



The Oxford Handbook of Politics and Performance

Shirin Rai (ed.) et al.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190863456.001.0001>

Published: 2021

Online ISBN: 9780190863487

Print ISBN: 9780190863456

CHAPTER

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

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190863456.013.9> Pages 135–150

Published: 10 March 2021

Abstract

This chapter considers how class and race are navigated through informal performances by marginalized subjects in New York City and London. Taking litefeet dance and grime music as objects of analysis (both performance forms developed and pioneered by working-class men of color), it argues that we can think of informal and ostensibly frivolous practices as importantly political, structuring our understanding of cities and contributing to social and cultural change compelled by injustices in the political system of late capitalism. The chapter posits space as a means of understanding the politics of global cities and the connections between different geographical locations. Drawing on ethnographic and observation work undertaken by the author between 2014 and 2020, it uses hip-hop practices taking place in different contexts as a way of exploring how those who are relegated to the city's edges find ways to survive and to push back against the dominant order. The argument here acknowledges the impossibility for marginalized performance forms to bring about total structural change but delineates ways that informal practices might nonetheless participate in a politics (understood as a struggle over power) and contribute to processes of change, which may not be inherently radical but are nonetheless resistant.

Keywords: [class](#), [race](#), [grime](#), [litefeet](#), [hip-hop](#), [revolution](#), [city space](#)

Subject: [Political Behaviour](#), [Politics](#)

Series: [Oxford Handbooks](#)

Collection: [Oxford Handbooks Online](#)

Introduction

IN April 2014 I took a long-planned trip to New York City with my mother. We stayed in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and took the J Train into Manhattan most days. Unexpectedly—for I had little interest before my visit in reading up on the subway system, beyond tips on how best to use it—the underground was alive with arts and performance practice. The throbbing thwack of bucket drumming and the surprising copper crocodile¹ that emerges from a manhole cover on the L Train platform at 14th Street and 8th Avenue were more thrilling to me than the iconic cultural scene above ground. As Susie Tanenbaum articulates in her 1995 ethnography of the subway music scene, *Underground Harmonies*, New York’s subway system has long been a space in which a heterogeneous range of amateur and professional artists hone their craft and seek to make a living. It is a space where the social and political structures of the city are reflected in the cultures, rituals, policing, legislation, and law enforcement practiced there. The rich music scene described by Tanenbaum still exists underground, but I was moved most profoundly by the subway dance culture.

Two incidents from that trip have stayed with me.

The first occurred as I changed trains at Union Square Station and came across a group of breakdancers setting up an amp on the mezzanine—an older gentleman, a woman, and three boys: two teenagers and one who was just three or four years old. As the music spiraled out of the speakers, they began dancing. It quickly became clear that the small boy was the star of the show, the moneymaker. He cocked his head with confident street attitude and took up the b-boy stance² before beginning a routine that included a perfectly executed four-turn head-spin. A large crowd gathered, filming the scene on their mobile phones, before the group finished the routine and encouraged the crowd to donate.

p. 136 The second incident took place on the subway train itself. As we rode around—confused, navigating a system that seemed indifferent to tourists (What is an express train? Why is there more than one station called 103rd Street?), three teenage boys boarded the train and shouted “Showtime!” They pumped tinny, upbeat, digitally enhanced hip-hop from small speakers and took it in turns to perform gymnastic dance feats, including somersaults, backflips, and aerial contortion using the safety poles. “What is this?” I asked my mother. I was completely mesmerized by the vitality, skill, and exuberance of the performance, which seemed both designed for us as tourists and an utterly indulgent and joyous means of expression for the dancers themselves.

I later learned the small boy I had seen on the mezzanine at Union Square was known as “Kid Break” and was self-taught by watching breakdance videos online. He was affiliated with WAFFLE, a crew of dancers mostly practicing a form of dance known as litefeet. WAFFLE regularly perform on subway trains, announcing their presence with the call “Showtime!” These incidents on the subway reminded me of the garage MCs and grime rappers who would recite their rhymes on the top decks of the London buses I used as a teenager, using public transport to practice and perfect emerging lyrical techniques that would also appear in music played on pirate radio stations, broadcast across London while I was growing up.³

