



Katie Beswick and Javon Johnson: Sounds of the City

Duška Radosavljević: Hello, welcome to the Salon!

Our guests today are Katie Beswick and Javon Johnson.

Katie Beswick is a Senior Lecturer in Drama at the University of Exeter, United Kingdom. Her research explores the relationship between class, culture and city spaces and more specifically, council estates and their representation in the arts. She is the author of the 2019 monograph *Social Housing in Performance: The English Council Estate on and off Stage* and is currently working on two new book projects – a monograph on sex, class and desire and a volume on hip-hop theatre to be co-authored with Conrad Murray, of the Beatbox Academy at Battersea Arts Centre. Katie is also an award-winning blogger and arts journalist.

Javon Johnson is an Assistant Professor and Director of African American & African Diaspora studies at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. His interest include performance, blackness, African American literature, black pop culture, slam and spoken word, black feminist theory, black queer theory, masculinity studies, black sexualities, and ethnography. He is the author of the 2017 monograph *Killing Poetry: Blackness and the Making of Slam and Spoken Word Communities* and a co-editor of the 2018 volume about violence in Chicago *The End of Chiraq: A Literary Mixtape*. Javon is also a renowned spoken word poet and a three-time national poetry slam champion of the USA.

In this conversation, Katie and Javon focus on auralities of place, specifically thinking about city sounds and how they link to the wider cultural and social politics of city spaces. This feeds into both of their interest in hip-hop as well as into their wider concerns about issues of race, class, inequality and space and place. Katie and Javon were matched together for this conversation by the Aural/Oral Dramaturgies project.

This conversation took place between Exeter and Las Vegas and was recorded on Zoom on 24th June 2020.

Katie Beswick: So, yeah, last time we spoke, we decided we were going to have a bit of a chat about sound in the city. I guess where that took me to, in like my thinking and my research just looking back through – through some of the thinking I've been doing on other projects, was back to kind of my teenage years. I don't know, I feel like often your like sound influences are really kind of solidified in that formative period. And I grew up in South London, and it was quite an exciting time for sound culture and music culture in the city. And I don't know what you've been thinking about during that?

Javon Johnson: What sparked my interest is up, you know, we talked about it. I'm an LA boy through and through. So much about me is Los Angeles, and I think about the ways cities imprint themselves onto people, and the ways in which people then in turn imprint themselves onto cities. I think about LA as a very, very ridiculously misunderstood city. And a city that most people don't care to understand for, you know, reasons around vanity and fakeness. You know, all of the sort of typical things that are attached to a city – as if all cities aren't social constructions; as if all cities were just somehow buildings magically erected like trees and other cities, but I think about that. And I'm thinking about not only my own youth, but I'm also thinking about this current moment as it pertains to LA. I'm thinking uniquely about Kendrick Lamar. I'm thinking uniquely about the protests that have happened in LA in relationship to Kendrick Lamar if we're thinking sounds, and how he creates what Shana Redmond might call an 'anthem'. UCLA Black Studies Professor Shana Redmond, who's really, really dope, and she might – she might label some of his



music 'anthem'. And I'm thinking about that, but I was also listening to *Boy in da Corner* that you sent me – who – the album ages well for me – like, the album is now in my rotation. It sounds like-

KB: Thank you for listening to that! That's Dizzee Rascal's album *Boy in da Corner* that was the sort of core albums that I sent over.

JJ: Right. Yeah! And so, it aged really well for me, because, like, one of the things that fascinates me is how do albums age well? And, like, what happens when they don't – like, what is it about an album that doesn't age well, and what is it about an album that does age well, right? And I don't know if I have an answer to that, but for me, at least in my initial listenings – and I want to give it a few more listens – it aged well for me in the listen that I gave it. I was listening to a little bit of it this morning too, I was like: 'This is – this holds up! I like that. Right?'. And we're talking about 16 years ago, right? And I was also interested in talking to you in relationship to that album about what's happening in London at that time that produces such a music that later gets really sort of blown up. And now is traveling even across seas, partially thanks to Drake, right? As it travels to the US, right? I think partially thanks to Drake, correct me if I'm wrong there, but – not to say that he created the music. But he, in many ways, showed the US the music.

KB: Right. Yeah.

JJ: Yeah, so I'm thinking about all of that stuff. And I'm very interested in grime's construction. I'm very interested in the social, and political, and historical, economical happenings, spatial happenings in the UK that produces the music, but also, simultaneously what the music produces.

KB: Yeah. That's a really good point. I've got – actually, we talked about bringing sound cues. I'd quite like to play a track. It's not a Dizzee Rascal track, but it sort of prefigures Dizzee Rascal, and it might be like a good way into just thinking about the way that the sort of sound starts to narrate the city that I grew up in at the time. So, this is called 'Bound 4 Da Reload', and it's by Oxide & Neutrino, and it's a UK garage song. So, I'm just going to play that now.

