

**Music and the City: Normalisation, Marginalisation, and
Resistance in Birmingham's Musicscape**

BY

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Abstract

Drawing on qualitative research conducted in Birmingham (2009-2014), the thesis explores the role music plays in shaping and producing the urban environment via a focus on three specific processes; normalisation, marginalisation, and resistance. The contemporary city's relationship with music has undergone substantial change in recent years within the UK, including significant growth in the live music industry and the increased targeting of musical activities within urban policy. The thesis examines the implications of these changes in the context of Birmingham.

Chapter One introduces the research aims and objectives. Chapter Two positions the thesis within the current geographies of music field and grounds the thesis in an anti-essentialist approach to geography and cultural politics. Chapter Three provides an overview of the research location and methodology. Chapter Four explores 'normalisation' by examining the role of public bodies in shaping local musical activities. Chapter Five explores 'marginalisation' by examining the exclusion of local rap music from the mainstream live musicscape, and rap music's place in shaping marginal geographies. Chapter Six explores 'resistance' through three in-depth examples of how different individuals use music as a tool of resistance against dominant power relations and the production of uneven urban geographies.

Dedication

To Bryony

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1.

INTRODUCTION: MUSIC AND UNEVEN URBAN GEOGRAPHIES

INTRODUCTION

This thesis contributes to research on the geographies of music by critically exploring the ways in which music can help us to make sense of contemporary uneven urban geographies. Drawing on qualitative research I conducted in Birmingham (2009-2014), the thesis explores the role music plays in shaping and producing the urban environment via a focus on three specific processes: 1) music and the **normalisation** of urban space; 2) music and urban **marginalisation**; and 3) music and geographies of **resistance**. The contemporary city's relationship with music has undergone substantial change in recent years within the UK. For example, this is typified by the substantial growth in the live music industry and the increased targeting of musical activities within urban policy, trends that are underpinned by concomitant shifts in urban governance as well as digital technologies. My research therefore promises to provide deeper insight into the nature and implication of these changes and thus contribute to broader understandings of urban transformation within the UK in the early part of the 21st Century. The thesis draws on literature in the existing geographies of music field in order to frame, unravel, and make sense of the research findings. More broadly, the research is informed by anti-essentialist political thought in human geography which seeks to challenge the fixed and essentialised boundaries which produce uneven cultural, political, and economic relationships. These literatures will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two. The analysis of my research data is organised around the processes of normalisation, marginalisation, and

resistance, each of which provides a distinct perspective on the relationship between music and the shaping and production of uneven urban geographies. Together, these three processes form the main empirical focus of the thesis.

An exploration of the process of **normalisation** involves a critical examination of music's relationship with forms of urban hegemony and the processes through which hegemonic actors both shape and benefit from the production of uneven urban geographies. I argue that music is significant within these processes as an instrument for normalising urban space. I theorise urban normalisation as a set of spatial processes which reproduce the dominant position of both commercial and state actors within the city. Moreover, I examine this theme specifically in relation to research I conducted on public bodies within Birmingham, which I argue, instrumentalise music as a cultural and political tool in order to control the production of urban space. Therein, I specifically examine the place of music over the past decade in relation to concerted efforts within urban cultural policy to re-produce Birmingham as a 'creative city', a process which I argue is underpinned by forms of spatial, political, cultural, and economic inequities and asymmetries.

A focus on the process of **marginalisation** involves an analysis of the relationship between music and those urban subjects that are disadvantaged by the normalisation of the contemporary city. I argue that music is both a means of defining the 'other' in relation to the normalised cityscape as well as a key cultural practice helping to shape the marginalised spaces that constitute the cultural political and spatial peripheries of the normalised city. I examine the second theme through an exploration of local forms of rap music in Birmingham which, for reasons I discuss in more detail in Chapter Five, have been widely stigmatised and marginalised within the city. I examine the multilayered causes and implications of this marginalisation. Moreover, I demonstrate that rap music provides a locally specific example

of music's active role in the production of, and in the interplay between, normalised and marginal urban geographies.

The process of **resistance** is examined via a focus on the relationship between music and localised attempts to actively challenge the production of both normalised and marginal urban geographies. I argue that music can and does provide an important and varied political tool in acts of resistance against prevailing hegemonic power relationships and in struggles against the production of divided urban landscapes. I examine this theme through an engagement with local individuals and groups in Birmingham who, in different ways and to different extents, actively mobilise music in counter-hegemonic practices. In particular, I explore how local music practitioners are constructing practices, spaces, and knowledges which cut across and disrupt the expectations which define the normalised cityscape. These practices of resistance provide locally specific insights into the mutability of urban space as well as the active role music can play in both challenging fixity and producing possibility.

These three interconnected processes of normalisation, marginalisation, and resistance together recount a narrative of music's varied but significant place in how the city is controlled and shaped by hegemonic powers; how this, in turn, results in forms of othering and exclusion; and how normalised and marginalised spatialities are ultimately resisted and challenged. More broadly, my research in these three areas demonstrates the necessity of taking music seriously as a significant force in shaping the contemporary urban environment.

Having introduced and outlined the key research aim and research themes, in the remainder of the chapter I discuss and situate the thesis with respect to current research on the geographies of music, and within a broader context of changing urban geographies. I then briefly outline the spaces in which I conducted the fieldwork in Birmingham, and finally I outline the chapters of the thesis.

THE PLACE OF MUSIC IN GEOGRAPHICAL ENQUIRY

In the introduction to a special issue on music and urban space (in *Popular Music History*, 2009) the authors outline why there is a need to make room for music in urban research:

...music research in urban studies derives not from the potential of music to capture the nature of urban life but from its potential to illuminate subtle, but sometimes politically potent, cultural conceptualizations of the city as a place.

(Cohen et al., 2009:108)

Thus music is not simply a text that describes urban life, but is rather a set of practices which are part of, and constitutive of, urban life. Moreover, the quote suggests that engaging with music in geographical and urban research can provide a productive way into understanding the intricate processes of urban life, including, how urban life is both positively and negatively shaped by political geographies. This research highlighted above has its roots in earlier work which began to take shape as a cross-disciplinary effort between cultural studies, music studies, and cultural geography in the early 1990s, (see, for example, Cohen, 1991; Cohen, 1995 on music in Liverpool; or Kong, 1995a on music in Singapore). Since then, attempts to explore and understand the interplays between music, society, and space have arguably grown into what is now a recognisable and distinct field of literature – the geographies of music.

More specifically, within human geography, an interest in such themes emerged following initial calls from geographers to give music more attention in geographical enquiry (see especially Smith, 1994; Leyshon et al., 1995). Such calls were based on arguments, for example, that music is ‘no more isolated from politics than any other cultural form’ (Smith, 1994:236) and that music ‘deserves more attention in the rapidly evolving field of social and cultural geography’ (Kong, 1995b:190). Driving these calls was the notion that music can, as

described above, illuminate unique aspects of the ways in which spaces are used, controlled, produced, and changed. Atkinson, for example, talks about ‘the power of music, sound and noise to denote place and demarcate space’ (2007:1905); similarly, Smith notes how ‘sound generally, and music in particular, structures space and characterises place’ (1994:232). Moreover, against perceptions that music is somehow trivial or unrelated to the important stuff of political life, there is within the geographies of music literature a strong appreciation of music as ‘much more than a decorative art; [and] that it is a powerful medium of social order’ (DeNora, 2000:163). Indeed, it is the so-called ‘power of music’ to change and become part of what makes spaces and places meaningful and to connect spaces to the political, that has caught the attention and imagination of geographers and music/cultural theorists alike. In Chapter Two, I will examine in detail the progress that has been made in geographies of music research.

As the geographies of music field developed over the past two decades it has been focused on understanding the myriad processes through which music shapes the production of space and place, as well as the different cultural, political, and economic implications of this relationship. Though established, the geographies of music field nonetheless remains less than fully matured; there are certain gaps where further research is still required, not least I would argue in terms of developing our understanding of music’s place in changing and uneven urban landscapes. As such, this thesis will seek to contribute new perspectives to existing research which has already revealed, through a diverse set of empirical research examples, that music plays a crucial but often overlooked role in the production of space. In particular, it will attempt to develop our understanding of the place of music in shaping the contemporary city by focussing on the three processes of normalisation, marginalisation, and resistance.

CHANGING CITIES: MUSIC'S AUGMENTING PLACE IN URBAN LIFE

The thesis centres on/around a particular set of concerns about music's place in uneven urban geographies, and in particular music's role in the production of both normalised and marginalised urban spaces, as well as the place of music in challenging asymmetrical urban relationships. Before proceeding further, it is useful to consider the broader cultural, political, and economic context in which the research was both conceived and carried out.

Cities of live music

In the past 10 to 15 years the global music industry has been dramatically reshaped. Despite the fact that only 15 years ago the music industry seemed steadfastly set in a future dependant on recorded music sales, there has been a widespread shift in revenue generation away from record sales and towards ticket sales and revenues from live music (IFPI, 2011). This inverse trend has reached the point where the live music industry is now more substantial than the recorded music industry in the world's largest popular music market, the US (Mortimer et al., 2012). This trend is also occurring in other Western music markets, including the UK (Page and Carey, 2010). The magnitude of the shift is demonstrated by the fact the global music industry is no longer financially dominated by the once 'big five' international record labels; now the second largest global music company is the live music promotions and ticketing conglomerate Live Nation Entertainment (Frith et al., 2010:9).

Besides the economic impact, the shift in revenues towards live music has had a significant geographical impact; at the centre of which is our cities. The two economies of recorded and live music have distinctly different geographies. Live music literally requires more space (in the form of venues, clubs, festival spaces, and so on) and generally consists of a more complex geography than the recorded music industry. It also requires access to large

concentrated populations who can easily and regularly access spaces of live music. Thus, it is in urban areas that the live music industry has carved out its augmented geography over the past decade. Research by UK Music, for example, has shown growth in revenues from music concerts and festivals across the majority of the major cities in Britain (UK-Music, 2011).

Targeting music in new urban policy

Unsurprisingly, the resulting pressure on urban space from the live music industry has not gone unnoticed by the authorities and organisations in charge of urban development policy, including in Birmingham (see BCC, 2012). Indeed, this highlights the second major shift – the increased targeting of music activities in urban policy. Partly in light of the growing live music industry, urban public authorities have increasingly sought to both influence and benefit from live music activities in their own cities (see for example Cohen, 2007 on regeneration policies targeted at music in Liverpool). The increase in policy interventions is also motivated by the ‘cultural turn’ in urban policy which has been taking hold globally over the past two decades (see Gibson and Kong, 2005; and Peck, 2012). The ‘cultural turn’ in urban policy is a response to the changing economies and spatialities of post-industrial cities and the growing desire to modify and enhance the ‘urban cultural experience’ in order to boost urban economic capacity (Amin and Thrift, 2007a). As Thrift notes, cities are increasingly expected to have a ‘buzz’ and to be ‘creative’ (2004:58). Unsurprisingly, music (especially live music) is one the most important devices for cultivating this new urban experience. A point demonstrated in the sentiments of the influential ‘creative city’ guru Richard Florida who asserted that ‘support[ing] a local music scene can be just as important as investing in high-tech business and far more effective than building a downtown mall’ in achieving status as a ‘creative city’ (2002:229). Hence our analysis of music needs to think more about the city, and at the same time, our analysis of the city needs to think more about music.