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

This chapter, then, takes as its starting point the assumption that acts that are ostensibly frivolous or destructive, including dancing, busking, graffiti, and even expressions of violence, nonetheless intervene in the social, cultural, and political life of the city. Like the practices Tim Cresswell (1996) calls “transgressive

acts,” informal performances are defined by the marginalization of the groups performing them, as well as the spaces and places in which they occur. Although such practices may begin informally, they often become woven into formal culture (through commercial exploitation and in historical narratives) and come to shape how spaces and places within cities are understood. In both London and New York, cities I have come to know well as a resident and as a tourist and researcher, respectively, street expressions of performative creativity that cut across race and class, and responses to them by authorities, make visible structural inequalities and imbue perhaps unlikely spaces (the subway car, the sidewalk, the council estate, the bus) with the energy of revolution. Informal performance practices therefore play a significant role in both structuring and responding to the political organization of city spaces.

p. 137 In this chapter, I explore how we might understand cities as political, mapping the intersections between class, space, and marginality, before offering an overview of two modes of informal street performance in two cities: litedance (New York) and grime music (London). These forms were both pioneered by young men of color in specific spatial contexts, and, as I discuss, they are useful examples of performance that help us to think about the city as a political space. I argue that these examples show us how the expression of “revolutionary” politics need not rely on total systemic change or ideological purity from practitioners but on what the scholar Lisa McKenzie (2018) tentatively calls “a process,” in which revolution manifests as “a turning, a whirling, an about change from one position to the opposite position.” I refer to McKenzie’s position as tentative not because she expresses hesitation in her writing but because the blog post from which I quote here is tentative in its form; that is, it is an unworked-through idea that is expressed online in a nonscholarly publication. Nonetheless, drawing on a concept that is in the process of formation, existing at the margins of scholarly writing, seems apt in a chapter concerned with the political significance of informal practices.

The work in this chapter draws on my studies of hip-hop and related cultures in London and New York, including periods of time shadowing both WAFFLE and the theater company Beats & Elements between 2014 and 2020. It reveals how we can use performance analysis to understand the ways those marginalized from mainstream cultural activity find connections within and to the city space—and even ways to (re)shape and change cities through performance. This relies on thinking about what the spatial philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1991) called “social space” as inherently political.

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

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

Lefebvre (1991), one of the most influential figures to write about the relationship between space and politics in the twentieth century, described the spaces of interaction between individual bodies, and between bodies and objects, as “social space.” Clearly, the (human) body and its experience of the world is important in social space and in our experiences of the places in which we live; indeed, “it is through the body that one comes to know the world” (Beswick 2011, 428). But although this suggests that the experience of space is

highly individual, the “social” in “social space” emphasizes that the internal individual experience is rooted in a shared external world (Peuquet 2002, 32). Importantly this shared externality is created as spaces are shaped by the forces of control and domination that we see operating in society and history in various ways. The idea of social space therefore relies on an understanding that politics is inherently *spatial* just as space is inherently political—and that individual human actors as well as overarching power structures create the spaces we live in and how we are able to live in them. Lefebvre, like many scholars seeking to analyze ↪ relations between power and injustice, draws on ideas rooted in Marxism, highlighting the injustices produced by social and economic inequality under capitalism. Such injustices, as Imogen Tyler (2013, 156) has argued, intersect across race, class, and gender to ensure that distinct groups of people (women, migrants, people of color) are far less likely to accumulate wealth and resources than other groups of people.

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Nowhere are the political injustices of social space under capitalism more visible than in our cities, where inequalities are played out in the street—not always noticed, though rarely hidden from view for those who care to look. In our city streets the lack of access to resources afforded to some groups sits directly alongside the obscene abundance of others. In New York City, for example, poverty moves alongside wealth outside Trump Tower, a fifty-eight-story skyscraper whose lobby is adorned with ostentatious gold finishings, representing the extreme riches hoarded by the Trump Organization, headed by US President Donald Trump (a neat illustration of the way space and power are intertwined). In the streets below the Tower and in Central Park, visible from the windows of the higher floors, those in extreme poverty and need, including the homeless, beg for money or work for wages that barely cover the cost of living as street cleaners, hot dog vendors, and subway attendants. Although it is important not to conflate London and New York, which are different places with different histories that produce distinct conditions of inequality (Wacquant 2009), it is the case that in both cities the crises of capitalism continue apace. In these cities too the raced nature of class injustice is often rendered most visible. The lowest paid jobs are often carried out by black, Hispanic, and Asian workers, who also struggle to find secure employment more frequently than their white counterparts (McGeehan 2012; Trust for London 2018), while rundown and underresourced neighborhoods are overwhelmingly occupied by people of color (Goldenberg 2018; Hanley 2017). In London (and other English cities) race inequality plays out in the vertical life of the city as well as on the streets, with black and Asian families far more likely to be allocated high-rise social housing, which is often poorly maintained, than white families (Hanley 2017). Although—as Trump Tower indicates—high-rise living, in terms of the luxury penthouse apartment, is also associated with wealth, high-rise social housing is frequently stigmatized and understood as producing crime, antisocial behavior, and ill health, pointing to how our understandings of space are socially (and politically) constructed in relation to how perceptions of wealth and power circulate in different types of spaces.