[00:06:53 to 00:07:12] Excerpt from 'Bound 4 Da Reload' by Oxide & Neutrino¹

That kind of – has some of the aspects in it that I wanted to talk about. So, that is a UK garage track. So, in this sort of late 1990s UK garage emerged as the sort of predominant culture, I suppose, the club culture, in which kind of London kids were growing up in – London kids from all sorts of backgrounds. And it was a really mixed-race culture, it kind of fused hip-hop; there was always MCs on the tracks, but R&beats – there would often be female R&B singers as well. And a lot of the culture was to do with the style. So, the music was always – it was kind of club beats, but the style was very slick, like, you got really dressed up to go to the club, a lot of makeup. The men, like, wore designer clothes. I was reading an article about just the style of it earlier. And it was sort of influenced by that late 1990s US rap scene, which was a lot about glamour and champagne, and so, the idea would be you'd like get dressed up, and go in a limo to the club. I mean, obviously, most of us were just getting a bus in our high heels and walking home – walking home with our shoes off over the pavement. But what I really like about that particular track is the way that it sort of incorporates a lot of, a lot of the cultural moment of the late 1990s. So, it's sample – it samples that siren noise, and then, the under-beat samples *Casualty*, which is a UK soap opera set in a hospital. So, everyone with their family would have been watching that on a Saturday night. So, it was kind of just a really familiar sound. And it samples that: 'Ah! Shit! I've been shot!' – it's from *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, the film by Guy Ritchie, which was set in London.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hPgBITf6Pp4>



JJ: Right, right.

KB: So, there's this kind of – on the one hand, it's like glamorized scene that comes out of the political moment of New Labour. So, New Labour get elected in 1997, and all of a sudden, you've got a world in which there's supposed to be no class anymore; multiculturalism is celebrated; there's supposed to be like no sort of racial divide. You're sort of in this post moment of: 'we're looking towards the future and everything's going to be different'. Obviously, that doesn't happen. But the kind of music and the club scene is sort of reflecting that. At the same time, while UK garage is happening – so, in the late '90s London's quite gross like, it's not like London is now. Like, it's still quite grimy. The urban redevelopment is something that New Labour really introduced as a priority from the late '90s, where, you know, at least in the part of London that I lived, you start to see like real changes to the city. And I guess that what you have with garage music is that garage music ends up becoming grime.

JJ: Right, right.

KB: So, Oxide & Neutrino, they – that's also why I chose them, because they – one of the guys is white, I think the other one is mixed-race. So, they kind of also – for me, they kind of reflect this city that I grew up in, which is the city where, you know, we don't have like housing segregation or anything like that. So, you grew up in a very multicultural environment. Everything's very mixed. It's – the class is mixed, race is mixed; you're all in school together, living together in estates and streets, side by side. And it feels, at that time – I'm growing up and I'm remembering it – maybe like nostalgically as a teenager – as this really exciting, vibrant moment. Then, you have the So Solid Crew, who – their music is again a little bit more grimy, and who kind of changed the narrative maybe around UK garage music. I think that – their song '21 seconds' is 2001 and then, obviously, in 2003, Dizzee Rascal releases – I think it's 2003, right? – *Boy in da Corner*.

JJ: '04 – I had it – it's '04, when I looked it up. Yeah.

KB: And at that point, what you've got is the sort of – New Labour is coming towards the sort of second half of its – and some of that glamour is wearing off, and you have real urban redevelopment of the city, which is obviously leading to gentrification and grime suddenly starts to shed this light on gentrification. Dan Hancox has written a book called *Inner City Pressure*, which sort of really like maps that growth of grime, and the change in grime, from this really what garage was – to me, there wasn't a real political sound to it. Often it was remixes of '70s songs, it was remixes of like popular theme tunes and stuff like that. Sometimes the MC, you know, would have politics, but also because it was quite fast, and often freestyle, it will just be like clever lyrics.

JJ: So, the song you played reminds me a lot of like house music, right? Yeah, I imagine you're familiar, right? What house music is born out of – right – this sort of underground club scene in Chicago, which later gets spread out to places like Detroit, DC and New York, right? I believe it's Chicago. And how it was – the black queer youth, right, who created that. And it's this up-tempo, this electronic music, this space, right, of belonging, of – I hesitate to use the word 'safety', but it's the easiest word to grab – of safety, safe space, of like belonging, of familial, and familiar – right – of home, of house, right. And, and I'm thinking about that in relation to, when you said this sort of advanced, sort of multicultural society that didn't really happen. So, I guess my question is: what do we mean by it didn't happen, because we could – I think, I think – make an argument that the music is the happening; that the space was the happening, however momentary the sort of – again, for lack of a better word – utopic moments, right. Why it didn't transition to a material, sort of revolutionary change of the entire city, of the entire nation-state? It does provide glimpses of possibility of different human interactions, of different ways to relate, and see, and engage one another, even if it's in that space and in that time. And a part of me wonders if these kinds of things demand to be this



temporal and this spatial, right? You know, and I just want to – but temporal and spatial, not to say that we can't, but it gives us a glimpse, a model by which we could imagine different futures, and different ways of being in the world. And I think about that in relationship to the art – that then art becomes the thing that leads us – right – that gives us a model by which to imagine, and think, and work towards. And it gives us an option. I'm rambling here, because I'm searching for something. So, I apologise. Like, instead of saying it didn't happen, I think about those moments of happenings. Have you watched the show *Pose*?

KB: No, although my brother was watching it when I was staying with my family during lockdown.

JJ: Or even, there's a show called *The Get Down* on Netflix about the rise of hip-hop.

KB: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

JJ: At the at the end of season one – and Baz Luhrmann I believe directs this – it's this gorgeous, gorgeous, like queer, colourful disco scene. And for me, that moment is a creative imagining of what our worlds can be like if we always live this emotionally full. If we always lived this aesthetically hungry. If we always were this connected to one another, this entanglement with one another. And so, for me, I think about music like this and how it's sort of seemingly wrapped up in these sort of electronic sounds as if it's not only imagining the future, but also, trying to grab it, and telling us that we can't hold on to this, if that makes sense?