The dialogue between research in music and in urban geography is, I would argue, especially pertinent in light of the political tensions which many geographers and urban theorists consider to underpin the production of ‘creative cities’. Jamie Peck, for example, argues that the implementation of ‘creative city’ policies are embedding asymmetrical relationships between, on the one hand, productive and creative urban subjects (i.e. ‘the creative class’) and, on the other, a group of ‘othered’ non-productive, non-creative urban subjects (see Peck, 2005; 2012). Indeed, this policy shift has been widely criticised for producing uneven urban geographies including, among other things, the displacement of ‘unproductive’ urban populations, the gentrification of urban areas, the creation of urban under classes, increased economic disparity, and decreases in labour welfare (see Pratt, 2010 for an overview of these issues).

Within this wide-ranging debate, however, I am interested in how the changing nature of urban policy and the implications for urban inequality relate specifically to music. As I will discuss in Chapter Two, this is an area of literature that is growing but, again, requires further attention, especially in terms of thinking about particular political, economic, and cultural implications for those people that Sassen (2010) refers to as the ‘losers’ or ‘rapidly growing surplus’ of urban regeneration, or that Peck (2005) refers to as the ‘lumpen classes of noncreatives’.

To be clear, Birmingham is undoubtedly subject to these processes of urban change and the concomitant political pressures, yet as a city it has received limited in-depth attention regarding how changes both in the wider global music industry and urban policy have manifested in relation to the city’s music practices and spaces. As it stands, existing analyses of music in Birmingham consist predominantly of studies conducted by local authorities in Birmingham, especially Birmingham City Council (BCC) (see BCC, 2010; 2012; AWM, 2008) (which tend to have an overly strong economic focus). There is, however, little joined

up academic analyses which addresses questions about who is being positively or negatively affected as a result of changes in the economy, culture, and politics of music. It was thus in this context of wider shifts, in addition to a lack of sufficient analysis of the relationship between music and urban geographies in Birmingham, that I conducted my qualitative research.

CONDUCTING RESEARCH IN BIRMINGHAM'S MUSICScape

Chapter Three of the thesis provides more detail in relation to the methodological approach of the research, but it is also useful to provide an outline of the urban spaces that formed the backdrop for and context within which I carried out my empirical work. The field work developed in three areas, each one connecting specifically to one of the key research themes of normalisation, marginalisation, and resistance. Indeed, developing the themes was an iterative process between the field and the desk.

Music in the 'creative city'

I began the fieldwork in Birmingham by initially seeking out people to speak with who were, in a sense, already thinking about and acting on some of the issues I was addressing in my research. This led me initially to the Birmingham Music Network, a local music-focused networking group whose primary activity is a monthly meeting. The interviews I conducted with individuals I accessed through the Birmingham Music Network highlighted that various aspects of many local music practitioners' activities, such as: recording and performance; access to financial resources; live promotion; and business networks, were influenced in different ways by what was being done in relation to local policy and the city's music. That is, the theme of public institutions intervening in the city's music activities was repeatedly being brought up as a point of concern by different research participants.

Central to this issue was a tension many music practitioners expressed between their want/need to access additional resources and concerns about interventions restricting the freedom of music practitioners, and that policy interventions were benefiting certain groups in the city at the disadvantage of others. The narrative that developed around this issue of policy intervention resonated with important questions being addressed in urban and cultural geography about urban authorities attempting to shape urban cultural experiences in relation to dominant global discourses of post-industrial urban development, such as the ‘creative city’ (Marcuse, 2011). In light of this, I pursued and developed this line of enquiry in my fieldwork to better understand what role local public institutions such as Birmingham City Council (and other powerful public and commercial organisations) play in shaping the local musicscape, including what their motivations are and what the cultural political and spatial implications of policy interventions are.

Rap music and the urban ‘other’

The second area of empirical research developed as an off-shoot of the first and relates specifically to rap music in Birmingham.¹ Like other music genres which have originated among black populations (including jazz, blues, and reggae), rap has been subject (on a global scale) to forms of social suspicion and fear. Moreover, rap’s history has been played out in the cultural, political, and spatial margins of the urban landscape (see Forman and Neal, 2004; and Rose, 2008). (I will discuss the histories and geographies of rap in more detail in Chapter Two).

Within my own research, the localised tensions both within and surrounding Birmingham’s rap music very rapidly became a widely spoken about and repeated topic. Two common

¹ Rap music’s is a genre of music, the defining feature of which is a stylised spoken-word vocal, which evolved within African-American and Afro-Caribbean cultures in North America, especially in New York City during the 1980s (Rose, 1994:2).

themes emerged; the first concerned the potential violence at live rap music events, and the second was the links between rap and local gangs in certain areas of Birmingham such as Handsworth, Aston, and Lozells (all of which are officially recognised as ‘priority neighbourhoods’ (BeBirmingham, 2012)). Fears about rap music have resulted in attempts to control and restrict rap’s presence within the local musicscape (i.e. banning rap artists and events from music venues in the city). It also became clear that rap music in Birmingham was a site of internal and external tensions, and that many people who were involved with rap music were struggling with issues of violence and urban marginalisation. Put simply, the narrative of local rap music in Birmingham appeared almost intrinsically connected to a process of marginalisation (banning rap, morally demonising rap, and restricting the presence of rap in city life).

My empirical research on rap in Birmingham included interviews with rap musicians, studio producers, and community groups; it also involved participant-observation in rap music studios, and I gathered significant amounts of audio-visual data. This area of research was an important part of the overall project and brought to light, sometimes in quite shocking ways, some of the cultural, political, and geographical complexities and imbalances which shape Birmingham as a city.

Music to change the city

Having developed two areas of research which focused on how music and the city are shaped by local bodies of power and how music plays a role in the construction of marginal urban geographies, the final research area developed, in part, from a desire to seek out a politics of hope in Birmingham’s musicscape. Moreover, in light of a strong history of music being used

as a tool for challenging injustices,² and given that my research was rapidly revealing such injustices present in Birmingham, the third area of my qualitative research developed around issues of how music was being used to challenge things like restrictive policy interventions, forms of urban normalisation, or forms of marginalisation and exclusion.

During the fieldwork it came to light that for a considerable group of music practitioners in Birmingham, the connection between music and political change was important to their life in music. My encounters included, among other things, independent music, alternative music formats, music events, subversive practices, and progressive music education. The diversity of practices highlighted that there was no standard or common way of creating links between music and forms of political resistance – the practices, languages, degrees of engagement, and the resources used, varied considerably. To some extent, this diversity challenges more embedded and widely known concepts of music and political resistance such as the political song (such as those by the political song-writer Billy Bragg) or the kind of aesthetic shock factor of punk music. Unlike such exemplary musical moments, the visibility and effectiveness of the practices I encountered in my research differed greatly. Nonetheless, I wanted to better understand the ways in which individuals and groups in Birmingham were making connections between their music practices and politics (writ large), and what the consequences of such connections were.

² Even a relatively surface-level look back through recent cultural history reveals that music has informed and even defined key moments of political resistance. Punk music, for example, is a pertinent demonstration of how disaffection among young people in the mid 1970s in the UK and US was responded to through musical and cultural rebellion (see Laing, 1978; and Bennett, 2001).

CHAPTER LAYOUT

Chapter Two examines how and where the relationship between music and space has been explored in existing literature, especially within the fields of cultural politics, music studies (writ large), and human geography. The focus of Chapter Two is existing research in the geographies of music field. Initially, I outline where and how the field developed, and highlight some of the driving themes. The remainder of Chapter Two is divided into three sections, each of which examines how current geographies of music literatures have dealt with the themes of normalisation, marginalisation, and resistance. I highlight key contributions from within the field to these areas of thought and discuss where further research is still required.

In **Chapter Three** I discuss the research methodology in detail both in terms of the methods I employed and the encounters that constituted my research. It also provides a contextual overview of the research location – Birmingham’s musicscape. I outline and justify the three primary research methods: in-depth interviews, participant-observation, and secondary visual, audio, and textual data collection. I also consider issues of positionality and the challenges that researching music and urban geographies presents.

Following the methodology, Chapters Four, Five and Six present and analyse the findings from the qualitative research I conducted in Birmingham.

Chapter Four presents my research findings on the first key research theme – *normalisation*. It does this by examining the cultural political and spatial implications of the augmented role and political influence of powerful public institutions and commercial organisations within Birmingham. I examine the policy practices of Birmingham City Council and their increasing attempts to act as an arbiter of music spaces and practices in the city. For example, as the live music economy has grown, so too has the emphasis within local policy to regulate and

actively arbitrate how live music spaces are used and consumed and the implications of this are yet to be fully examined. Chapter Four draws on findings from interviews with local music practitioners to examine what effects local policy interventions are having in the local musicscape.

Chapter Five presents my research findings on the second key research theme – *marginalisation*. It examines urban marginalisation in relation to local rap music in Birmingham. I argue that we can see within Birmingham’s local rap music the construction and subordination of urban ‘others’ – including othered musics and sounds, spaces, bodies, practices, and knowledges. In line with the work by Tricia Rose on rap music in America, I critically examine and account for the geographies of violence and urban gangs connected to and present in rap music in Birmingham. However, like Rose’s, my analysis of rap music goes beyond thinking about rap’s presence as a violent threat, and examines rap music as a threat to power’s ideological legitimacy. I argue, that rap music, by virtue of the cultural, musical, political, and spatial differences that it conjures and brings to the fore potentially exposes the paradoxes and inequities upon which an ‘over there’ normalised urban life is built. I draw on interviews with different Individuals engaged in Birmingham’s rap music culture, to explore how these issues play out and manifest in the city.

Chapter Six presents my research findings on the third key research theme – *resistance*. Having examined in Chapters Five and Six where music is instrumentalised in the production of uneven geographies, Chapter Seven explores moments of re-territorialisation, where different local individuals and groups engage music in the construction of counter-hegemonic practices and spaces. I argue that acts of resistance through music against both the normalisation and marginalisation of the urban landscape actively change the city and in doing so reveal (even minimally) that fixity is a temporary condition of urban life, and alternative spatialities are possible.

Finally, **Chapter Seven** draws conclusions on the thesis and reflects on the central themes developed in the research. It reiterates what is achieved but also the opportunities there are in what has not been achieved. I reflect on what it means to do research on music and cultural political geographies as well as the complexities and potential implications (good and bad) of doing social science research which asks questions about political inequity in contemporary cities.

CONCLUSION

The narrative I present in the following chapters is not supposed to provide a complete and/or neat story of music and cultural political geographies in the city of Birmingham. The things I encountered as a researcher were invariably complex and fraught with unknowable or invisible content. That is, the story is never full however many perspectives we take. This makes the research interesting but also a political challenge, because as a qualitative researcher you have to make sense of (analyse) and re-present narratives from a particular, and no doubt often privileged position. I took as a key part of this challenge the fact that music itself can often be overlooked in political analyses; its power underplayed and underestimated. Certainly, what I found in my research was the very opposite; of course, I found music to be a source of personal enrichment and enjoyment for myself and for those I encountered. However, I also found music to be something which has genuinely enormous spatial, cultural, and political consequences (positive and negative). For example, the fact that BCC puts more money from its arts budget into music than any other art form is not inconsequential; it says something about urban life, urban space, and urban politics. Music is not an apolitical space, it is constitutive of and a vital force in contemporary urban geographies. Hence, in the following chapters I attempt to ensure our understanding of music

better accounts for these complexities and that, in turn, our geographical enquiry better accounts for music.

2.

LITERATURE REVIEW: THE GEOGRAPHIES OF MUSIC

INTRODUCTION

As individuals we can, for the most part, switch off to the politics of music when we listen to and encounter it. At the same time, we are usually instinctively aware of music's abundant capacity to shape our own mood or that of a setting. In other words, we intuitively feel and get a sense of the 'power of music' when we encounter it, that is, even if we don't think about how, or by whom, music's power is being harnessed.