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This state of affairs indicates how class and race operate in conjunction with one another, in ways that often produce greater injustices for people of color as the injustices of their class position are compounded by racism. As Solga (2019, 14) argues, “Racism and White privilege depend upon the reproduction of certain normative spatial structures for their violent power.” This idea of normativity can be seen in the way injustices of class and race are reflected in the criminal justice system, where both the working class in general and the black working class in particular are overrepresented as criminals, portrayed as the natural occupiers of prisons and courthouses. The scholar Deirdre O’Neill (2017) illustrates how society is structured so as to produce the behavior of the working class as criminal and to suggest that this criminality is natural rather than the result of injustices that mean the working class are far more likely to experience “poverty, isolation, boredom, an inability to cope, drink problems and mental illness” (Farell quoted in O’Neill 2017, 27) and to have their behavior categorized as criminal (see also Kitossa 2012). As O’Neill points out, the criminalization of the working class is the result of a “system of historically embedded ↪ beliefs and common sense rationalities” “that are drawn upon to justify and reinforce the apparatus of capitalism [and] serve to deflect attention away from the behavior of the rich and powerful” (O’Neill 2017, 27).

Writing in 1967, Lefebvre pointed to the increasing commodification and commercialism of the city space under the capitalist regime in his essay *The Right to the City* (1968). As David Harvey (2013, x) points out, the idea of the “right to the city” was “both a cry and a demand”: “The cry was a response to the existential pain of a withering crisis of everyday life in the city. The demand was really a command to look that crisis clearly in the eye and to create urban life that is less alienated, more meaningful and playful but, as always with Lefebvre, conflictual and dialectical, open to becoming, to encounters (both fearful and pleasurable), and to the perpetual pursuit of unknowable novelty.” When we understand that our social spaces are structured in ways that marginalize and criminalize sections of the population, it can be easy to feel hopelessness or despair at the prevailing order. But even as capitalism accelerates into crisis, producing economic, ecological, and social chaos, we find those dwelling in the city’s marginal spaces clamoring to assert their right to city space. As bell hooks (1989) reminds us, just as it is a space of repression and pain, so too the “margin” occupied by those oppressed by the injustices of capitalism can be understood as a radical space of resistance. She writes of the dangers of pessimism about marginality, “If we only view the margin as a sign, marking the condition of our pain and deprivation, then a certain hopelessness and despair, a deep nihilism penetrates in a destructive way” (21). For hooks, to stay located at the margins is a radical choice; she makes a “definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance—as location of radical openness and possibility” (23). In London, New York, and other cities structured by the capitalist system, the places, cultures, and ideas often marginalized by the dominant forces of capitalism become sites from which to speak back to power and through which citizens might assert their own power in the face of structural inequality.