KB: Yeah, it does make sense, and as you're saying that I'm thinking of a few things. One is, I'm thinking about a documentary film that you probably wouldn't have seen, because it wasn't cinema-released, it was made by a filmmaker called Andrea Zimmerman, and the company Fugitive Images' and it's called *Estate, a Reverie*, and it's about a housing estate in London, that is undergoing redevelopment. And these redevelopments of social housing estates in London take years and years. And so, the tenants learn they're going to be moved out, and the building is going to be torn down; and they have seven years in which they live in that precarity. And this filmmaker, Andrea Zimmerman, lives on the estate, she's a resident, and she starts to record it; and what emerges is that this like moment of change – is this moment in which – and this is an inner city London estate, so, again you have people from all different nationalities, all different races, religions living side by side in this kind of moment of extreme stress, that comes across. But also, what comes across is this kind of utopian moment in which they really come together and are with one another in a way that can't be permanent because the estate comes down, and they dispersed. But which the film is really, really trying to hold onto. And there's a lot of music in that film. I mean, it's not the sort of music that I kind of generally tend to listen to. It's folk music more than anything, but there's these moments, and I write about this a little bit in a piece that I've written, where I talked about like bell hooks' idea of 'yearning', and this music really draws out that like, that yearning for this moment to just kind of remain, and for being able to be.

JJ: Right. Can you say more about the coming together for me?

KB: They support one another. So, quite a lot of scenes show the ways that residents provide support and care for one another. So, for example, there are residents who are chronically or terminally ill living on the estate; residents who are disabled, and you see the way that other residents provide support for them. And the way that the state doesn't. So, something like that.

JJ: Yeah, so I think about this too, right, because I talk about this in various capacities. One of my people that I cite a lot, Dwight Conquergood, he writes about a tenement in Chicago, called 'The Big Red', and he talks about living in Big Red, he is a Northwestern professor at the time before his passing, and he moves in to the Big Red in what was predominantly, I believe, a brown and black community, if I remember – it's been more than a decade since I've read this piece, so, bear



with me here. One of the things he talks about is this kind of coming together, and what it opens up, again, is for us to understand that there are different ways of living, right. So, he talks about like how when the heat gets cut off, what happens. He talks about like what we call 'poor' or 'doubling up' is a ways for family to survive, and doubling up being multiple families who live in an apartment at the same time as a way of survival, right, because then, it's one less rent bill to pay, right. He talks about like people taking care of the outside square on their own when the slumlords did not, right, and things of this nature, and the way people fed each other. And I think about how my own upbringing, right. So, I grew up in South-Central Los Angeles in the '80s and '90s, right. And so, I witnessed, you know, the height of the gang epidemic, height of the crack epidemic in Los Angeles, and so – you know, my grandmother, like, we used to trade veggies, right? Like, we used to trade veggies and fruits with the neighbours. Like, somebody had avocados, somebody had a fruit tree in their backyard. So, my grandmother grew some collard greens, and we would literally take – harvest ours, take them around, and trade, and come back with a whole bag of stuff. And I always talk about like what we call 'environmentally-friendly' now, was called 'poor' then, right. How these survival mechanisms sort of force a sharing, and that sharing creates a new world, a new way of being. That it's not this sort of Western notion of individualistic 'I grab everything for myself', but it's also 'how can I look out for you, because I understand the pressures of the state and how it bears on all of us even if it's not bearing on me uniquely at this moment', right. And I love that sense of sharedness and then, also, what is created out of that, because we could argue in many ways this sense of sharedness is what birthed hip-hop in its early iteration, right. So, we're talking the US is going through an economic decline; we're talking about people are losing jobs; social welfare is being stripped so, not only do you have no jobs, you have nowhere to turn to government to say: 'I need help'. They are closing down public spaces. So, not only do you not have jobs; not only can you not ask the government for some supplemental help; you have nowhere to go and say: 'I hate this'. You have nowhere to voice your – this is anger – like this. This is anger-inducing. And so, you know, hip-hop gets born out of these conditions, right. This, on some level, a celebration and imagining of what the world would be like if it wasn't always this terrible. On some level, it was about throwing parties, so that you can make rent. On some levels, it was about being able to voice your frustrations with the system, right; all while a group of black and brown folks were mastering equipment that they never went to class to learn how to use, right. And so, all of this is happening simultaneously – born out of these – and I get frustrated with that argument on some level, because it tells us that these things are born out of poverty, born out of strife, and I just imagine a world where we can create art not out of poverty, not out of destitution, right, but out of – out of desire, out of yearning.

KB: Yeah. And that yearning to be with other people. And I don't think that that has to come out of poverty, necessarily, but I think that what – what those conditions can do – and again, I'm thinking back now to London, to the context that I grew up in, and that I've been thinking about for the past few weeks. And what one of the big events of the late 20th century in the UK was the murder of a black teenager called Stephen Lawrence that happened a few miles from where I live, and was a huge shadow over the whole country, and the way that the state and the law reformed itself towards racial justice and in some ways away from racial justice. Maybe I'll say a bit more about that in a minute. But, as a community growing up in that moment, there was also a sense of how do we come together around what is a like fascist fringe, certainly, in those areas, and resist this. And a lot of that happened at grassroots level. So, a lot of that was about community festivals. Every single year, there was a community festival held on a common – common land, called 'The Anti-Racist Festival'. And I'm really interested, having not heard the words 'anti-racism' for years, because they seem to fall out of fashion somewhere along the line, be replaced by other words. That these words-

JJ: -like 'diversity' and 'inclusion', ubiquitous words that come to mean nothing.