The power of music has been on the agenda of political theory and philosophy for millennia. In addition, evolutionary biology has revealed that music has been a formative part of our social history for as long as humans have existed (see Perlovsky, 2010). And music's story continues today, music is part of our social life; it still shapes our 'conduct' in everyday life (DeNora, 2000). In addition, geographers and cultural theorists have increasingly come to recognise that music also shapes, and is shaped by, space and place (our geographies). Indeed, music has its own geographies which interplay with culture, politics, and economics (Born, 2013). Until recently, this whole gamut of audio-musical geographies was being overlooked in geographical enquiry. However, this began to change in the early 1990s when human geographers, inspired by the cultural turn in the social science, raised a call to give music a place in geographical thought (see, for example, Smith, 1994). The considerable work that has since been achieved in the geographies of music field by geographers and non-geographers (in

social-musicology and cultural studies) suggests that the field has indeed fledged and is growing. Books continue to be published in the field and research is still being funded which examines the geographies of music. However, the field is not without gaps and room for development.

As well as thinking about music, this thesis is about contributing to geographical enquiry and our understanding of spatial processes more broadly. To make it clear from the outset, the overall approach I take to theorising space and place and human geography in my work is informed by anti-essentialist theory (or, what might also be termed post-structural theory) which at its heart is about wanting to challenge fixed and essentialised social meanings. In human geography, it is about recognising that space and place are socially constructed, and that what may appear as ‘true’ and transcendent in social space is always-already subject to change and difference. It is about, as J.K. Gibson-Graham describe it, ‘the ultimate undecidability of meaning’ – it is about challenging notions of knowledge as ‘singular, cumulative, and neutral’ and instead recognising that all knowledge is ‘multiple, contradictory, and powerful’ (2003:95). For example, it is about challenging dominant social, historical, and spatial binaries such as developed/undeveloped, man/woman, black/white, rich/poor. An anti-essentialist approach would seek to challenge the presumed and fixed meanings of these social binaries. However, more than just a critical position, anti-essentialism and post-structuralism are also just as much about the politics of enabling new meanings to emerge. As Gibson-Graham note, it is about questioning ‘received ideas and dominant practices, [and] making visible their power’ but is also about ‘creating openings for alternative forms of practice and power to emerge’ (2003:97). I will, of course, explore these ideas in more detail throughout the discussion in this chapter, but to make the reader aware, this anti-essentialist approach to knowledge and power and to space and place underpins the overall theoretical stance of the research.

In the first section of this chapter (Making Geographies of Music) I examine the broader history of how the geographies of music field developed, and think about its particular focus on spatial context and contest. Following this, in the subsequent three sections (Hegemony, Spatial Norms, and Music; Music at the Margins; and Resistance Through Music) I explore how existing geographies of music literatures have variously dealt with and theorised music's place in the different spatial processes that form my three key research themes – normalisation, marginalisation, and resistance. I also discuss more generally how critical human geography literatures frame these spatial processes. The purpose of arranging the discussion of the existing literatures in this way is to gain a better insight into, on the one hand, what research and ideas have been developed in relation to each theme, and on the other hand, to apprehend the kinds of gaps in the literature that remain and that this thesis can attempt to address.

MAKING GEOGRAPHIES OF MUSIC

*...music is much more than a decorative art ...it is a powerful
medium of social order... music's presence is clearly political,
in every sense that the political can be conceived.*

- DeNora, 2000:163

Taking music seriously

In many ways we cannot avoid music's impact on our lives; it is embedded in contemporary public and private life – in the places we shop, on the television, on our mobile phones, in the places we socialise, and so on. Music is also firmly embedded in contemporary local and national economies. For instance, most local authorities (in the UK) portion significant amounts of public budgets on musical activities, from music festivals to music education.

Music plays a part in shaping how we live – it invariably and unavoidably influences our spatial, temporal, and social connections and rhythms.

Paradoxically, despite its undoubted influence in our everyday lives, music can often appear distinctly innocent. This is by no means a coincidence since music is so often at the forefront in shaping geographies of entertainment and enjoyment. Music plays a defining role in key night-time entertainment spaces such as pubs, clubs, and live music venues and key celebration events such as carnivals and festivals. In a very real sense, music is a major coordinate in terms of how individuals and groups navigate towards moments of enjoyment, and away from the supposed mundaneness, seriousness, and challenges of everyday life.

The seemingly natural place of music in our lives as entertainment points to perhaps one of the most basic paradoxes present in our understanding of music; quite simply, it can be confusing to talk seriously about something that in society we actively try to experience as un-serious. For example, I personally have often been met with a slightly perplexed look when I tell people that I am doing PhD research in human geography, and add that my research focus is music – ‘Music is something we do for fun; what can it tell us about the real world?’ In effect, the complexities involved in shaping musical practices and the effect of music on urban life are often not reflected in the light-hearted nature of our everyday encounters with music. Nonetheless, taking music seriously and questioning the social role of music has been an important feature of critical thought for millennia. For example, writing in *The Republic* in c.380 BC, Plato made substantial links between consistency in musical practices and ‘lawful’ societies. Given the ever-increasing presence of music in contemporary life, now is just as crucial a time to continue thinking about music as more than a ‘decorative art’ (DeNora, 2000:163).

More recent challenges to the idea that music is more than ‘mere entertainment’ (Kong, 1995b:183) began to take shape during the 20th Century in the work of early social-musicology authors such as Max Weber in the 1920s (see Weber, 1921), and again in the work of Theodore Adorno in the 1940s and 50s (see Adorno, 1958). These and other early critical analyses of music and society rebuked notions that music was in some way ‘autonomous’ from society.³ Indeed, we see in their work the first moves in modern sociology to reciprocally (and critically) connect music to the social and political by demonstrating that music is both influenced *by* society and an influence *on* society. This questioning of music’s role in society (especially Adorno’s analyses) fuelled the more recent development of cultural studies and popular music studies analyses of music in the 1970s and 80s, both of which sought to defend the right, as it were, of music to be taken seriously in social analyses (see McClary, 1985).

Given their historical connections to earlier critical writing on music and society, cultural studies and popular music studies (and related socio-musicological disciplines such as ethnomusicology) have largely led the way in shaping the music-society debate over the past forty years. Nonetheless, other social science and arts and humanities disciplines have increasingly taken an interest in music and its role within social processes – with each discipline adding its own twist to the enquiry. Human geography’s entry into the debate began as the discipline emerged out of the 1980s influenced by the progressive work being done in areas such as cultural studies. At the time, human geography was feeling the effects of (and partly leading the way in) the ‘cultural turn’. Besides other things, this meant that a much greater level of attention was being paid to things like; the body, performance, art, sensuality, and the politics of representation. Moreover, as the spectrum of research widened, and as

³ Musical ‘autonomy’ refers to the idea that ‘music shapes itself in accordance with self-contained, abstract principles that are unrelated to the outside social world’ (Leppert and McClary, 1989:xii).

research began actively to challenge the dominance of visual and textual analyses, all things aural, sound-related, and musical were soon in-line for scrutiny by geographers wanting to re-engage with important socio-spatial questions.

Spatial agendas beyond ocularcentricism⁴

Against a tendency in geography in the 1980s and early 1990s to conceptualise space and place in visual terms such as ‘landscape’, Susan Smith, in one of the earliest and most substantial geographical engagements with sound and music up to that point, published a paper titled ‘Soundscape’ (Smith, 1994). Smith’s general thrust in Soundscape was that geography had, for too long, ‘neglected the extent to which sound generally, and music in particular, structures space and characterises place’ (1994:232). The aim of Smith’s paper was to demonstrate that geographical projects could be ‘enlarged and enriched’ if music were given a research agenda of its own (1994:233). Crucially, given a lack of research on music within human geography itself at the time, Smith developed this position on the basis of work being done outside geography by cultural-theorists and social-musicologists. She drew on emerging research which bridged conversations between music, cultural politics, and space/place, including, for example: Sara Cohen’s work on music and urban regeneration in Liverpool (Cohen, 1991); Ruth Finnegan’s ethnographic study of amateur music in Milton Keynes (Finnegan, 1989); and John Street’s work on the state funding of a waterfront music venue in Norwich (Street, 1993).

To this extent, then, critical questions about music and space were being grappled with by the ‘music-heads’ before they became the purview of the ‘space-heads’. Nonetheless, the cross-disciplinarity worked both ways since the attention being given to spatial issues within music

⁴ ‘Ocularcentric’ is a term meaning ‘vision-centred’ used by Susan Smith (1994) to refer to visually biased approaches to social enquiry.

studies was very much contingent on prior work in human geography which opened up new avenues into spatial thought. Sara Cohen's paper on music in Liverpool (1991), for example, includes references to David Harvey's influential text on urban geography, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989). Fortunately, it has to be said, this cross-disciplinary interest in music, society, and space very much continues today.

Within geography itself, interest in music began to grow in the mid-to-late 1990s. Shortly after Smith's 'Soundscape', a special issue on the geographies of music, the first of its kind in a human geography journal to focus on music, was published in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* (1995, Vol. 20, No. 4). Contributions from geographers included an extended introduction from Andrew Leyshon, David Matless, and George Revill (1995); a study of music and national identity in Singapore by Lily Kong (1995a); and a study of music and queer geographies by Gill Valentine (1995). Perhaps above all, the special issue demonstrated the potential breadth of research in the geographies of music field. Shortly following this, in another (closely related) development, Leyshon, Matless, and Revill co-edited a book titled *The Place of Music* (1998). Like Smith's 'Soundscape', the special issue in *Transactions* and *The Place of Music* were arguing for and demonstrating that music can add texture and unique insights into complex geographies. Lily Kong's research in Singapore, for example, revealed how struggles over national identity were actively being fought in relation to musical choices, whereby Singaporeans could align their national identities to the 'restricted' musical repertoires chosen by the state, or they could choose to assert alternative identities by changing the music they listened to (see Kong, 1995a).

Of course, such developments within geography were really only possible because of important cross-disciplinary conversations and contributions from cultural theorists and social-musicologists. Nonetheless, these and other publications by geographers talking about

music largely cemented the place of the ‘geographies of music’ as an emerging sub-discipline within human geography.

Music + Space

The early geographies of music literature, though diverse in their empirical content, shared a common theme; making the case for geographers to recognise music as a worthy area of research and as something that really does have a ‘geography’ of its own. However, geographers working on music-based research at the time also recognised that this had to be achieved in ways which accounted for the kinds of advances in spatial theory which critical geographers, at the time, had been coming to terms with. Leyshon et al. for example, warned against the simple ‘addition’ of space and place to the study of music; the danger being that this can have a ‘numbing affect’ on the meaning of space and place (1995:424). Moreover, a too simplistic approach to geography, they argued, risks an analysis in which space and place end up being reduced to something more akin to ‘containers’ – ‘sites where or about which music happens to be made, or over which music has diffused’ (1995:425). Studying ‘the place of music’, Leyshon et al. contend, is not simply a case of adding geography and ending up with music *plus* a particular location. Instead, enquiries concerned with the geographies of music should recognise that space and place play a formative and active role in the ‘sounding and resounding of music’ (1995:425).