This is not to suggest that creative, informal street acts bring about wholesale change to the structures of the capitalist city; indeed, the impulses toward and means of resistance played out in informal street performance are often born of a need for survival. In conditions of abjection, poverty, and pain, to survive and to find ways to do so joyfully is also an act of resistance. So too it is often difficult to understand the kinds of performance I describe as entirely revolutionary in the radical sense, because the cultural forms expressed in street dance, rap, and other means of informal street expression are often in tension with and subject to co-optation by the capitalist system they exist within.⁴ Nonetheless, despite such tensions, these forms of expression can provide moments we might understand as revolutionary in the sense of what McKenzie (2018) describes as a “turning wheel,” where the toxicity of capitalism compels those oppressed by it to make movements toward change. McKenzie is not optimistic about the destination toward which this revolution in the face of toxic capitalism is traveling—and the tensions inherent in street performance forms suggest the difficulty of transcending the status quo entirely. Nonetheless her writing does encourage us to think about political struggles as they play out in the everyday lives and spaces of the working classes and to view acts that participate in the slow transformation of our societies as “revolutionary”—as having political potential. Here her argument, although tentative, offers us a frame for understanding informal practices that is perhaps more optimistic than Cresswell’s (1996) argument, in which transgressive acts risk being understood as “out of place” unless they effectively disrupt the current order. Litefeet, emerging from the streets and subways of New York, and grime, developed in East London’s tower blocks, provide examples of informal street performance practices that contribute to the revolutionary “wheel turning” compelled by late capitalism.

Hip-Hop and the City

Litefeet and grime were propelled by hip-hop; indeed it is impossible to write about race, urban marginality, and informal performance without mentioning hip-hop, a now global cultural form that famously began in the impoverished inner-city neighborhoods (at that time, the Bronx, Harlem, and Brooklyn) of New York City in the early 1970s. As Murray Forman (2002, 9) notes, “Hip-hop’s discourses have an impressive influence among North Americans ... of all races and ethnicities, providing a distinctive understanding of the social terrains and conditions under which ‘real’ black cultural identities are formed and experienced.” Forman’s work—and the growing scholarship on hip-hop, now spanning a number of disciplinary fields—demonstrates how street practices are profoundly local and yet frequently co-opted, appropriated, and caught up within globalized economic systems and capitalist imperatives that complicate and blur the boundaries between the margins and the mainstream. This complication is compounded by the race and class politics that play out through hip-hop culture in the dominant cultural sphere, where the often working-class black, Asian, and ethnic minority practitioners of the form are frequently presented as “outward manifestations of an ‘outlaw culture’ that is perceived as dangerous, if not outrightly criminal” (Fatsis 2018, 1). This plays out in the evolution of litefeet, a practice that has been explicitly criminalized in city law. Litefeet is a dance and music form that began in Harlem in around 2006 and spread through the Bronx and elsewhere. Practitioners of the form describe it as “the reemergence of hip-hop through dance” (my interview with Andrew Saunders, 2015). It emerged as part of organized and spontaneous “battles,” where dancers as young as eleven or twelve and up to about thirty would gather on the streets, in the courtyards of housing projects, or in warehouses, studios, and gymnasiums and, moving away from the traditional b-boy, develop new and innovative moves in order to impress and, at organized battles, win kudos and respect from their peers. Signature moves include the Harlem Shake, Chicken Noodle Soup, and the Toe Wop (or Tone Wop), but it is probably most well known as the dance style performed on the subway trains of New York City. Groups of predominantly Hispanic and African American teenagers, often from housing projects and mostly low-income neighborhoods on the city’s edges, perform gymnastic feats using the walls, seats, poles, and floors of subway cars; they often form “crews” (groups) and dance to music produced by fellow crew members. In a research trip I took to the city in 2015, dancers from the WAFFLE crew explained to me that they began performing on trains to make the 10-dollar fee to attend battles but were soon earning between 100 and 150 dollars a day and contributing to their family’s household expenses. As most of the boys and men live in low-income housing and do not have recourse to family money or any disposable income, dancing quickly became a low-risk illegal way to make cash quickly. Panhandling (soliciting money from the public) has long been illegal on the subway system (the penalty was usually a fine), but in 2014, in response to the continued use of subway trains as a platform for panhandling by litefeet dancers, New York City’s police commissioner, William Bratton, announced that dancers caught performing on trains would be charged with reckless endangerment, a Misdemeanor A offense that carries a penalty of up to a year in prison. It is difficult to see this move as divorced from the wider culture of classed and racialized criminalization of young black men in the USA, where black people are incarcerated at five times the rate of whites (Nellis 2016).

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

even as hip-hop is co-opted by capitalism, it continues to find ways to resist. That is, hip-hop's means of expression, including MCing (rapping), breakdance, graffiti, and DJing, continue to be adopted and developed by those struggling to overcome the hardships of late capitalism.