KB: Yeah, but this term is coming back around now, and the way that that was a real like grassroots resistance to, you know, what had happened on the street. And again, it included,



you know, musical cultures and celebrations in that festival, food – but it was a way of bringing people together, you know, united against what was obviously perceived as injustice. I guess one of the things I'm struggling with, at this moment, not being part of the community of the town that I live in – the town that I live in also being, you know, very white, nothing like the place that I grew up in, is how do you – how do you have that sense, which I feel was the anti-racist movement that is enabled by the city space, because you are side by side with your fellow citizens. And one of the problems I think we have in the regional cities in the UK, is we're not side by side always with our fellow citizens, or as fellow citizens are so much in the minority that anti-racism becomes much more difficult to sort of envision as a being together. And it has to be something else, and what is it? And I don't know if I'm right on that tangent here, but-

JJ: No, no, no, no, no, this is good, because this is actually where my thinking has been lately. Just to sort of – to share some personal to sort of explain, and – like, you're like dead on in my own thinking in the sense of, like, I grew up, again, in South-Central Los Angeles and, you know, I also witnessed the 1992 uprising/riots. That started a couple miles from my house, the epicentre of that moment of which Tupac says – I love – I think he said: *'I love Cali like I love women/ 'cause every nigga in LA got a little bit of thug in him/ we might fight amongst each other, but I promise you this/ we'll burn this bitch down, get us pissed.'* Right? And there's a sense of, you know, black, brown, Los Angeles that says: 'we will burn this entire city to the ground if we're upset enough', right, which I think changes the relationship with a nation-state and its people. Right? They have to think about a number of things. And I think it creates different types of police tactics. This isn't to say that LA isn't repressive, it ridiculously is, but it is to say that, you know, I miss Los Angeles, I think, is essentially what I'm – what I'm getting at. And I miss specifically South-Central Los Angeles, right, and I'm going to come back to this point, but I miss the sound; I miss the smells; I miss the people; I miss the filth of South-Central Los Angeles, right. I took my partner back there, and I was like the city is so gorgeous to me; this neighbourhood is gorgeous to me. Not the parts of South-Central that 'looks different' and is gorgeous, but South-Central is gorgeous in all of its ugly, and all of its beauty, all of its brilliance, all of its pain – it's such a gorgeous space to me. Even the graffiti on the wall. And I think about the pushback of these aesthetics as a kind of normalising project that says: 'I can't imagine this being pleasing, because I can't see it'. The similar ways in which certain musics can't be pleasing, because I can't hear it, right. Regardless of its popularity, I – whoever the I am – I is usually sort of white male, right. And I think, you know, and I miss it. And I say all of that to say right now, my wife and I live in a, by and large, white affluent neighbourhood in Las Vegas. We're both frustrated, but pleased about that, right. Frustrated in the sense that I don't feel like I have a pulse of this movement living in my body the way I did in the '90s, in the early 2000s, when I was in Los Angeles, and just out there with people talking about overthrowing the system. And in this deed – we were idealistic. We were, you know, we thought we were going to overthrow and change the world. And here, I'm thinking about slam poetry cultures, right, and I miss it, because here we don't have that. And I think Vegas also as a city, it's hard to overthrow, because where you would protest are in front of Casinos by large, which are banks, which means they have the some of the best facial recognition software in the world. So, you protest, they know exactly who you are, and know exactly where to come. And then, on top of that, it's god awful hot here, right. So, it makes protesting also very difficult, especially when City Council says that you can't have water containers out, you know, ice chest out there. So, if you want to protest, you can very, really, seriously risk your life. I say all of that to say we're also positive, because she's close to being due, and if there was ever a moment to have peace for her, it is here in now. Right? And so, it's this weird thing that, you know, I feel disconnected, and the way I get connected – and this is bringing me all to this point – is often through sound, and through music, right. And I think of, you know, one of the things that – I'm certain that you've heard of it, Kendrick Lamar's 'Alright'?

[00:27:20 to 00:27:40] Excerpt from 'Alright' by Kendrick Lamar²

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-48u_uWMHY



JJ: This sort of constant refrain of: ‘we gon’ be alright’, right, it stares dead in the face of global anti-blackness in a moment when police are refusing to stop killing people, even when we’re asking: ‘Hey, could you stop killing me?’. I think there was something like a 120 US police murders in – since the protests kicked off, I’m – if I’m remembering that number correctly, don’t quote me there. And how you still look in the face of that aesthetically to say: ‘we’re gon’ be alright’? That it doesn’t necessarily create spiritual change, but it envisions it; it imagines it; it puts it out there. And I think about the moments that that song has come on before. One of my most vivid moments, I was at a conference, and we had an afterparty, and the DJ played that. And it was a list of who’s who in terms of academics – black performance studies academics. And we all were just in there, yelling: ‘we gon’ be alright’; and we hugged, and some of us cried. And it’s in these moments that I just keep returning to going: ‘what if – what if we could live like this?’. Right? And for me, that that’s what the sound does, right. It connects us, even when we’re not connected. It allows us to reach across, to hold, and hold one another’s feelings. I say that to say, you know, I definitely understand what it means to live away from, and wanting to be closer to; to feel the beat, because I do think cities do a thing, right – to the art. As well as this art does things to cities. Here, I’m also thinking about Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s book, *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams*. I don’t know if you’re familiar with this. So, Thiong’o essentially writes that both the nation-state and artists have dreams for what they want the nation-state to be. The state enforces those dreams with gunpoints; artists imagine those dreams with penpoints. One could make an argument than that, you know, artists stand outside. They’re constantly imagining, but, you know, what I’ve written about in my own book – the beyond – what else is next, where states desire to contain and hold in? And so, artists’ imagination stands outside of the state and challenge to – sometimes, they work in tandem with, obviously, of course. But constantly asking what else is next. Artists are constantly creating something that wasn’t here before. And in so doing, artists become inherently threaten – they inherently threaten the control of the nation-state. And I’ve argued elsewhere this is why I think Plato said, you know, in his perfect *Republic*, you know: ‘we got to kill off the poets!’. Because they force you to think about things that the philosopher kings wouldn’t want you to otherwise think about. But yeah.

