



## **Katie Beswick & Javon Johnson: Sounds of the City**

### **[00:00:23] INTRO**

**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 interests 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 entitled *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 interests in hip hop as well as into their wider concerns about issues of race, class, inequality and space and place. Katie and Javon have been 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 24<sup>th</sup> June 2020.

### **[00:02:50] SALON**

**Katie Beswick:** So last time we spoke, we decided we were going to have a bit of a chat about sound and the city. I guess where that took me to in like my thinking and my research just looking back 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:** Well, it sparked my interest – 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 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' (2014). UCLA Black Studies Professor Shana Redmond, who's really, really dope – 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 – 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, it aged really well for me. One of the things that fascinates me is how do albums age well? And 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 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 travelling 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, not to say that he created the music, but he in many ways showed the US the music.

**KB:** That's 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 produce the music, but also simultaneously what the music produces.

**KB:** Yeah. That's a really good point. 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' (2001) by Oxide & Neutrino**

That has some of the aspects in it that I wanted to talk about. So that is a UK garage track. In the late 1990s UK garage emerged as the sort of predominant culture, I suppose, the club culture, 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 were often female R&B singers as well. A lot of the culture was to do with the style – the music was always 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 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 the cultural moment of the late 1990s. So it samples that siren noise, and then the under-beat samples *Casualty*, which is a UK soap opera set in a hospital. Everyone with their family would have been watching that on a Saturday night – it was kind of just a really familiar sound. And it samples 'Oh shit! I've been shot!' from *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, the film by Guy Ritchie, which was set in London.

**JJ:** Right, right.

**KB:** So on the one hand, it's like glamorised 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 – in the late '90s London's quite gross, 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 started 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 – and I chose them because one of the guys is white, I think the other one is mixed-race – so for me, they kind of reflect this city that I grew up in, which is the city where we don't have housing segregation or anything like that. So you grew up in a very multicultural environment.



Everything's very mixed – 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 nostalgically as a teenager, as this really exciting, vibrant moment. Then you have the So Solid Crew – their music is again a little bit more grimy – who kind of changed the narrative maybe around UK garage music. I think 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 as '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 term 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 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 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 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 who created that. And it's this up tempo, 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, of home, of house. 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 moment', 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? 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 – is this gorgeous, gorgeous, queer, colourful disco scene. And for me, that moment is a creative imagining of what our worlds can be like if we always lived this emotionally full. If we always lived this aesthetically hungry. If we always were this connected to one another, this entangled 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 moment of change – 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're 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 bell hooks' idea of 'yearning' (1999), and this music really draws out that yearning for this moment to just kind of remain, and for it to be able to be.

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

**KB:** They support one another, 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, 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, writes about a tenement in Chicago, called the 'Big Red'. 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 when the heat gets cut off, what happens. He talks about what we call 'poor' or 'doubling up' is a way 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 and things of this nature, and the way people fed each other. And I think about my own upbringing – I grew up in South-Central Los Angeles in the '80s and '90s, and I witnessed the height of the gang epidemic, height of the crack epidemic in Los Angeles. And you know, my grandmother, like we used to trade veggies, right? 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 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 is 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'. 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 no way 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: 'This is anger! 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, 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 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 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. One of the big events of the late 20<sup>th</sup> 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 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, to 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 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, uniting 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 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 our fellow citizens are so much in the minority that anti-racism becomes much more difficult to sort of envision as a 'being together'. 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 share some personal, to sort of explain – you're 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 think he said: *'I love Cali like I love women / 'cause every [...] 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.'* 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. 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 getting at. And I miss specifically South-Central Los Angeles. 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 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, 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 godawful hot here, right, so it makes protesting also very difficult, especially when city council says that you can't have water containers and ice chests 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 [to give birth], and if there was ever a moment to have peace for her, it is here and now. Right? 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 – one of the things that I'm certain that you've heard of – Kendrick Lamar's 'Alright'?

**[00:27:20 to 00:27:40] Excerpt from 'Alright' (2015) by Kendrick Lamar**

**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 since the protests kicked off, 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 we could live like this?' And for me, 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 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. 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 then that artists stand outside, they're constantly imagining, 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 in 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 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 'We've 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 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, or [that] they can stay anywhere and create a culture and create a permanent thing. Nor is the state offering anything, really, in its place, apart from 'you are not welcome here', to the 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 I guess I'm trying to think how do artists that I know about, how have they responded to that threat? There's a really interesting piece of hip hop theatre – 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 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 piece just becomes music – and that's all that they can kind of offer – this 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 really part of the sort of dramaturgy of that piece. And when we watched it, I was in rehearsals 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 was really struggling to understand 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 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:** —its ambitions are such that 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 the sound — and it's noisy and it's not necessarily offering this utopian future, it's just offering an in-the-moment [experience].