Kong (1995b) in looking back over geographical attempts to think about music prior to the 1990s, similarly warned against simplistic approaches to geography. Kong notes how the few existing geographical writings on music were predominantly framed by one-dimensional, even positivistic understandings of culture and place. Kong highlights studies concerned with issues of ‘how musical styles diffuse over space’ as exemplary of the kind of simplistic geographical perspective she hoped could be overcome (see as an example of this, Carney, 1987). In looking forward however, Kong was able to highlight emerging and richer

engagements with questions about music and space/place. Drawing on debates mostly in social-musicology and cultural studies, Kong underlines and rallies behind the new emphasis on understanding music as a site in which meaning is both produced and struggled over. Kong references progressive work by cultural theorists Simon Frith (1983) and Julian Tanner (1978) on music as a space in which counter-cultures (such as punk) can establish and assert alternative and subversive social meanings. Kong's overall sentiment, which was shared by the likes of Smith and Leyshon et al., is that these areas of thought could be greatly enriched if put in the view of a keen geographical eye, concluding that, 'music thus deserves more attention in the rapidly evolving field of social and cultural geography' (Kong, 1995b:190).

Spatial contexts and contests

When looking back to the roots of the geographies of music field, something that stands out (and it is something which is a strong trait in geographical analyses more generally) is the dual-emphasis on context and contestation. With regards to 'context', geographies of music literatures were, from early on, driven by questions about what Leyshon et al. term the 'mutually generative relations of music and place' (1995:425). This is the idea that music has a reciprocal relationship with social and spatial contexts in which it is composed, performed, and heard. Part of Leyshon et al.'s reason for making this argument about the importance of context was to rebuke conventional ideas about the globalization of cultural processes (such as the global music industry) being equal to cultural homogenisation. Instead, Leyshon et al. wanted to hang on to the idea that even if music is subject to globalised commercialisation, it does not necessarily change the fact that people continue to 'experience music in distinctive localized ways' (1995:428). As I will explore in the following sections, this focus on music's localised embeddedness and contextual specificity undoubtedly continues to chime across the geographies of music literature.

Second, we see significant attention being paid to music as a space of contest and struggle – that is, music understood as an arena in which cultural and spatial politics are played out and, in turn, made visible and audible. For example, central to Smith’s (1994) writing on music is a recognition that there are always-present and irresolvable tensions within the production of place, and that music inevitably gets caught up in producing and shaping such tensions (see also Smith, 1997; Smith, 2000; and Wood et al., 2007). Indeed, Smith argues that geographical enquiry needs to recognise that music is ‘no more isolated from politics than any other cultural form’ (1994:236). Related to this, much of the early geographies of music literatures were broadly led by deconstructionist and post-structuralist understandings of space which recognised that although spatial constructions can appear fixed and can become normalised, they are also open to change and transgression. For example, Gill Valentine (1995) examined, through the music of the lesbian musician KD Lang and her fans’ listening habits, how spatialised ‘heteronormativities’ can be transgressed and contested through non-standard musical practices which un-presume heteronormative spatial relationships. On the whole, then, the geographies of music enquiry is built on a desire to get to know music as something constitutive and active in space and time, but also as something which has both normalising and transgressive (including, actively resistive) powers.

Naturally, from this early context, the geographies of music field has developed in myriad ways. As such, rather than attempting the impossible task of an exhaustive review of the literature, in the following sections I purposefully explore the ways in which geographies of music literatures (across disciplines) have approached and theorised the spatial themes of normalisation, marginalisation, and resistance. Each section also includes a discussion of how each theme has been shaped by geographical thought more broadly.

HEGEMONY, SPATIAL NORMS, AND MUSIC

In this section I examine where attempts within the geographies of music literature have been made to understand the relationship between hegemony, geographies of normalisation, and music, this section informs the thinking and discussion related (but not explicitly so) to music and normalisation. I begin by introducing the notions of spatial normalisation and hegemonic geographies within human geography more broadly, and then examine key debates linking music and power. Therein, attention turns to urban geography and concerns about the use of music in producing the so-called ‘creative city’ or ‘cultural city’ as a normalised space.

Geographies of Normalisation

Gibson-Graham write about politics as the ‘continual struggle to fix meaning’ (2006:55) and ‘hegemony’ as entailing:

The persuasive expansion of a discourse into widely shared values, norms, and perceptions such that meaning *appears* to be fixed, even naturalized. (Gibson-Graham, 2006:55)

Just as the meaning of different objects or different individuals and groups in society can become fixed and naturalised in relation to hegemonic power relations, so too can the meaning of different spaces and places. Indeed, the relationship between the exercise of power and meaning of space and place has been the focus of a wide range of political geography literatures for decades. Especially since the 1970s (following moves away from positivistic geographies and towards more critical geographies), there has been a growing concern over the issue of how dominant powers structure and use space in order to dominate. In a quite straightforward example, David Harvey – a Marxist geographer who has played a

considerable role in shaping understandings of how dominant powers use and construct space – refers to this process taking place in New York, where, he writes:

...the billionaire mayor, Michael Bloomberg, is reshaping the city along lines favourable to developers, Wall Street and transnational capitalist-class elements, and promoting the city as an optimal location for high-value businesses and a fantastic destination for tourists. He is, in effect, turning Manhattan into one vast gated community for the rich. (Harvey, 2008:38)

Harvey's notion of powerful actors, institutions, and organisations actively 'shaping a city for the rich' highlights the idea which geographers interested in politics have long been grappling with, that hegemonic powers 'need' space in order to dominate. In other words, hegemonic powers can only achieve control over political, economic, and cultural life through the control and territorialisation of space and by fixing the meaning of space (see Harvey, 2001; 2006b). The challenge for geographers and others has been in examining the varied global and local processes involved and implications of this relationship between hegemony (dominant power) and space (both material and imagined space).

Henri Lefebvre, another influential Marxist, brought the question of politics' relationship to space to the fore in political theory. Lefebvre drew distinct lines between dominant power relations and space, arguing that 'just as everyday life has been colonized by capitalism, so too has its location – social space' (Elden, 2008:105). As Stuart Elden explains; for Lefebvre 'space is the ultimate locus and medium of struggle', (Elden, 2008:106-107). Moreover, Lefebvre understood the 'production' of space as inherently connected to extant political formations, such as capitalism. As in Harvey's example of New York, Stuart Elden explains how within capitalist societies and territories, 'social space is allocated according to class, and social planning reproduces the class structure. This is either on the basis of an abundance of

space for the rich and too little for the poor, or ... uneven development in the quality of places, or indeed both' (Elden, 2008:106). Hence, social space is absolutely key to making capitalism, or any power relationship, work. This is because power inscribes asymmetrical relationships – for example the privilege of the political-economic elite and the under-privilege of subordinate groups – into the production space. In turn, hegemonic powers depend on these specific socio-spatial orderings becoming normalised. Other theorists have extended the analysis to other dominant/hegemonic political relationships such as patriarchy (see Massey, 1994) or racism (see Said, 1979).

Here I am especially interested in work in the geographies of music literature which has attempted to address the question of what role music plays in the process of inscribing and normalising hegemonic power relationships into the production of space. As discussed above, the geographies of music field developed very much on the basis of understanding music as inherently and reciprocally connected to both its geographical and political settings. And as Smith contends, music itself is 'a performance of power ... that is creative; that brings spaces, peoples, places 'into form'' (2000:618). Indeed, it is this *formative* power of music which makes it a useful, and arguably un-ignorable, part of understanding hegemonic power relations and concomitant normalised geographies.

Soundtracks of place

The relationship between music and power is depicted by Tia DeNora in her argument that:

To be in control, then, of the soundtrack of social action is to provide a framework for the organization of social agency, a framework for how people perceive (consciously or subconsciously) potential avenues of conduct. ...control over music in social settings is a source of social power; it is an opportunity to structure the parameters of action. (2000:17/20)

For DeNora, music can be used to ‘control’ how individuals and groups (within power’s reach) think and act. Music – ‘the soundtrack of social action’ – plays on the conscious and subconscious subject, leading them in particular directions and towards particular territories of conduct. Central to DeNora’s analysis of social power are the geographies (or settings) which shape and are shaped by music. DeNora especially thinks about music’s role in what she terms ‘the creation of scenic specificity’ (2000:111), an idea that denotes the rendering of certain places as hospitable and inclusive of some forms of conduct/practice/action and inhospitable to or exclusive of others.

For DeNora, music is important spatially because of its capacity for ‘setting the scene’ – music ‘providing a way of modelling future action ... exemplifying action styles and ways of happening’ (2000:159). DeNora explores in her research how, for example, the music being played in British high street shops can act as a kind of audio ‘welcome mat’ (or in some cases ‘keep out’ notices) (2000:136). In this way, DeNora draws very clear lines between music, conduct, and space, and explores how these things interplay to produce different ‘settings’ which in turn exemplify and encourage, or discourage, different behaviours/bodies. In another example, DeNora considers at length how couples use music to produce intimate moments, and how music can make a space feel appropriate for intimacy. What DeNora takes from this close-up research is a kind of micro-politics of music and the body, and concludes that:

‘This is why the question of who puts what on the record player as a backdrop for intimacy is of necessity a question of intimate politics’. (DeNora, 2000:120)

Building directly on to this, but thinking instead about the spatialities and politics of urban life (rather than the politics of intimacy) we might argue, figuratively speaking, *the question of who puts what on the record player as a backdrop for urban life is of necessity a question of urban politics*. This point is potentially important because it re-phrases and re-emphasises the

place of music in the city and in our lives; it affirms the innate connection between music, politics, behaviour, belonging, and space (the setting). It leaves no room to think about the questions of *what* music or *where* music is played as anything other than of absolute relevance to our cultural and political geographies. This approach to music disrupts a discourse of music as a passive source of entertainment or simply as a source of capital, and instead phrases music as a formative and vital part of the production of space and politics.

Music and spatial controls

Spaces of music's public performance have long been highlighted in a range of cultural and geographical studies as key sites of political control and the exercise of power. Tricia Rose, for example, in her examination of the connections between urban America, cultural political hegemony, and American rap music, argues that 'powerful groups maintain and affirm their power by attempting to dictate the staging of public celebrations' and by 'preventing access to the public stage' (1994:100). The controlling of the 'public stage' (a term used to denote spaces which include, but also go beyond, the physical concert hall stage) is, for Rose, about power's instrumental use of music to align the geography and politics of public performance (especially in urban areas) to its own interests.

Rose's emphasis on the connection between power, the public stage, and performance is particularly insightful and significant as it brings attention to the importance of thinking about music in the public cityscape. Going back to DeNora's idea about who puts what on the record player, when scaled up to the city, is precisely about public performance. It raises the question, what music is allowed to be played and heard on the public urban 'record player' or on the 'public stage'? In a sense, this is the question Rose looked at in her research. The public stage is important because it is one of the more fundamental social and political endorsements of what or who belongs in a particular social space. Rose is saying that the

public stage is a window into the cultural political soul of the city, a doctrine of who belongs at the centre of urban life and who is omitted from it (cast to the margins).

A number of geographical analyses concerning the control of space and music have highlighted instances in which attempts have been made by both state and market to enforce or maintain some form of musical and sonic order and to protect certain spaces from the threat of music. For instance, the geographer David Sibley (1997) examines the tensions that emerged in the 1990s around the proliferation of open air rave music parties in the British countryside and the subsequent move to impose a ban on the raves via the introduction of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Bill by the British government in 1994 – a section of which is entitled ‘*Powers in relation to raves*’ (S. 63). Described by the Home Secretary at the time as ‘being designed to tackle the destruction and distress caused mainly to rural communities by trespassers’ (quoted in Sibley, 1997:221), Section 63 of the Bill specifies that the police have the power to ‘remove persons attending or preparing for a rave’ (S. 63(1)). In order to warrant the legitimacy of such powers, the Bill defines a ‘rave’ in terms of an open air gathering of 100 or more people at which amplified music is played during the night; adding that “‘music’ includes sounds wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats’ (S. 63(1b)). In doing this the Bill creates a specific ‘aesthetic criteria’ against which sounds can be judged as either ‘good or bad, appropriate or inappropriate, in the right or the wrong place’ (Revill, 2000:201). Sibley’s argument was that the indictment placed on ‘ravers’ was in fact an attempt by a collection of individuals, organisations, and institutions to protect and preserve from perceived urban threats, an idyllic representation of the countryside which includes the maintenance of a ‘natural’ or ‘rural’ soundscape. Sibley also notes how boundaries between an ‘us’ and ‘them’ become heightened and emphasized ‘when the interests of the more powerful groups in rural society appear to be threatened’ (1997:219).