KB: Yeah, that’s really interesting. I guess I’m just thinking about that idea in relation to cities. And in relation to London, especially, and what this, the state has done in London. And I guess it’s not the state, it’s corporate entities acting through the state, but it’s made any sense of containment, stasis, permanence impossible, because of the tearing down, and the gentrification of places. So, people don’t have that feeling like they belong anywhere; and like they can stay anywhere; and create a culture; and create a permanent thing. And nor is the state offering anything, really, in its place, apart from ‘you are not welcome here’. You know, it – to their housing estates, and communities that are destroyed through gentrification. You know, if people can’t afford a house, they are told to move outside of London. You can be housed in a bed and breakfast in a different city, where you don’t know anybody. And so, people are being offered absolutely nothing, and how do – I guess, I’m trying to think how do artists that I know about – how have they responded to that threat. And there’s a really interesting piece of hip-hop theatre. So, I collaborate with an artist called Conrad Murray, who I think has been on this podcast before, and he has a company called Beats & Elements, and their last show was called *High Rise Estate of Mind*, and it was thinking about what is the sort of endgame of this – of this gentrification movement, and how do people survive within that system. And there’s this point, where the sort of dramaturgy of the play completely breaks down, and the whole place – piece just becomes music, and it’s not – and that’s all that they can kind of offer, is this like sound in response to kind of possible futures. And it’s pretty bleak where the play ends up, because the space isn’t offering anything, but the music is offering something. And I think that that’s, you know, that’s really part of the sort of dramaturgy of that piece. And when we watched it – I was in rehearsals, sort of documenting it, and I watched it with a producer, who hadn’t grown up in London – was from quite a middle-class background, and hadn’t necessarily experienced this breaking down of the city. And she kind of was really struggling to understand, you know, what’s happening in the play at this point. And I was like: ‘No no, the play has had to explode at



this point, because it can't go anywhere'. And it does eventually reform, but all that – that there can exist is sound. So, I guess I'm sort of agreeing with you in the sense that art can offer something in those moments, where the future is impossible. But I don't know if what it offers is a sense always of a utopian future, because I think sometimes-

JJ: Oh, no, certainly.

KB: -ambitions are such that we can't, you know, we can't come together, and we can't do anything, other than just be in the moment, in the noise of it. And that's grime as well, right, is it's just loud, and that sound – and it's noisy, and it's not necessarily offering this utopian future – it's just offering a – in the moment.

JJ: But, but that's the interesting thing to me. Right. And certainly, I'm ridiculously new to grime, and I want to – I want to mark that, right. I want to name it. I'm by no means a grime expert. But when I hear it, I obviously hear sounds of dancehall; I obviously hear hip-hop; I obviously hear electronic music – all merged together, on top of like urbanity. Or maybe urbanity is the thing that ties it all together, or maybe urbanity is on top of – I don't know yet, but it's there, right, the sounds of the street, right? Like, the sirens, this – the screeching noises. And I'm wrestling with this idea of – and I guess not even – I guess the best way for me to think about it is the way in which sound calls us to some place. I hear certain music and I'm immediately called to a place. I hear certain sounds and I'm immediately called to a place, right, like SWV, right, a black R&B group in the US. Their songs were popular at a time I was pre-teen to teen. My first goings to backyard house parties; my first dance with a girl was to an SWV song. And I will never, ever forget – so, it takes me back to that no matter what, right. It comes on, I think of it. And I think I write about it in a book of poems that's coming up soon – to Tasha who I used to be in love with when I was a pre-teen, who had a ponytail on one side of the head, who pulled me in to dance with her for the first time, and I was a nervous wreck, right. And it takes me back to that sort of moment, which then takes me back to South-Central, which then takes me back to backyard parties, which then takes me back to a different way of living that wasn't always tightly tied to the ways in which I live now. Because in South-Central, as violent as it was in moments, there was a beautiful, shared sense of living that we all had. Everybody knew everyone, for the most part, in the neighbourhood in which you live. Our parents all went to school with each other. I did not learn that some of those people were not my actual, biological family until like 10-11 years old. Like, that's my auntie. And there's like, oh, but that's not my biological auntie, but it's still my auntie. And those are my cousins. And it's this sort of familial that that song takes me back to all through that long way. And I'm thinking about grime in those similar kinds of ways. Right. And that's why I started off by asking you what was happening in that moment that made such a thing possible, because what's happening in the '90s, is, again, for me, around hip-hop. If I take it to hip-hop and out of – in R&B, what's happening to me and for the '90s, is that I'm becoming a teenager and I'm interested in dating. I'm interested in people, you know, in girls in ways I haven't been before. And so, that's always tied to it. And then, my sense of love, outside of platonic love, is being formed in this moment of the 'hood. And so, for me, my love will always be attached to the 'hood, right, in a way that I call my wife 'my boo', right. Like, and it is this just sort of 'hood thing, right. And, you know, I'm thinking about all of that, right. And in hip-hop in the 1990s and that sort of social unrest in Los Angeles that gives us things like 'Fuck Tha Police' by N.W.A, right, which again, in and of itself is an anthem, and now, in the sort of current iteration, which we're asking: 'Can we defund the police and eventually, abolish the police?' – that has been a rooted logic for me for decades now. All birthed originally through hip-hop. Some of my early forms of critical consciousness of the government is through hip-hop. I also wanted to ask you too – and I know I asked these long-winded big questions so, I apologize, but I also want to – wanted to think about, because you were saying it's not so much the state, but companies, right? And when you said that I'm at – I'm at my first stop – but the companies are the state, right? And in here, I'm thinking of Cedric Robinson's work on *Black Marxism*, when he says Marx got it wrong – capitalism isn't a break from feudalism, it's a logical extension of it.



