1993) identifies as Black Atlantic culture, indicating the historical experience of the colonialist slavery of African peoples and the enforced passage across the Atlantic Ocean, early voice was given to capitalist alienation, in the form of extreme commodification of human life. This voice has woven itself through the syncretic musical forms associated with African-Americans, Latin-Americans and Afro-Caribbean cultures, including the mixed demographic of London working class youth with its mix of Caribbean, Irish, South-Asian, Anglo and other ethnic backgrounds. Understanding the wide geo-political scope of this long-standing cultural history, one starts to wonder if the notion of 'subculture' suffices to explain the music forms that have evolved form this, as one must wonder what dominant culture this subcultural musical aesthetic is actually 'sub' to.

The broken and minimalist low-tech DiY aesthetic approach to music resonates with other music scenes. For example, there are the minimalist digital sounds of Kuduro in Angola, that is researched and discussed in the work of Stefanie Alisch and Nadine Siegert (2011, 2013) as well as Garth Sheridan (2014) and can be heard in videos like "Kuduro in Angola: Os Detroia, Não Faz Isso Bela"; The electronic tracks feature vocalists most of the time and both groups of young men and groups of young women show off their dance steps, which involve strong body

chores as torso's band backwards and, when genders mix, dancers simulate explicit sexual poses. Another example of a low-tech minimalist electronic music style is gqom from South Africa, which mainly seems to consist of stark drum programming and a bass line, yet each track offers a unique *riddim* (as one would say in the world of reggae to indicate a bass and drum track), often inspired by traditional drum rhythms. Gqom followed after the bling optimism of South Africa's version of house music, kwaito, which celebrated the end of Apartheit. Gqom, by contrast has a rawer, DiY, and almost menacing quality, in its cleverly stripped-down yet stubborn repetitive phrases and drone-like tonality, as can be heard on, for example, a recent DJ mix: GQOM, 2015 Reprise Mix. In these styles, resonances can be identified in the shared post-colonial post-human urban experiences of accelerated digital cultures. Although musicians and scene participants travel and settle elsewhere, resulting in some exchange, say in the case of Kuduro, between Luanda, Lisbon and Bahia, as well as New York and London this does not necessarily mean that there has been a direct musical exchange between these local scenes. However, there are shared political and even cultural history styles that rhizomically emerge from similar experiences of alienation.

A complex web of connections loosely binds together these disparate electronic music styles, which, for lack of a better word, may be identified as a type of ghetto-tech. This term has, admittedly, been reserved for a specific style of gritty club music from Chicago and Detroit, which combines electro, techno, drum'n'bass and UK garage, and is thereby relatively explicitly part of a cross-Atlantic dialogue with musical developments in the UK, which is not necessarily the case with Angola's Kuduro or South Africa's gqom. Such minimalist aesthetics are also not just resereved for music scenes that can connections with African styles, as also in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, a minimalist male-dominated techno style emerged, locally known as gabber (meaning a male friend or mate), and since mutated by English-speakers to gabba, indicating its simplicity of four-to-the-floor beats and single melody lines, embracing accelerated culture with approximate tempos of 180 BPM.

Within the seemingly unrelated music scenes discussed above, it may possible to identify, within what politically may be identified as *noise,* articulations of: neoliberal economics of competition; post-colonial diasporic identity formation; global urbanization; digitization of music production; power shifts in gender identity; and, perhaps, brotherhood community as 'alternative'. I argue here, therefore, that the raw electronic musical aesthetics discussed reach beyond the limits of subcultural theory. The latter makes sense on a local level, where dominant cultures and subcultures may be easier distinguished. But on a wider, even global, scale, one needs to look further into shared histories and shared experiences based on larger political economic forces.

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