Another example of research which addresses the role of music in the production of normalised spatial and social relationships is the work done by Arun Saldanha on the rave music scene in Goa (see Saldanha, 2002; 2005). Saldanha's research followed the rave music scene to explore how local forms of power create complex micro cultural political geographies in Goa's beach parties. Saldanha argues that music helps to place different bodies in different spatial and political relations; it connects and disconnects the different users (party goers) and servers (dealers, vendors, cleaners etc.) of the raves. For Saldanha, his research revealed music as the integral thread that joins and gives meaning to the place of the rave – it was music that gave texture to the place, but also made place uneven, creating distinctions between different and unequal bodies and practices. The music enabled distinctions which favoured dominant social groups, including the tourists who visit the place and the local actors who benefit economically from these uneven relationships. However, another point Saldanha raises is that in the context of the beach party, music can shroud power in the comforting vale of aesthetics and entertainment. Yet, this is of course more reason why there is a need to enquire more robustly into the politics of music.

Music and creativity: changing instruments of urban capital

A key part of the geographies of music field is the research which theorises music's place in the emergence of the 'creative city' (or 'cultural city') as a new kind of urban idyll which increasingly dominates the developmental trajectory of post-industrial urban landscapes (see Bergmann, 2008). Important to more recent geographies of music literatures is the question of what role music plays in these changing urban geographies. Nigel Thrift, for example argues that cultural practices and spaces are being assimilated within increasingly virulent urban economic policy agendas to fulfil the new rules of cultural urbanism which require that cities have a 'buzz' and be 'creative'. As Thrift put it, 'Cities must exhibit intense expressivity' (2004:58). As research by creative city proponents such as Richard Florida (see Florida and

Jackson, 2010; and Florida, 2002) and Charles Landry (2008) have shown, music is a fundamental 'tool' in terms of how governing and commercial organisations are able to produce cities which fulfil these 'expressive' expectations.

Music's capacity for 'setting the scene', and for representing the various parameters of emotional and embodied conduct, is increasingly relevant in relation to the city. Indeed, what DeNora's research tells us, that 'getting the music right is a way of trying to make the action right' (2000:114) is something that undoubtedly has to be accounted for when examining the cultural politics of the contemporary city. This is especially important given that 'getting the music right' is rapidly climbing up the list of priorities of city authorities and cultural policy agendas. Indeed, recent research in urban geography and cultural studies is increasingly turning attention to the fact that music is being drawn ever deeper into the circle of mainstream local political processes (see Cohen et al., 2009; and Watson et al., 2009). The place of music in the global competition for urban economic/capitalistic success is changing; as the urban cultural-economy guru Richard Florida so starkly put it (to city planners), 'support[ing] a local music scene can be just as important as investing in high-tech business and far more effective than building a downtown mall' (2002:229). Music is a highly significant source of power that is being wielded in ever more complex and diverse ways, especially within urban settings. However, just as powerful actors increasingly instrumentalise music, and just as power is able to territorialise new spaces through music, so the challenge of theorising the politics of music becomes at once both more pressing and in many ways more testing, not least because, as so much work in the geographies of music field demonstrates, political, aesthetic, and cultural connections can be so intricate and subtle.

Beyond thinking about music specifically there is an important debate in human geography around the issue of what creativity means and how the meaning of creativity is re-shaping the urban environment. Gibson and Klocker (2005) apply a critical analysis to the changing

meaning of creativity in urban settings. They critique what they argue is a constriction of and essentialisation of the ways in which notions of creativity are being adopted into current cultural urban policy. They argue:

‘Creativity’ is a loaded term but, in Florida (2002) a limited definition – creativity as entrepreneurial innovation present only in some individuals, those engaged in certain industries – is assumed to be all encompassing. Alternative creativities (graffiti-art, culture jamming, skateboarding, vandalism, shoplifting, collectivisation . . .) do not figure in this creative economy script, in part because they are perceived as socially disruptive, but also because they are less easily transformed into (capitalist) accumulation strategies. (Gibson and Klocker, 2005:100)

In other words, within urban capitalism what counts as creativity is increasingly territorialised and reduced in relation to particular understandings of what kinds of spaces and practices (and I would add sounds and forms of music) can count as creative. Gibson and Klocker also add that:

...despite the many possibilities that an engagement with creativity might enable, in the emerging policy discourse... creativity is ‘folded back’ within a neoliberal governing project. Rather than present alternative ways of imagining regional futures, what seems to be happening is that a singular interpretation of creativity is being incorporated into a rather *uncreative* framework, in which private sector solutions..., the ideal of creative, independent, entrepreneurial subjects, and the primacy of place competition in global markets remain paramount. (Gibson and Klocker, 2005:100)

Within this dynamic of new urban geographies, creativity and creative practices, including music, Gibson and Klocker argue, are being instrumentalised in the production and intensification of a dichotomy between ‘the creative’ (people and places) and ‘the non creative’ (people and places). Furthermore, they argue that this dichotomy is key to the urban capitalist/neoliberal myth of creativity that is needed in order that different parts of the population conduct themselves in ways that reify and thus ensure the hegemony of urban capitalistic powers. The discourse of urban creativity and especially the distinction between creatives and non-creatives relies on the perpetuation of an ideological myth that separates that city in particular and repressive ways. Non-creative areas of cities are constructed as ‘broken’, but that could be positive if only they could be ‘fixed’. As Gibson and Klocker note:

Unsuccessful people are perceived as problematic through a binary opposition to the norms set by the successful, creative class, bourgeois society. (Gibson and Klocker, 2005:98)

In other words, success and failure within urban capitalism become opposing bundles of traits. Success is bundled together with creativity, competitiveness, trendiness, conformity, even cleanliness. The flip side of this – failure – is bundled together with the opposites, non-creativity, inactivity, obsolescence, deviation, and dirtiness. Gibson and Klocker’s argument is that this binary reproduces itself and in doing so continually reifies the positivity of urban capitalistic norms. Moreover, urban life under this logic is given a ‘key’ to map itself – urban successes and urban failures – and a trajectory of how things should work – all policies to be oriented to banishing failure and achieving success. A ‘singular vision’ of urban life is being constructed and creativity has a special place in it – and music, as Florida so keenly pointed out, is central to the narrative of urban creativity.

What the different literatures discussed so far highlight is that music is potentially a key instrument in power's ability to shape the production of space and place. But what they crucially also do is shine a light on some of the processes of normalisation which allow powerful actors to harness the power of music. In an anti-essentialist fashion, each of the different literatures I discussed so far, have in some way refused to accept the spatialities of music as fixed or neutral (or natural). These different approaches will be key to developing my own analysis of the process of normalisation in Birmingham's musicscape in Chapter Four. In the next section, I continue to explore the geographies of music literatures in relation to the theme of marginalisation.

MUSIC AT THE MARGINS

...the musician is at the same time within society, which protects, purchases, and finances him, and outside it, when he threatens it with his visions. ...When he is reassuring, he alienates; when he is disturbing, he destroys; when he speaks too loudly, power silences him.

- Attali, 1985:11

Many geographers have argued that controlling the production of space in order to produce normalised geographies is contingent on, what David Sibley (Sibley, 1997) refers to as, a process of 'elision' – the removal of unwanted and 'abject' things (people, objects, sounds, ideas, practices etc.) from normalised spaces (the body, the home, the city etc.). The perception of something as abject or unwanted, however, is always context-based and is therefore only conceivable in relation to the particular aspects of a place that are considered desirable, valuable, or normal. In other words, the production of normalised spaces which serve to reproduce the dominant position of hegemonic powers is invariably contingent on the

simultaneous production, and exclusion, of an 'other'. Here I examine attempts within the geographies of music field to approach and theorise the relationship between music, exclusion, otherness, and marginal geographies. The discussion offered in this section is particularly important for informing my thinking around the process of marginalisation which is discussed in Chapter Five with specific reference to rap music.

Musical transgressions

When I began reading around the topic of music and politics in geographical research, the issue of music being part of what makes cities uneven was not especially prominent. There is in the geographies of music literature a set of strong conversations which have developed since the mid-1990s about music as a practice for making place (see Smith, 1997; Leyshon et al., 1998; Connell and Gibson, 2003; Finn and Lukinbeal, 2009). Within those conversations there is, on the one hand, a political enquiry about how music and place-making might be controlled by powerful actors and instrumentalised to produce normalised geographies (as discussed above). On the other hand, there is a long tradition of enquiry about how music can 'empower the construction of individual and social identities' or how music can act as 'a site of positive self-realisation' (Cloonan and Johnson, 2002:27) or how it can be used as a site of counter-hegemonic practices (the topic of the discussion in the final section of this chapter). However, within existing conversations about music and place, there is less connected-up analysis which examines the margins within the geographies of music. I am not suggesting that these concerns are entirely absent from current debates, however, they have a more limited and less joined-up development and, therefore, they warrant further attention. Nonetheless, I will explore the work that has been done in this area of enquiry into music, threat, and exclusion.

Who let the dogs out? Get them back in!

In her analysis of the politics of black cultural expression, Tricia Rose (1994) considers the notion of rap music as threatening and transgressive. She frames her discussion within the political theory of Antonio Gramsci and his ideas about the ‘war of manoeuvre’ and the ‘war of position’ – the former provides the victor with control over ‘capital and institutions’ and the latter provides the victor with control over ‘the discursive and ideological terrain that legitimates such institutional control’ (Rose, 1994:102). Crucially, within this dynamic of conflict, control over capital and institutions requires and depends upon ideological legitimation which comes from the ability to control discourses – what we might think of in Foucauldian terms as, social ‘truths’ (see Foucault, 1982). What Rose’s work brings to light is the potential precarity of the contingent links between control over resources and the control over ideas, and the potential that music has to disrupt that careful balance. Hence, Rose argues that the legitimacy of power ‘runs the risk of unravelling when lived experiences conflict with legitimising ideologies’ (1994:102).

Rose refers to Lipsitz’s metaphor of an ‘ideological dogcatcher’ who, so say, has to be sent out every morning to ‘round up ideological strays, only to be confronted by a new group of loose mutts the next day’ (1994:102). Here the ‘mutt’, the ‘ideological stray’, is conceived as a ‘threat’ to power – it threatens to compromise power’s capacity to legitimise institutional control (to win Gramsci’s ‘war of position’). Moreover, the mutt is an ideological stray in the sense that it is an excess – the truth escaping through the cracks of power’s facade – threatening to reveal the chasm between lived experience and ideological myth. For Rose, then, a threat to power is thus something which has the real potential to disclose the real asymmetries on which power depends, in turn, undermining the legitimacy of power’s institutional control. Rose notes, that ‘discursive inversions and the contexts within which they are disseminated directly threaten the institutional base’ (1994:102). In other words,

disrupt ideological discourses and you potentially disrupt institutional control; the two wars of manoeuvre and position are co-dependent. Rose applies this analysis to her research on rap music in America and makes the argument that:

In contemporary popular culture, rappers have been vocal unruly stray dogs. Rap music, more than any other contemporary form of black cultural expression, articulates the chasm between black urban lived experience and dominant, legitimate (e.g. neoliberal) ideologies regarding equal opportunity and racial inequality. As new ideological fissures and points of contradiction develop, new mutts bark and growl, and new dogcatchers are dispatched. (Rose, 1994:102)

In Rose's study she examines this political dynamic in part by looking at/listening to and making sense of how certain American rappers have actively critiqued political injustices in their rap lyrics. In the cases that Rose highlights, their rap lyrics both reveal and challenge forms of racial discrimination. Rose's argument is that those particular musical practices, in some way, disclose the gap between lived experience and ideological myth of racial equality under American-capitalistic-democracy. Put simply, rapper's musical practices reveal the fallacy of power's dominance, thus, they disrupt and threaten power's legitimacy.