KB: I haven't read that, but I totally agree with the sentiment. Yeah.

JJ: Yeah, yeah. I mean, essentially, it says that that's what Marx got wrong, and Marx never really addressed the race question of capitalism, because racism and capitalism, at least in the sort of current iteration, was born simultaneously as logical extensions of the feudal state. And in order to track what he calls 'the black radical tradition', he tracks – he goes way back to Europe – I keep telling myself I'm going to return to the book, and I have the E-book right now on my desktop that I keep wanting to return to. But yeah, it's – I think it's a phenomenally brilliant work.

KB: I mean, what I will say is I think that there is a slight difference in the US and the UK between the ideas of the state, particularly the ideas of the state maybe I grew up in, because obviously, we have a welfare state that was really, quite socialist in the period that I was growing up. And in London, '65 to '86 was the Greater London Council – was this sort of top-tier administrative council that ran London, and in many ways, it was quite progressive. So, The Inner London Education Authority, ILEA, governed schools at that point, and it had quite a long legacy. So, '86 I would have just been starting school, but that let – you know, so, they were, they were quite progressive. There were lots of people involved in ILEA who were really into anti-racism, really into feminism. And that was kind of embedded through to my – I guess what I'm talking about is my idea of the state, and certainly, the welfare state, as providing for its citizens; as providing health care; as providing – and for me, like, in the UK, and particularly, in London – that has gone away, and particularly in terms of housing. You know, there is now no way that you can really be given safe, affordable housing easily in London.

JJ: Right. I would say – I would say the same thing about the US, except it was socialist for its white citizens, and what constitutes citizenship in the US might be in drastically different, especially then, even though we might be coming closer and closer together now – what constitutes citizenship in both the UK and the US – but then, citizenship was always a thing granted towards whiteness. And it was a thing that even its black citizens never really was fully given access to, right?

KB: Yeah, I imagine that, you know, black and Asian people who live in England might say the same thing. I don't know, but I don't think it's the same as it was in the US – but – and citizenship, yeah, has always been conditioned on, on me in certain – but there was at least a – I guess there was at least a moment that I experienced where people I knew and who I grew up with were safely housed, had enough food to eat, could access health care. And now, those schools that I went to, my brother and sister still work in. And that's just not the case. You know, there are –

JJ: And what years would you say this was?

KB: Yeah, so in the 1980s probably.

JJ: So, yeah. So, the reason why I'm asking this, is because, again, if we go back to grime – and if you said you imagine that black citizens and some Asian citizens – and Asian citizens, might say differently. So, if there's this imagination of a good state for multiple UK citizens, but then, you have this population that goes: 'Nope. Here's some grime music!', I think it might offer, it might – and this is just me sort of riffing without any digging into it whatsoever – it might offer a very key piece of symbolism to say that there were clearly some citizens – 'citizens' being a very precarious term – some citizens who say to themselves that the state isn't as good as everyone thinks it is, right. So, here I'm thinking, again, back to the US; back to, particularly the West Coast hip-hop. I'm thinking about a moment in which, you know, we're watching suburbs flourish, and urban cities being structurally divested from – over decades of time. And suburban cities flourish quite precisely because of what is otherwise really socialist US programmes, in many ways, right, that's how some of that wealth gets built – what this is how some sort of that white wealth



gets built, right. [*Sound of a dog barking*]. As the dog give us yet another sound cue. No, so, it's good. But you have groups of people, who are saying: 'Nope. The state is really terrible for people that look like me – who move like me'.

KB: Yeah, that's really important. I mean, I haven't thought that through necessarily enough, and, you know, I don't think there was ever a moment that things were perfect. And certainly, what you have in the 1980s is this sort of – the start of neo-liberalism and, you know, the complete clamping down of unions, Thatcherism. There are terrible political problems throughout the 1970s that are affecting working class people of all races. So, that – I don't want to make it sound as if I think that there's a point at which the nation-state is functioning perfectly. I think that what isn't necessarily visible – and certainly isn't visible in culture until the 2000s and maybe the 2010s, because I'm not even sure this is visible in early grime music – is the extent to which the corporate entity is acting through the state. And the extent to which 'oh, actually, this isn't our city', and that just becomes so visible in the physical landscape of the city at a certain point, you know, where all of your estates have been torn down and private housing has been built, you know. The area that I grew up, Woolwich, there – there's now a gated community in what was once a munitions factory. And people who grew up – and opposite, it's like the town's been bisected: there's a gated community, where flats are like 650,000 pounds at starting point, and then, there's the other side of the road, where you've still got the shops where people can wire money to their family in other countries and Asian food shops, and so on – they're selling produce really cheaply to a local community. But that's just bisected, and the two sides of the community don't meet. And the, you know, the corporations – BMW, I think have got a showroom there now, Berkeley Homes has invested in homes there – the corporations are just visible, and shameless about the fact that we have done this to the city, and we've been allowed to do this. And it hasn't been for the citizens. And I think that, you know, I guess for me, when I think about it – it's just the visibility with which that's allowed to happen, and no one's even pretending anymore that you're – that you're looking after the people.