**JJ:** But that's the interesting thing to me — and certainly, I'm ridiculously new to grime and I want to mark that. 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 — the screeching noises. And I'm wrestling with this idea of — 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 that — so, it takes me back to that no matter what. 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 ten-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. 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 — and I know I asked these long-winded big questions so, I apologise, but I also 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 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. I mean, essentially, it says that that's what Marx got wrong, that 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 ebook right now on my desktop that I keep wanting to return to. 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 had a welfare state that was really, quite socialist in the period that I was growing up. And in London, '65 to '86, 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 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 healthcare, as providing. And for me 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 drastically different, especially then – even though we might be coming closer and closer together now in 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 were fully given access to, right?

**KB:** I imagine that 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. And citizenship has always been conditioned in certain – but 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 healthcare. And now, those schools that I went to, my brother and sister still work in, and that's just not the case.

**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 Asian citizens, might say differently, 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 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. 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 of that white wealth gets built, right. [*Sound of a dog barking.*] As the dog gives 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 the start of neoliberalism and the complete clamping down of unions, Thatcherism. There are terrible political problems throughout the 1970s that are affecting working-class people of all races. 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. The area that I grew up, Woolwich, there's now a gated community in what was once a munitions factory. And people who grew up opposite, it's like the town's been bisected: there's a gated community, where flats are like £650,000 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 that



are 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 corporations – BMW I think have got a showroom there now, Berkeley Homes has invested in the 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 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:** No, I definitely understand, because – 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 – which is wild. Like: 'Oh, yeah, 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 what we call – 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 shape 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 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 – '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? I mean, we're sitting on stolen land. 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 is enacted, and how that is – I don't know that you can... 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 reparations that aren't just bringing up a whole another set of problems? And I guess it comes back to that 'how do we be together?' Because we can't erase ourselves from – that's not an answer, erasing ourselves from the place that we live in or the neighbourhoods that have emerged out of history. So what do we do? And I guess it comes back to that '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 Debris Stevenson. And it was a response to *Boy in da Corner*, which was an album that she'd loved growing up. And she's a white woman, and she kind of wrestles in this play with like: 'What does it mean that I have shaped my life so much around Black cultural appropriation, and how do I come to terms with that?' And in the play, a 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 productive conversation that that play kind of brings out, because 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: '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 if the problem is in 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 again if appropriation isn't the



proper term. And I wonder 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!' If I come back to the US, right, some things happen just by virtue of proximity. Here I'm thinking uniquely of: my partner's Latina and she didn't know that Black people had their own version of tacos in the US, until I was like: 'No, we have Black tacos. 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* – and he opens up by talking, we have a long history Black music and of white people being 'the best' at Black music, of Benny Goodman labelled the king of swing, of Eric Clapton, ostensibly, the best jazz guitarist of the world, watching Elvis Presley be named the 'King of Rock', despite whatever Little Richard did, despite whatever Fats Waller did for swing. And now we recently watched a few people ask if Eminem is the best rap artist of all time, right. So 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 and 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 lifesteal, and they're dancers – and I've spent a lot of time with the dancers, and obviously, there's like an unequal power relationship there. Some of these kids still live on the projects, they're 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 but I haven't really written about it, and it's difficult, because you want to have human relationships with people. 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 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 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:** 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 of poems that comes out in October – I talk about me dating a woman who was Filipina – and at the end, you know, I say she knows all the right words, all the social justice, knows all of this stuff, can tell you all of the buzz words around race and is really good at it. And I forget how I ended the poem, but it says something like, 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 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? 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 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 policies that are more just and equitable around race, around gender, sex, sexuality, class, religion, nationality, et cetera and so forth and so on. I think.

**KB:** I think that's beautiful. And that is what I think when I say the 'being together'. And that is 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. And 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 I now occupy, very white spaces – is you don't actually 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 do you do that ethically?

**JJ:** I'm going to send you some Dwight Conquergood 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 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. And just in many ways replicates the very structures in which we claim to be pushing against.

**KB:** I completely agree. And that that question also runs through art, right? It's become very fashionable now to borrow from hip hop, to borrow from impoverished communities, to make work that is about the urban inner city, and then to take, as you say, everything but the burden, and leave. And you know, how can we show up 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 'make art about', 'make work about' – and 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!' Because part of this moment is asking things 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 da-da-da-da', 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, but it is to say that sometimes we just got to let people do that 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.

Transcription by Kalina Petrova

### Clips Summary

[00:06:53 to 00:07:12] 'Bound 4 Da Reload' (2001) by Oxide & Neutrino

[00:27:20 to 00:27:40] 'Alright' (2015) by Kendrick Lamar

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