For me, I feel that Rose's point is important to keep hold of when thinking in the following chapters about moments in Birmingham where music, musical practices, or musical actors may potentially disrupt power's legitimacy and therefore threaten power's spatial, cultural, and political dominance. To note, Rose's analysis of how power is threatened by rap music goes beyond rap lyrics to think about how a range of musical practices and connections within rap disrupt power, including, not least the spatialities of rap music. For example, Rose examines rap music's place in the city, arguing that because rap music is seen to stem from the inner-city ghetto – homogenised black spaces of poverty and violence – that any attempt

to take rap beyond the ghetto is seen as inherently transgressive. To be sure, certain of rap's transgressions out of the ghetto have been managed, commandeered, and appropriated for commercial gain – hence the enormous and ever growing global market for rap music products. But where transgressions are unwarranted they are perceived as the unwanted movement of the margin into the centre.

Rose also writes about her own experience of attending rap music concerts in the 1990s to get across the intricate and subtle web of feelings that contribute to the shared feeling among rap audiences of being 'out of place' (see Rose, 1994:134). Moreover, Rose reflects on her own experiences of, what she describes as, the 'humiliating' security body-search procedures that rap audiences faced at public music events. Her experiences of going to rap concerts in America during the early 1990s reveal how feelings of fear and suspicion about rap audiences mutated into a kind of socio-spatial barrier in the form of the search procedure which, she felt, let rap audiences know that they do not fit and are unwelcome in spaces of public performance. She explains the dynamic which frames the presence of a black people in a 'normal' music space:

Because black youths are constructed as a permanent threat to social order, large public gatherings will always be viewed as dangerous events. The larger arenas possess greater potential for mass access and unsanctioned behaviour. And black youths, who are highly conscious of their alienated and marginalized lives, will continue to be hostile toward those institutions and environments that reaffirm this aspect of their reality. (Rose, 1994:134)

For Rose, the presence of rap music and rap audiences in large arena venues actually serves to highlight the spatial norms which conventionally dominate what she calls the 'public stage'. That is, for Rose, the public stage is a normalised space and music plays a role in both

producing such norms as well as threatening them – in this case, rap music is the threat because it is seen to transgress from its marginal space of the inner-city ‘ghetto’ (its natural place) to the central spaces of urban life (major live performance venues). Rose also notes that in many cases the fear around rap led to more explicit acts of exclusion against certain hip hop acts, for example, the American rap group NWA faced police enforced show cancellations across the US during the 1990s.

One of the key dimensions of Rose’s work on American rap is her emphasis on thinking beyond those instances where music disrupts or threatens because it is being used in a politically progressive way. Instead, Rose thinks about how power is threatened by the cultural practices of marginalised groups wherein there may not be any direct or explicit attempt to challenge power, but simply the threat of the margin itself. As I will discuss below, music can be harnessed in counter-hegemonic moments, however, it is not necessarily the case that power is threatened only by that which actively resists it. Other practices which do not have such political motivations, may also threaten dominant orders. Rose’s argument is that the complex practices in rap and hip hop – from the progressive to the repressive – may also potentially demystify dominant ideologies and disclose power in some way. This point is particularly useful to keep in mind when thinking through the thorny issues relating to rap music and urban gangs, both of which were prominent themes in my own research but which also presented difficult conceptual and moral challenges in terms of understanding why rap music is marginalised in the city. I will explore these challenges in more detail in Chapter Four; here I want to discuss how notions of music as marginal, threatening, and transgressive have been developed by Jacques Attali.

Silencing 'noise'

The notion of power 'silencing' that which threatens is compellingly observed and theorised in Attali's single work on music, *Noise* (1985). Attali deals directly with the interrelationship between music and power, including the question of what happens to that which threatens power.

Attali, perhaps more than any other theorist of the politics of music, puts at the heart of his analysis the idea that there is something dangerous about music – to that danger, Attali gives the name 'noise'. As such the idea of noise is crucial to thinking about the politics of music. What is somewhat unique about Attali's theory of music and noise is his framing of the political 'duality' of music. Throughout his analysis, music teeters on the edge between, on the one hand, being a source of order, power, and control and, on the other hand, being a source of disruption, danger, and threat. Spatially, music fluxes between the centre and the margin, defining both spaces at once. This is, for Attali, in a sense what makes music so politically potent and important. Along these dualistic lines, Attali notes how:

With noise is born disorder and its opposite: the world. With music is born power and its opposite: subversion. (Attali, 1985:6)

Speaking about music in capitalistic political formations, Attali recognises in both music and in politics more generally the unwavering possibility for both fixity and change. In a sense, this is Attali's driving idea that just as much as dominant social powers rely and depend on cultural instruments/tools/weapons like music, those same things are always-already power's greatest threat. In a sense, Attali is saying that music, however deeply it is connected into a structure of domination, can never be completely sealed off from difference – possibility remains indefinitely in music, even if minimally.

Attali makes the following statement about hegemonic power, especially capitalism, and its relationship to difference:

No organized society can exist without structuring differences at its core. No market economy can develop without erasing those differences in mass production. The self-destruction of capitalism lies in this contradiction, in the fact that music leads a deafening life: an instrument of differentiation, it has become a locus of repetition. (Attali, 1985:5)

The way I read this is that capital – ‘the market economy’ – a hegemonic power puts at the centre of its production the removal of difference. In doing so, it strikes up a contingent relationship with difference – power’s existence depends on that relationship. As a result what threatens power most is the very thing it most deeply relies on; what threatens power is difference itself. Capitalistic power relies on the ‘absence(ing)’ of difference and is therefore threatened by the presence(ing) of difference. Difference, therefore, is the ‘abnormal’; the disruption of the repetition of normalised orders. With regards to where music comes into this, when Attali claims that music has become a ‘locus of repetition’, he is not saying so straightforwardly that mass-produced music simply sounds the same, or that each moment of music literally repeats the last, he is saying that music has become a ‘place’ (locus being the Latin for ‘place’) of repetition, or rather a place of normalisation. In other words, music, within a market economy, has become a place in which cultural political orders – man/woman, rich/poor, nature/culture, black/white, creative/uncreative, and competitive/uncompetitive – are normalised and reproduced. The key is that to achieve these norms some form of difference has to be ‘erased’. To erase however, is never simply a case of deleting completely, instead it is invariably a case of hiding or moving difference out of sight where its disruptive presence cannot be felt in the ‘locus of repetition’, or, places of normal life. Like repetition, difference itself has to be given a place. That place is the margin. In other

words, the difference which power removes in order to create normalised spaces can never be fully extinguished; they can only ever be moved away from power's centres – to the margin.

What the work of Rose and Attali reveal is that creating margins is crucial to the process of creating centres, and that music plays a crucial role in shaping who and what becomes marginalised in society. Music becomes a symbol of something undesirable, and in doing so it becomes a noise which must be silenced. But defining something as a noise is always specific to a context; noise is not a naturally defined position for any sound. Any sound can be identified as music or as noise. But both Attali and Rose argue that power fixes certain forms of music and the people that music represents as noise, as abject, and the geographical response is to marginalise, it is to hide, and silence the noise which threatens power. Within my own research there were thought provoking examples of music at the margins of urban life within Birmingham and my analysis of marginalisation is informed by and speaks to the literature discussed in this section. In the final section of this chapter I discuss the role and place of music in relation to resistance.

RESISTANCE THROUGH MUSIC

Under social conditions in which sustained frontal attacks on powerful groups are strategically unwise or successfully contained, oppressed people use language, dance, and music to mock those in power, express rage, and produce fantasies of subversion.

- Rose, 1994:99

Geographical enquiry is increasingly oriented towards conceptualising space and place as fluid, not as a pre-given or bounded entity but as an active production and as the site of

everyday life, power, and the possibility of difference (see Gibson-Graham, 2008). In relation to this shift towards post-structural notions and desires to undo powerful readings of space, in this final section I examine attempts with the geographies of music field to approach and theorise the relationship between music and resistance and the possibility of changing spatialities.

New geographies of resistance

At each juncture in the history of theorising space and place writers have recognised that resistance is part of place – that there is the potential for socio-spatial change. From a performative, anti-essentialist, post-structural, and non-representational perspective, the key to understanding resistance, however, is to ensure that its theoretical framing is not based on an essentialized or fixed understating of either power or place. In other words, there is a rejection of ‘notions of resistance that assume a subject standing... against a well-established structure of power’ (Thrift, 1997:150). In which case, there is a need to think about resistance as part of the production of place in a non-fundamentalist way and without recourse to a ‘David and Goliath romanticism’ in which political subjects are forced into a dichotomy of resistance and submission (Thrift, 1997:124). For Amin and Thrift (2004:234), this means shifting the focus of analysis away from participation in politics with a capital ‘P’, towards thinking about politics of the ‘minor register’, that is, the politics of everyday life. Moreover, their argument is that our analysis of resistance, which is a central feature in the production of place, has to reconsider ‘the ordinary and the ‘small things’ (from walks and car journeys to daily joys and irritations) that make up urban social life’ (2004:234). They argue that from the perspective of conventional politics these small things can be looked upon as unworthy of the ascription ‘political’ even though ‘most political acts precisely draw upon that everyday sociality’ (2004:234).

Amongst the writers who have attempted to address these questions, J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996; 2006) provide one of the most comprehensive and insightful analyses of the relationship between place and political alterity and the creation of new places and new ways of being in the world. Gibson-Graham (2006) advocate an ontology of ‘overdetermination’, this refers to the idea that the political landscape is never completely fixed and is always-already open to possibility, but, that it is often subject to representations of fixity and incontestability (see Gibson-Graham, 1996:27). In their own research Gibson-Graham (2006) attempted to enact, what they term ‘a politics of economic possibility’, this refers to the development of non-capitalist and non-dominant economic relationships. They pursue this political possibility through three ‘techniques’ – ontological reframing, rereading, and creativity – each of which provides a set of theoretical and practical-political tools for composing spaces of difference (see Gibson-Graham, 2006:xxx). More specifically, the aim of their political project is to ‘decentre’ capitalist economic representations, imaginations, and performances of place in two ways. First, they seek to reveal the existence of noncapitalist practices which are made invisible through subordination. Second, they seek to develop spaces in which to incubate alternative political economic identities, practices, and discourses. In other words, Gibson-Graham’s aim is to enable a politics of difference rather than domination in order to create and sustain new places and new realities (see especially Gibson-Graham, 2006). Gibson-Graham very much capture the potential of anti-essentialist and post-structural politics to challenge fixed meanings and oppressive spatial relationships. Here; I want to think about how such a politics has been thought about in relation to music.