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

Litefeet

The pioneers of litefeet are primarily from Harlem and the Bronx. Much like first-wave hip-hop culture, litefeet is a grassroots practice that has evolved from an informal street practice to a mainstream movement co-opted, globally, by brands and prominent entertainers. Its signature moves (or "trends"), including the Harlem Shake, have gone viral, with videos shared online garnering views in the millions and high-profile entertainers reproducing trends in music videos. Dancers are regularly asked to perform at events such as New York Fashion Week and in commercials and at corporate events for global brands, including Nike and Red Bull. In 2019 members of the WAFFLE crew appeared on the popular entertainment show *Ellen*. Several documentaries about litefeet have been made, and the form has been the subject of articles in the *Huffington Post*, *New York Magazine*, and the *Daily Mail*.

p. 142 Litefeet is also known as "getting lite," which signals its move away from some of the stereotypes of East Coast gangster hip-hop that dominated the mainstream in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Unlike b-boy, the traditional form of breakdancing, which makes virtuosic use of the floor and often sees practitioners adopt a confident street swagger epitomized by the "b-boy stance," litefeet is comical and ostensibly flippant in style. Dancers often accompany moves with exaggerated facial expressions and make use of height. If breakdancing is known for floor work, litefeet is known for its aerial displays as dancers somersault, contort themselves using safety poles on subway cars as elevation, and carry out tricks using baseball caps and sneakers thrown into the air. This move toward lightness can be considered political—an attempt to overturn negative images of young black men that dominate commercial hip-hop culture (Rose 2008). Unlike the gangsta rap that sought to portray the harsh realities of life in the impoverished inner city, litefeet dancers use the lightness of form to draw attention to the positive and playful potentials of inner-city living. As the dancers tell viewers on a local Bronx news station interview that I watched them record, "Dance is positive." This turn to liteness might itself be understood as a softening of the politics of hip-hop—and indeed there are tensions between the revolutionary nature of the litefeet form and the way it presents an acceptable, unthreatening version of black masculinity that is easily co-opted by brands, television shows, and other commercial interests. The dancers are clear that making money from their work is an aim: this is about survival not only through creative and emotional freedom but through "economic capital" (Bourdieu 1986) that allows financial freedom.

It would be misleading, then, to suggest that litefeet dancers are motivated by an ideological socialist purity (indeed I saw no indication that they are socialist at all in any individual or collective sense) or that they are consciously Marxist in their attempts at disrupting power. Nonetheless dancers do use the form to contest their treatment by those in positions of power, particularly the police. Knafo and Kassie (2014) describe a dance sequence performed by WAFFLE's Andrew "Goofy" Saunders,

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

Indeed, litefeet dancers have been at the forefront of contesting the injustices that play out through subway space. When the law criminalizing subway dance was announced, WAFFLE staged a “last dance” protest to draw attention to the gross unfairness of this legislation. Documented in Scott Carthy’s 2014 short film *Litefeet*, the protest begins in the subway station as the crew walk slowly up the stairs toward the platform, the camera following them from behind. Kid Break is in front, dressed in sweatpants (tracksuit bottoms), his shirt off, suggesting the heat of a New York summer. In slow motion the crew move across the platform, laughing and stretching to warm up, while Saunders, in voice-over, describes the formation of WAFFLE and the misrepresentation of subway dancers in the political debate surrounding the form. A train pulls into the platform and the dancers board. They call “Showtime!” and begin, one by one, to perform. They tell the audience that this is their “last dance.” The camera is positioned low so as to capture the vertical planes of the dance form. Despite the somber tone of the film the dancers are upbeat and smiling, lighthearted for the camera.

p. 143 Although the last dance wasn’t really the final dance WAFFLE dancers ever performed on the subway (they were still dancing on trains when I visited New York in 2015, 2016, 2018, and 2020), it was a symbolic gesture, drawing attention to the injustices of the reckless endangerment charge. The performance was followed by other tactics to resist the clampdown on dancing, including developing merchandise that allowed the public to show support for the dancers—most strikingly a T-shirt that riffs on the posters placed all over the subway system warning about the dangers of using the poles for dance. (“This pole is for my safety, not your latest dance routine,” the posters declare.) On the T-shirts the image from the poster is reprinted, the words changed to assert “This pole is for your safety and my latest dance routine.” In this way litefeet is not only a frivolous form but can serve as a means to address overarching systems of domination and control and to draw attention to injustices that structure the lives of working-class black men in the city, such as dealing with harassment from the police based on the way that black working-class bodies, as I described earlier, are naturalized as criminal in the capitalist system.