JJ: I understand. Yeah, no. No, I definitely understand, because, you know. And I'm just, again, thinking about it in relationship, obviously, to the US, because that's where my knowledge is based – but we're watching home developments at a rapid rate, right. And even our homes now have brands to them, right – like, which is wild. I'm like: 'Oh, yeah, this is a, this is a KB home', 'this is a Toll Brothers home', 'this is a Pardee home'. It's like – this is very odd, are we not going to have this conversation about how odd this is? And it's particularly interesting, again, if I take it back to here. So, Vegas has a – what we call it's a – I live in a 'masterplan community'. Like, there was an idea of what this community would look like well before they built it. And it's fascinating, and odd, and corporate, and – but, again, what makes that corporate possible, is quite literally the laws, right, which the corporations helped shaped, but also, still that the government's allowed for, right, in many ways? And I think to the other piece that I wanted to say, now, that I'm reading a lot more stuff on – that asks me to really think about settler colonialism and theories around settler colonialism – one of the things that I'm asking myself now is – is there such a claim, which is different for the UK? So, this is a very US-specific question, right – is there such a claim to black neighbourhoods in the US? How do we push back against gentrification and claim a neighbourhood that was never first supposed to be ours to begin with, right? I mean, we're sitting on stolen land. So, how then do I claim this is mine, when I'm complaining that this is stolen land also? So, I'm appealing to a state to say this is my neighbourhood, who I don't believe the state should have the power to give me the neighbourhood to begin with. And I don't know how to resolve that conundrum outright just yet, but I'm thinking about it.

KB: Yeah, I mean, it's kind of an impossible question, really, isn't it? And that like, the right to the city, the right to space, and whose it is, and how that's enacted, and how that is – I don't know that you can, you know, I have also been thinking about this. Not in the same way, but in relation to like reparations, given the current moment, and what do you do about the past, given that, you know, you can't change it? And how do you make, yeah – how do you make reparations that



aren't just bringing up a whole another set of problems? And I guess it comes back to that, like, how do we be together? Because we can't, like, erase ourselves from – like, that's not an answer, erasing ourselves from the place that we live in or the neighbourhoods that we've – that have emerged out of history. So, what do we do? And I guess it comes back to that, like, how do we – how do we be together? And how do we solve this? And I suppose one – yeah, I suppose, as I'm saying that, I'm thinking about some of the difficult conversations that we have to have, therefore, and how art might facilitate those. Going back to *Boy in da Corner* – *Boy in da Corner* album, there was a play made – and I saw it this year when we were still allowed in theatres – called *Poet in Da Corner* by – I believe you pronounce the name Debris Stevenson – and it was a response to *Boy in da Corner*, which was an album that she loved growing up. And she's a white woman, and she kind of wrestles that in this play, like: 'What does it mean that I have shaped my kind of – loved so much around kind of black cultural appropriation, and how do I kind of come to terms with that?'. And in the play, black grime MC sort of battles with her over these questions, and what does that mean. And they don't necessarily resolve it. It's like a reworking of the album. So, she works through the different songs, asking these questions.

JJ: I see.

KB: And I guess, for me, that was a really – it was a really productive conversation that that play kind of brings out, because it's like – it's a forum in which that difficult conversation can be had, and we can start thinking about these things which don't have straightforward answers to them. And these ways of, like: 'How can – we ought to – we need to be together. But how can I do that in ways that are ethical, and at what point is culture shared, and at what point is culture appropriated? And where does that begin and end?'

JJ: I wonder, I wonder if the problem is in what we're, what we're thinking appropriation is, right? It seems to me that we far too often think of appropriation as an inherently bad term. That, for me, I think of appropriation as perhaps an umbrella term that includes sharing, but it seems to me that we're making appropriation cultural cannibalism, right? We're making appropriation always cultural theft, right? It far too often is theft and cannibalism, I want to be clear about that. But I also wonder too – again if appropriation isn't the proper term. And I wonder if – again, if appropriation is an umbrella term that includes a number of things, including theft, cannibalism, cultural sharing and more, right? I think, also, to one of the things that – it doesn't seem like, at least in the discussions that I'm having, that we're wrestling properly with the power relationships in appropriation, right. We're just like: 'Appropriation, appropriation, appropriation!'. But if I come back to the US, right, some things happen just by virtue of proximity. Here I'm thinking uniquely of – so, my partner's Latina and she didn't know that black people had their own version of tacos in the US until she – I was like: 'No, we have black tacos. It's a, it's a black version of' – and she was like: 'What?!'. And so, we laugh about that all the time, but that was about proximity, right? That was about black and brown neighbourhoods being kind of intertwined – us borrowing from each other's culture. But certainly, there is no place, at least that I can think of off the top of my head, where black people's tacos outweigh Mexican, Mexican-American tacos. That doesn't happen. So, the power relationships are different there, right. Does that make sense?

KB: Yeah, and it's what you're using – is whether it's cultural sharing, or whatever it becomes-

JJ: -theft, right, like a theft – a flat-out theft. And here, I'm also thinking about Greg Tate's anthology, and I love the introduction of this anthology, called *Everything But the Burden: What White People Are Taking from Black America*, right. And he opens up by talking: 'We have a long history of black music – of white people being 'the best' at black music – of Benny Goodman labelled the king of swing; of Eric Clapton, ostensibly, the best guitarist of the world, possibly – ostensibly of jazz. Watching Elvis Presley be named the King of Rock, despite whatever Little Richard did; despite whatever Fats Waller did for, for swing'. And now, we recently watched a few



people ask if Eminem is the best rap artist of all time, right. So, that – that's, that's a history of musical theft, right? But there has to be some space of sharing too. And that doesn't even take into account the fact that rock was created by black people; that country was also created by black people, that are now, by large, seen as white musics, right.