Connecting music into political change

Connell and Gibson argue that music provides an opportunity to assert human political agency and that ultimately ‘all musical materials are capable of being mobilised subversively... even the most commercial music’ (2003:273). As such there is a need to

examine how within the practice of music, opportunities emerge not only for artistic creativity but also for music to enable alternative cultural political relationships and/or the production of alternative cultural and political spaces (see also Smith, 2000).

Ben Anderson (2002) analyses recorded music practices as a way of producing 'utopian' spaces. He argues that utopias (spaces of difference) do not have to be thought of as something which is 'located else-where or else-when in a transcendent realm' (2002:211), instead he argues that there is the possibility, through music, for a utopia as 'immanent to 'everyday life'' (2002:211). Anderson explores the idea of an 'immanent utopia' through an examination of listening practices and recorded music and considers how these practices contain 'moments of hope' and the opportunity to transform feelings through music (2002:211). He argues that the individual emotional subject, the everyday, and music are all potential sites of transformation and provide opportunities for what Anderson refers to as the 'celebration of the possible' (2002:224). Moreover, Anderson argues that at the level of everyday life change and newness can emerge through music. For example, listening to music can become an opportunity to transform mood or feelings and he explains that 'such moments of heightened sensuous experience with music 'indicate' the presence of other possibilities or potentialities, as they exist 'not-yet'' (2002:224). He argues that what is hoped for – a utopian space of difference and hope – must be 'experimented for', and music, because of its malleability and accessibility can open up a space in everyday life for this kind of transformative-experimentalism. Anderson's line of enquiry, then, highlights one of the ways in which music's relation to forms of spatial, emotional, and political transformation can become part of everyday life, and that music can play a role in creating alternative or utopian spaces.

The themes of music, place, and resistive politics have also been explored in literature outside geography. For example, through a study of American hip hop Murray Forman (2000)

demonstrates that urban places are deconstructed and reconstructed by the practices of rap artists. Forman argues that rappers are not passive residents of place but that their music affords them political agency, in particular, the capacity to become, what Forman calls, 'alternative cartographers' of place (2000:65-66). By this he means 'hip hop continually displays a clever transformative creativity that is endlessly capable of altering the uses of technologies and space' (2000:65). Forman explores how rap musicians actively use their music and rap lyrics in attempts to 'agitate' the dominant representations of their cities and to 'reconstruct the image-idea of the city' as they understand it (2000:83). Forman adds further nuance to these claims by exploring how the political and spatial capacities of rap musicians differ between American cities. For example, he argues that in New York, more engrained and dominant representations of the city constrain the capacity of rap music to develop alternative narratives but that this is less of an issue in cities such as Seattle which carry less 'representational baggage' and where, Forman argues, 'lyrical innovators' have greater opportunities to re-imagine and re-present their cities.

Finding the right place for music and resistance

Finally, I want to highlight the work of Adam Krims, in particular the ideas he develops in his book *Music and Urban Geography* (2007). Therein, Krims explores, using a number of case study settings, the place of music in different urban contexts, and throughout his analysis he grapples with the possibility that music can be used to alter political and spatial relationships. Though Krims certainly makes some important and compelling points, I particularly want to discuss his work in terms of what I argue is its failure to capture music as something which has the potential to be used in resistance. A discussion of his ideas will be a useful way to think about the relationship between music and resistance, but it is also an opportunity to think about the kinds of additional research that the geographies of music field would benefit from.

In his analysis of music and urban geography, Krims criticises the approach taken in cultural studies to the spatialities and politics of music. He argues that cultural studies have tended to think about music within a dualistic politico-spatial paradigm of localised resistive forces pitted against homogenising global forces. In other words, Krims argues that within cultural studies there has been an almost instinctive tendency to celebrate and vindicate 'localness' in music as something culturally and politically resistive to the homogenising and globalised force of capitalism. In such a paradigm, Krims argues that capitalism, accused of being a culturally homogenising force, is equated to the global (the non-local), whereas cultural authenticity and resistance is attached to the local. The two spatialities become politically opposed – 'local' = good and resistant to capitalism, and 'global' = bad and conducive to capitalism.⁵

Krims' critical position is that the dichotomy of local=good/global=bad is problematic precisely because it falsely constructs and presumes a more or less Fordist system of cultural standardisation; something which Krims argues is no longer an accurate politico-economic frame of reference. Krims further argues that cultural studies approaches to music have failed to conceive of the music industry as operating within a post-Fordist political economy wherein, besides other things, musical 'localness' is now truly part of and conducive to capitalism (rather than automatically being a resistive spatial position). Krims' argument is that just as in all spheres of the economy, especially in technologies; standardisation has been replaced by, or allied with, a proliferation of specialisms and localisms. No longer restricted to simply capitalising on globally standardised (non-localised) products, capitalism thrives on the localised diversity of production. Once standardised markets selling enormous volumes of

⁵ My portrayal of this paradigm is no doubt simplistic, but nonetheless it captures Krims' critique of a conventional cultural studies conceptualisation of the spatialities of cultural forces and the place of resistance in music.

products to whole populations have, since the late 1970s, increasingly become multiple markets selectively selling specialised products to specialised audiences – this model Krims argues applies to music.

My argument is however, that Krims arguably takes his analysis to an extreme which is just as *fatal* as falsely pitting a resistant ‘local’ against a dominating ‘global’. Krims’ analysis, I argue, unfortunately ends up with a somewhat totalising version of capitalistic power from which nothing can seemingly escape. That is, the capitalism that Krims portrays is one that has gone from a once perhaps contestable form (in the Fordist period) to one that, in its current phase, is almost completely un-contestable. Krims’ portrait of capital is one in which all spatial, cultural, and musical processes are seemingly already (at least potentially, if not actually) subsumed – commandeered. Nothing is shown in Krims’ analysis of music and urban geography to be beyond the reach of capital. In turn, what he arguably ends up with is an ultimately hopeless narrative of political economic life, and perhaps an even less hopeful narrative of musical difference. Indeed, Musical difference itself appears as an all-too-easy target for the post-Fordist and global-local capitalism that Krims uses in his frame of analysis. Thus, despite his largely valid critique of cultural studies and his assessment of the current political economy, Krims fails, or, stops short of thinking critically about capitalism’s ‘outsides’ – its inexistences and lacks and its ultimate contestability – and, in turn, he fails to account for the reality that capitalism (or other dominant powers) can be and is being resisted – that there are musical practices incongruous to, resistant to, or intangible to capital.

I agree with Krims’ analysis in that it is absolutely imperative that we attempt to comprehend capitalist production for what it is and avoid reconstructing erroneous or outmoded images of capital, such as the one Krims accuses cultural studies of invoking. However, my argument, and my criticism of Krims’ analysis, is that we have also to go further and be sure that not all forms of ‘production’, a term Krims uses (in a Marxian sense) to denote social organisation,

have to be narrativised from a capitalist starting point. We need, in other words, to be sure that there are forms of ‘production’ which quite simply do not include capitalism as a master signifier. To adopt a notion of capital as ultimately too powerful to resist, is, as I note above, a failure to apprehend the nature of resistance where it does exist.

If we take Krims’ critique of cultural studies approaches to music wherein resistance has become (to put it bluntly) uncritically attached to localness, as well as his argument that localness is truly a part of the specialist economy of post-Fordist capitalism, then how do we avoid simply stopping there (as Krims unfortunately does)? How do we think about the non-capitalist or the more-than-capitalist multiple narratives of music and urban geography? Moreover, how do we robustly and radically maintain, and not malign, key anti-hegemonic notions such as resistance, difference, and possibility in our narrative of music and urban geography? To be sure, many and varied options and routes exist, but those that I take here follow the lead of some of the anti-essentialist and post-structural thinkers whose work I have discussed above, such as J.K. Gibson-Graham and Tricia Rose. Further to this, the examples that I draw on from Birmingham (in particular in Chapter Six) present concrete attempts to resist, through music, dominant power relations. These, I argue, present narratives for thinking about music and resistance which go beyond the local/global dichotomy presented by Krims.

CONCLUSION: REVEALING MUSIC’S ‘HIDDEN’ STORIES

This research ‘fits into’ the geographies of music field. Generally speaking, besides the concern for thinking about ‘music spatially’ and ‘space musically’, this field of thought has largely been driven by a concern for the cultural politics of music. That is, the literature is characterised by attempts to understand not just the geographies but the politics and meaning

of music (practices) also. That is, most of the authors in the field would recognise that music ‘speaks to’ politics in a particular and unique way. This is perhaps because music is so exceptionally accessible as an art form, both in terms of composition/production and listening/consumption. Indeed, it is music’s spatial and cultural ubiquity that most likely appeals to social science and political enquiry – simply put, music’s reach stretches into the most varied and extensive set of spaces. It goes where many cultural practices cannot.

In this chapter I have tried to make sense of how geographers, cultural theorists, and social musicologists have, in different ways, approached and dealt with music’s place within the processes of normalisation, marginalisation, and resistance. Perhaps above all, what the literature demonstrates is that music is undeniably a multifaceted phenomenon which has a set of cultural political tensions bubbling away underneath its more obvious aesthetic exterior. Music’s aesthetics are by no means separate from its politics but as anyone who has simply enjoyed music without questioning its politics knows, music can hide those politics incredibly well. Sometimes music wears its politics on its sleeve in the form of so-called ‘political music’, which is often thought provoking, but even the most politically overt songs can be experienced and enjoyed without the listener batting an eyelid to its political provocations. Music also has a certain bodily directness; when it is *right* it simply grabs the listener with an immediacy that seemingly bypasses the ‘permission’ of cognition. Hence music is, for most of us, most of the time, something experienced without prerequisite political thought; and those ‘hidden politics’, as Tricia Rose (1994) called them, remain precisely that – hidden. Here, however, in this thesis, like the authors I have discussed in this chapter, I want to bring music’s hidden cultural politics to the surface and to question what implications they have for uneven urban geographies in Birmingham.

3.

METHODOLOGY: NARRATIVISING BIRMINGHAM'S MUSICSCAPE

Music does not exist in a vacuum. Geographical space is not an 'empty stage' on which aesthetic, economic, and cultural battles are contested. Rather music and space are actively and dialectally related. Music shapes spaces, and spaces shape music.

Connell and Gibson, 2003: 192

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I discuss the fieldwork stage of my research which focused on exploring Birmingham's musicscape and collecting qualitative data on the roles that music plays in different people's lives and in different spaces. In the first section of the chapter, I provide an overview of the research location – Birmingham's musicscape. In the second section, I outline and discuss the data collection techniques – interviews, participant-observation, and secondary audio, visual, and textual data collection. The third section is in-depth discussion of the fieldwork process itself. The discussion is split into three parts each of which details how I used different qualitative research methods and where I conducted research in relation each of the three key research themes of normalisation, marginalisation, and resistance.

RESEARCH LOCATION: BIRMINGHAM'S MUSICSCAPE

My research on the geographies of music was located in 'Birmingham's musicscape'. Here I want to provide a kind of birds-eye view of the city. Birmingham is located in the West Midlands region of England. It is known as England's 'second city' as it has the largest population outside London (approximately one million). Culturally, Birmingham's identity is often seen to be tied up with its history of heavy industry. Historically, the city is famous for being at the centre of the industrial revolution in the late 19th Century. Musically, Birmingham is particularly famous for the heavy metal music which emerged in the 1970s and which supposedly reflects and takes inspiration from its industrial past (see Harrison, 2010 for an account of heavy metal's place in Birmingham). Heavy metal bands from Birmingham such as Black Sabbath and Judas Priest are well-known across the world. The Birmingham of the 1980s was also famously known as a hotspot for West Indian musical cultures, especially reggae music; and local reggae bands such as Steel Pulse garnered a significant following (see Jones, 1988). Since the 1980s Birmingham has also been the UK's primary location for Bhangra music, a style of Indian dance music (see Dudrah, 2002; 2011). Besides these particular music genres, Birmingham has produced its fair share of household name musicians including, among others, the new romantic pop group Duran Duran in the 1980s, the Brit-pop band Ocean Colour Scene in the 1990s, and the RnB singer Jamelia in the 2000s. Beyond these more popular music genres and musicians there are a multiplicity of less known musicians and music genres in the city. Of course, my own research has never been about trying to provide a comprehensive history of the music of Birmingham; it is about the spatialities and cultural politics of the contemporary musicscape. Nonetheless, Birmingham does have a significant popular and classical music history which plays a part in shaping the city's identity.