One of the notable features of litefeet as a form is that, from its inception during street battles in New York’s housing projects to its current practice by professionals on reality television programs and in commercials and documentaries, it has been digitally documented. Indeed the evolution of the practice runs parallel to the rise of YouTube, where the founders of litefeet posted videos of battles and dance sessions—some of which were “branded” as individuals attempted to secure their place in history as authors of the form. Practitioners now use Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, and Twitter to document and share their litefeet practice. Collectives such as the WAFFLE NYC crew have garnered significant local, national, and international attention through their social media activity. As Hector Postigo (2016, 333) argues in his examination of online gaming commentary, YouTube videos serve multiple functions for their users: “They are not only performances of expertise ... but they also serve as performances of identity, community conflicts and allegiances, community values, economy and creativity.” In this way we can also understand the documentation of litefeet as intervening politically in spatial practice not only in its co-optation of street and subway space, where the bodies of those usually relegated to the margins assert themselves as virtuosic owners of space, but in its use of digital space as a means with which to make visible the lives and practices of the city’s margins to a global audience. Again, this use of commercial, digital space is not without its tensions; if there is revolution in working-class black men claiming ownership of their intellectual and creative contributions to urban dance, there is also a deeply unradical aspect to the choice of corporate social media as the platform through which to leverage this revolution. It is important, then, to understand that informal street performance forms often enact their politics inadvertently and in

compromised ways. The necessity for survival, coupled with the lack of access to alternatives, means those using the street and other public space as the site for action must often make use of what is familiar, accessible, and freely available to them. The compromised nature of this politics illustrates McKenzie's understanding of "revolution" as a process of turning rather than an immediate radical shift in practices or perspective. Although we can't know where this turning will end, practitioners of informal practices assert themselves as visible subjects in the process of change, as actors with the ability to participate in revolution, if unable to control it.

p. 144 **Grime**

Grime is the term used to describe a distinctive, and distinctively English (White 2018), form of urban music. Developed in East London, particularly in the boroughs of Tower Hamlets and Newham, grime draws on a range of music influences, including dancehall (which also influenced early hip-hop music), UK garage, jungle, and dub reggae (Collins and Rose 2016), and can also be understood as a UK development of hip-hop —despite recent writing about grime (particularly Dan Hancox's [2018] *Inner-City Pressure*) downplaying the link with hip-hop culture. Examining grime as a form, the link with hip-hop is apparent in numerous ways: the primary means of vocal expression used in hip-hop (rapping over an instrumental beat) also distinguishes grime, and the semiotics of hip-hop music are utilized by grime musicians, who channel the "hood" style that has its roots in US hip-hop: wearing branded sportswear, especially trainers (or sneakers, in US parlance), baseball caps, and gold jewelry. So too grime musicians affiliate themselves with highly specific neighborhoods in the same way that hip-hop artists do, with music videos often filmed, or appearing to be filmed, in and around the homes of grime artists (see, e.g., Skepta's *Shut Down Video*, and my commentary of it in Beswick 2019, 155). Like hip-hop the stories told through grime music are highly specific and often appear "ethnographic" (Barron 2013) in their narration of urban life. Lambros Fatsis (2018, 6) argues that this ethnography is politically inflected, allowing grime rappers to act as "public intellectuals" who "lay bare the violence of what is represented by their lyrics (disturbing images of social exclusion), while also hinting at the social and political violence done to those [often working-class people of color] who are represented in their lyrics."