KB: Yeah, I mean, I guess at what point it becomes theft is a question, isn't it? And I guess, it's the point when you're the only visible face of that thing, or when you're making money from a thing that you don't necessarily have claim to.

JJ: And the power relationships, right? Yeah. But go ahead, I'm sorry.

KB: No, no, yeah, yeah, the power relationships. But I think that's complicated as well. Like, I've been studying a form of hip-hop that emerged in New York in the mid-2000s called Litefeet, and then, you know, the dance, sort of dance – and I've spent a lot of time with the – with the dancers, and obviously, there's like an unequal power relationship there – like, some of these kids still live on the projects, they're, you know, not earning that much money, and I work at a university in the UK. And so, I haven't really – I mean, I've written one thing about it – so, I haven't really written about it; and it's difficult, because you want to have human relationships with people. And you – and you can be genuinely interested in and inspired by what people are doing. And I guess an ethical question for me then, around research, is like how do you – how do you be together with people in research – hold those power relationships, hold those things – but still allow yourself to be together with people, because I think that we can't allow ourselves to like close down to having relationships with people who exist in the system as us, but perhaps aren't offered the same privileges, because that's just shielding our privilege again. But how do you make room to share, I guess, in these spaces?

JJ: So, I think I – I wonder if it's about not only showing up for the dance but also, showing up for the conditions that make the music. In a book, again, that comes out in the future, in October, of poems – I talk about me dating a woman who was Filipino, who – and at the end, you know, I say she knows all the right words, you know, all the social justice, knows all of this stuff, right, can tell you all of the buzz words around race and is really good at it. And I talked – I forget how I ended the poem, but it says something like, she – I think she says she wants to save me from me. But I asked her how else we will be able to know how stars shine unless we – unless we were – something about embracing the darkness, right. How else can we see how bright stars shine unless we embrace the darkness? And I think I said: 'but isn't that what it's all about? How everybody wants – how everybody loves hip-hop; how everybody wants to go to the club, but no one wants to know the night?'. And I think it's easy to go to the club. It's difficult to know the night if I'm going to extend that metaphor, right. So, there's so many people who love hip-hop, who are not showing up for black people in a moment we need them. And I think that's part of it: 'Show up for me when it's difficult, not just when it's fun', right? I mean – and that's, that's – but that's also what I think creates family too though, right. Like, if I'm taking this out of art, and just thinking about human relationships. What for me makes love love, what for me makes family family, friends friends, is that the ability to show up for someone, even when it's difficult – that I know I can count on you, even when it's hard. And that's what allows me to share this part of me that's nice; that part of me that's lovely, and tender, and caring, and joyful, and happy with you, because I know that you're not just coming in for that. And if I think about this on a larger social scale, it's much more easy for me to share art if I know you're not just coming in to make money off of it. If I know you'll show up for me in the difficult moment. If I know that when I actually play 'we gon' be alright', you're not only dancing with me, but you're actually helping me create new ways of living, new policy that are more just and equitable around race, around gender, sex, sexuality, class, religion, nationality, etc. and so forth, and so on. I think.

KB: Yeah, I mean, I think that's beautiful. And I think that that is – that is why I kind of think when I say the being together – is what I mean. And that is where, you know, where that being together



comes out of those communities that live side by side, where you have to be there, because you're in the darkness with them too, right. Then – so, conditions for love then become possible, because I think what we lose in maybe corporate, neoliberal culture, or some of those middle-class cultural spaces that are now occupied – very white spaces – is you don't actually – you don't have to show up. It's very easy to leave, you know, and it's very easy to leave as a researcher. And how do you stay embedded in that, and how you do that ethically?

JJ: So, I'm going to send you some Dwight Conquergood as you – as you think about this, because one of the things that he says – and it's oft-cited claim that he makes often, and I just absolutely love it – he says, and I quote: 'Opening and interpreting lives is very different than opening and closing books.' That the people we do ethnographic research with, and for, and about, are with us – that they don't – they don't leave us. We don't get to leave them like we leave a library. That's unethical, right? That for me is woefully ridiculous and problematic, right. And just in many ways replicate the very structures in which we claim to be pushing against.

KB: Yeah. I mean, I completely agree. But that that question also runs through art, right? Like, what will that – it's become very fashionable now to borrow from hip-hop; to borrow from impoverished communities to make work that is about the urban and the city, and then, to take – as you say – everything but the burden, and leave. And, you know, how can we show up for those – for those cultures that we're getting so much from? So, yeah, maybe that's a question too.

JJ: And I would, I would even add – because you said, you know, make art about; make work about – in the next step has been make work with, right. But I would even push past that to say: 'Get out the way and let them make the work themselves!'. Right? Because part of this moment is asking like – I had a friend – not had, I have a really good friend, white male poet. He kept asking how can I make the art that dadadada, and I go: 'You have a huge platform – get out of the way! There are black artists making black art – imagine that concept – who aren't given access to the same platforms that you have. What would it look like to just get out of the way?'. I guess, what I'm not saying is that there can't be collaborative art. That would be absurd, right. I wouldn't even be doing this project if I believed that, right? But it is to say that sometimes, we just got to let people do them and make the art themselves, and part of it is breaking down the structures of haves and have nots, even though that's a little too simplistic a way of understanding how power works, but breaking down that structure and getting out of the way, and letting folks make the art. And benefit from the art that they make themselves.

Audio available at www.auralia.space/issue1-katiebeswickandjvonjohnson

Transcription by Kalina Petrova

To cite this material:

Radosavljevic, Duska; Pitrolo, Flora; Bano, Tim (2020): Katie Beswick and Javon Johnson - Sounds of the City. The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. Media. <https://doi.org/10.25389/rcssd.13017659.v1>