While some of these links with hip-hop may seem superficial, they are important in understanding the way that hip-hop is leveraged as a global political movement. Through fashion and attitude and by drawing on hip-hop techniques, UK grime artists affiliate themselves with hip-hop culture and position themselves, in their specific local and national contexts, within a global movement. In this way those in London show solidarity with others living under capitalist systems that oppress them because of their class and race. As I argue elsewhere, "[Grime's] origins in grass-roots hip-hop culture position it as a very obvious ... articulation of the global hood, where modes of resistance and survival developed in the marginalized inner cities of North America are appropriated and articulated globally" (Beswick 2019, 155). The solidarity that runs through hip-hop and forms emerging from it is also political, and can also be seen in a variety of practices. Fatsis (2018) points to the political potential of the cipher, the sharing-circle in which practitioners of hip-hop across forms (including both grime and litefeet) come together to improvise, innovate, share, and listen. In the cipher, "space, place and culture ... intertwine to form a public place of assembly where citizenship is exercised in an actively-involved, publicly-situated and 'lived' manner, not unlike the Pnyx in Ancient Athens or Speakers' Corner in London" (8). Joy White (2018, 227) draws attention to the politics of the crew (seen in both grime and litefeet) as a means of seizing and sharing power, a model that operates outside of the capitalist drive for individual success: "Crew membership allows for a creative expression and performance firmly rooted in the black experience. Predominately male, a crew is a space that offers a number of opportunities to learn your craft as a musician as well as develop tacit knowledge about the scene and how it operates." In *Inner-City Pressure* Hancox (2018) describes how the artist Wiley, one of grime's leading figures, repeatedly claims that his greatest achievement is the

success of other artists he has mentored. An anathema to interviewers, this attitude reveals again the solidarity that underpins grime. Despite these roots in care, solidarity, and sharing, grime is nonetheless often characterized as being bound up with crime, particularly violence and drug taking. This belief, while perhaps rooted in the few high-profile crimes carried out by grime artists in the early days of the genre's emergence (Fatsis 2018; Hancox 2018; White 2018), nonetheless draws on the kinds of reductive understandings of people marginalized by virtue of their class and race that I described earlier. Drawing on the work of Frantz Fanon, Fatsis (2018, 13) describes the criminalization of grime music as a "form of cultural racism [that] has its roots in the belief that 'Black' cultural values should be suspected of promoting violent or criminal lifestyles and should therefore be responded to by tactics that have been described as 'policing against black people.'"

Like hip-hop, grime emerges from the margins of the inner city (in East and South London), as those people and places overlooked by mainstream culture become sites of creative revolution. In this way grime, like litefeet, can be understood as a spatial practice. If litefeet articulates its politics in the streets, subways, and digital sphere, we might understand the spatial politics of grime by thinking about its relationship with housing. Hancox (2018) describes how grime emerged from the council estates of East London, where many of the pioneers lived, made music, and in the early days of the genre broadcast music from illegal pirate radio stations that transmitted across the city. Grime is intimately intertwined with the culture of inner-city social housing, or council housing, itself a stigmatized space, bound up with notions of "street life," that becomes an ideological container for the stigmas related to class and race (Beswick 2019, 12). The term *grime*, while of contested origin, is widely considered to describe the way the form both embodies the grimy, gritty quality of the estate and narrates and often celebrates in its lyrics the pressure of the marginalized inner city and its residents. Even the frenetic pace of the music (MCs rap at 140 bpm, significantly faster than most hip-hop tracks, which range from about 60 to 100 bpm), seems to comment on the relentless pace of city life, and practitioners' will to survive in the face of it.

A searing example of grime's willingness to speak truth to power occurred at the 2018 Brit Awards, when the artist Stormzy used his performance to ask the government why the survivors of a horrific fire in Grenfell Tower, a high-rise tower block on the Lancaster West council estate in West London, had not been rehoused in the months since the tragedy. Turning accusations usually leveled at grime artists back on the government, he called the prime minister "criminal" and accused MPs of drug taking ("MPs sniff coke / we just smoke a bit of cannabis"). This performance drew attention not only to the gross negligence of those responsible for housing vulnerable people but also to the decadence and excess of the powerful, whose crimes go unnoticed and unpunished, while the harmless behavior (making music, dancing) of those at the margins is criminalized. This critique also drew on the space of the council estate, not only because Stormzy evoked Grenfell Tower but because, in his performance, he stood in front of a large three-tiered structure that resembled an estate (Beswick 2019) and which was populated by rows of backing performers dressed in tracksuits and balaclavas, a nod to the kind of clothing often symbolically associated with "black gangs" and "council estate crime" (see Bell 2013). Stormzy has also used social media platforms to maintain criticism of the government's response to Grenfell. When, in November 2019, following the release of the first report from the public inquiry into the tragedy, the Conservative MP Jacob Reese Mogg suggested he would have escaped the fire by ignoring the advice of firefighters to stay inside the building, Stormzy launched an attack on this position, posted on Twitter and Facebook. His posts blasted politicians as "evil" and "wicked," arguing that the fire was the fault of the British government: "their fault, and their fault alone".

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Similarly, grime was used in the hip-hop theater performance *High Rise eState of Mind* (Beats & Elements, Battersea Arts Centre, 2019) as a means to contest the injustices of London's housing crisis, where the Grenfell Tower tragedy has come to epitomize the wider structural violence toward the working classes, who are frequently expected to dwell in substandard accommodation and for whom a home in the city,

where prices are driven to unaffordable levels by wealthy investors, becomes an impossibility. *High Rise eState of Mind* is an adaptation of J. G. Ballard's dystopian novel *High Rise*. In the play characters compete to ascend to the top floor of the City Heights flats, where they will be granted luxury apartments and win the spoils offered to capitalism's "winners." In this performance, which weaves hip-hop, grime, and spoken word, the grime number "So Sick" is a critique of the ways capitalism compels a toxic drive to succeed that is ultimately a sickness for those who engage with its logic. The phrase *so sick* is both a diagnosis for Luke, a character struggling to succeed on the lower floors of City Heights, and a comment on the world outside the reality of the play, where those at the margins are made so sick by a toxic housing system driven by capitalist excesses.

Conclusion

The cultural movements I outline are rooted in street practice in one way or another: they are forms that have developed and flourished at the margins of the cities where capital rules, where those black, Hispanic, working-class bodies are left out. This makes tracing the audiences for these kinds of work difficult. My own engagement with informal street performance forms has happened, in the first instance, as a byproduct of my practice of the city as a tourist and resident (and later in more structured ways, as I undertook research trips, shadowed crews, interviewed practitioners, and observed rehearsals as part of a research project exploring informal performances in city spaces). Views, likes, and comments on the social media profiles of litefeet dancers and grime artists alike attest to the wide appeal of these artists and of hip-hop forms in general, and similarly make it difficult to identify a demographic audience. Bakari Kitwana (2005) has argued that hip-hop's mainstream appeal suggests how those from both sides of the racial and economic divide feel silenced and see hip-hop culture, with its proximity to the public sphere of the street, as a means of finding a political voice. While, as a scholar with secure employment and publication platform, I cannot claim to exist at a silenced margin, my engagement with hip-hop practices is driven by a sense of affiliation with, as opposed to difference from, the practitioners I have worked with. Certainly my experiences of litefeet and hip-hop culture, on the street, online, and via commercial means such as purchasing music and attending gigs, has been a source of joy and relief. In times that often feel unbearable, to see others move in joy or to hear public critiques of the systems through which you too are made to feel powerless become a means of finding meaning in life and reasons to live.

p. 147 It should be clear from my accounts that grime and litefeet have not wrought total change in the overarching power structures that shape class and race inequality in our society: reckless endangerment remains the charge for subway dance at the time of writing, and although Stormzy's engagement with Grenfell did appear to put pressure on the government to act (Vonberg 2018), Grenfell Tower survivors were not rehoused more quickly as a result of his performance. London's housing market remains overinflated, and those who cannot afford to live in London are still forced to move elsewhere or dwell in unsafe and substandard accommodation. Nonetheless I maintain that the forms I've examined in this chapter push against the dominant order, manifesting their politics by participating in the process of unknowable change, drawing attention to the unfairness of city life under capitalism and revealing, often playfully and with great skill, the injustices of the ways things are and modeling how they might be different. In this way, although informal street practices may not succeed in upending the dominant order, they can help us find bearable ways to survive it.

Notes

1. A permanent sculpture, installed in the station as part of *Life Underground* (2011), an artwork by the sculptor Tom Otterness. It was commissioned by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's Art for Transit program (now known as MTA Arts & Design), a collection that includes more than three hundred public artworks made for subway and commuter rail stations.
2. B-boy is the breakdancing style developed as part of the hip-hop movement in the 1970s and 1980s; the b-boy stance is a starting move where the dancer stands with head back, as if resting on a wall, and arms crossed over the chest.
3. Coincidentally *Showtime* (2004) is the title of the second studio album by one of grime's most prominent pioneers, Dizzee Rascal.
4. So too they often exclude women, a discussion I don't have room for in this chapter. The issue of sexism is explored by Tricia Rose in her book *The Hip Hop Wars* (2008) for anyone wanting to begin thinking about this issue.

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