Birmingham is well-known for its ethnically diverse population. Around 42% of Birmingham's population are 'from an ethnic group other than White', and 22% of its population were born outside the UK, compared to the national average of 14% (Birmingham City Council, 2014). Birmingham is also the 'youngest city in Europe' with around 40% of the city's population under the age 25 (Birmingham City Council, 2014). This is partly the result of the large student population who attend Birmingham's four universities. Birmingham also has high levels of deprivation. For example in 2010, Birmingham was ranked as the most deprived city in the UK in areas of income and employment deprivation. In addition, in 2010, 40% of Birmingham's population lived in areas described as in the most deprived 10% in England (Birmingham City Council, 2014). These high levels of deprivation contribute to the similarly high levels of economic inequality in the city. Research in 2013 by the Centre for Cities, for example, revealed Birmingham to be the second most unequal city (behind Glasgow) in the UK (Centre-for-Cities, 2013). Alongside the massive levels of deprivation, then, there exist enclaves of enormous wealth in Birmingham. In 2014 the Birmingham Post published the 'Birmingham Rich List' consisting of the 50 richest individuals in Birmingham whose combined wealth exceeds £16.6 billion. The nature of inequality in Birmingham is also racially and geographically specific. The following graph (Figure 1), for example, shows the relationship between levels of multiple deprivation and the proportion of ethnic minorities in different Birmingham wards in 2004. In essence, the graph shows a higher rate of deprivation in areas of the city with high populations of ethnic minorities.

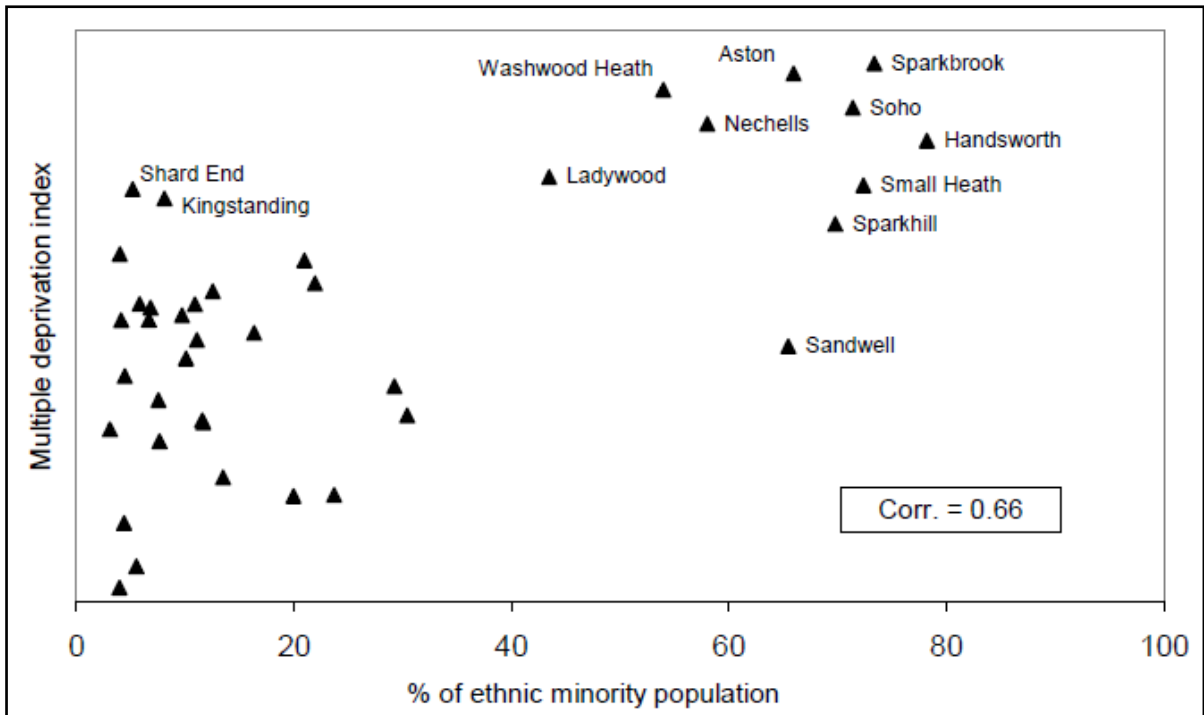


Figure 1: Deprivation and ethnicity in Birmingham (Source: Cangiano, 2007)

These data reveal Birmingham, at the very least, to be a complex city which is uneven in multiple ways. To some extent, we are used to thinking about inequality in these quantitative ways, however, this research is an attempt to also think about Birmingham’s inequalities and asymmetries in other ways – in cultural, spatial, political, and musical ways – and through qualitative data.

Beyond this very basic overview of Birmingham as a city, I also want to highlight in more detail how I approached and engaged with Birmingham’s musicscape as the location of my empirical research. In other words, I feel it would be useful to provide an overview of the key musical spaces which I conducted my research in. To do so, I have produced a schematic map (accompanied by images) which highlights four particular areas, each of which represents a distinct concentration of musical activity in Birmingham. Moreover, the areas highlighted on the map are intended to represent some of the key musical spaces and identities that are present in the city. To be clear, however, the map is not meant to provide a complete or exhaustive image of Birmingham’s musicscape, nor are the individual areas meant to be

treated as internally homogeneous or definitive. Nor are they supposed to speak to some essential or official breakdown of what Birmingham's musicscape is really like. On the contrary, the map is closely linked to and derived from my own experience of doing the empirical research, including how the city's scenes were recounted to me during interviews, how they are discursively laid out and constructed in secondary material (such as in the media or in cultural policy), and how I personally experienced them whilst navigating the field. Moreover, the map is quite simply a practical means by which I can introduce and illustrate the city's music. Inevitably, there is no way of providing a definitive map of something called 'Birmingham's musicscape'. Besides anything, the map and the four areas it highlights provides simply another way in which to begin thinking about Birmingham as place.

The map highlights four themed areas which I have given the names of 1) the gang territories,⁶ 2) the entertainment district, 3) the creative quarter, and 4) the bohemian area; each is accompanied by a series of three images which are there simply to provide a visual illustration of each area's identity. Finally, the map, along with the descriptions of each area below are supposed to be a useful point of reference for anyone who is unfamiliar with Birmingham and to provide a better sense of where I conducted my research.

⁶ I recognise that the term 'the gang territories' is a provocative tag, but it is used as such in order reflect on how the city and its musical cultures are constructed both materially and in the imagination. It is a reference point the meaning of which the thesis will unpick.

Figure 2: Mapping Birmingham's Musicscape (Source: Author)



Here I provide a brief description of each themed area.

‘The Gang Territories’

This refers to a group of areas in the north of Birmingham whose identities have become deeply entangled with street gangs, who, in turn, are connected to rap music. The specific areas include: Handsworth, Aston, and Lozells; these areas are also known by their respective postcodes B21, B6 and B19. The images I have used to depict the connections between the presence of gangs and rap music include, firstly, the image of a map of the area which shows the names of Birmingham’s two most notorious rival gangs and their associated postcodes. The map is taken from a documentary film about gangs in Birmingham titled *One Mile Away*. The film’s title refers to the distance between the two street gangs – the Burger Bar Boys (also known as the Burgers) whose gang territory is Handsworth (B21) and the Johnson Crew (also known as the Johnsons) whose gang territory is Aston (B6). The Johnsons are also associated with the Lozells area (B19). One thing to note is that over time the names of the gangs that operate in these areas has changed. Although they can still be identified as Burgers or Johnsons territories, today the most common gang names associated with the two areas are ‘Bang Bang’ representing Handsworth (B21) and SLASH (an acronym for *Stay Loyal and Stay Humble*) representing Aston (B6) and Lozells (B19). Another thing to note is that these street gangs predominantly consist of Jamaican descendent black men. In other words, they are black gangs (for a comprehensive overview of the contemporary history of black gangs in Birmingham see Bassey, 2005a).

The notoriety of the gangs in Handsworth and Aston was massively increased in 2003 following an incident known as the ‘New Year’s Shootings’ which involved the murder of two teenage girls who were shot in the crossfire of a revenge attack by members of the Burgers. The New Year’s shootings and the two gangs involved have since become deeply

engrained in local imaginations of Handsworth and Aston. What is interesting from the perspective of this research is that the primary cultural symbol of the gangs in Handsworth and Aston is rap music. The other two images I included in the map above are taken from rap music videos. The image on the left with word the 'Handsworth' is from a rap music video titled 'B21', it is made by rappers from a gang called Real Man Dem (RMD) (which is a branch of Bang Bang). The image shows two automatic handguns, a pile of money, and a knife, all surrounding the name of the area that the rappers represent, Handsworth. The second image is also taken from a rap music video, this time made by rappers from the Aston, B6 area of Birmingham; it shows the gang sign of a number '6' being made with a hand gesture, beneath which is the name of the gang, SLASH. Both images are there to represent the fact that rap music is deeply connected into gang cultural, and gang culture is deeply connected with specific areas and postcodes.

To be sure, the problem of gangs in Birmingham is considerable and serious, a 2012 report produced by the Barrow Cadbury Trust revealed there to be an estimated 42 urban street gangs operating in Birmingham in 2011, a number that has increased in the past decade (Cangiano, 2007). The level of violence within the gangs is demonstrated by the 900 firearm incidents (attributed to gangs) between 2008 and 2011 (Cangiano, 2007). Nonetheless, two notes of caution are worth making here. The first is that the areas I refer to here as 'gang territories' are by no means homogenous spaces; they are not solely defined by the fact that there are gangs operating within them. They are areas which have high multiple deprivation levels, but they are also places where many people live otherwise 'normal' lives. Even still, the label of gang territories is not accidental, it is one which individuals and groups both inside and outside those areas have, over time, given them and I am reflecting that identity here. The second note of caution is that these areas I have highlighted on the map are, unfortunately, by no means the only areas in Birmingham which have active street gangs

operating within them. In my research I have identified numerous gangs which, just as in Handsworth and Aston, define themselves in terms of their postcode or the name of their area. For example, another relatively large gang is the ‘515’ gang who take their name from the two postcodes of B5 and B15. Despite the presence of gangs elsewhere in the city, prevailing local discourses predominantly identify Handsworth and Aston as *the* gang territories in Birmingham. As even this short discussion reveals, rap music and gang culture in Birmingham are deeply complex topics, which is why I go to great length in Chapter Five to unpick some of the key issues relating to this topic. In any case, the intention of this short discussion was to highlight, for the reader, some of the key geographical connections between rap, gangs, and particular areas in Birmingham.

‘The Entertainment District’

If the reader can picture the city centre area of any UK or western city, with a ‘strip’ of bars, restaurants, and clubs, then this is essentially what I am referring to as ‘the entertainment district’. In Birmingham, a number of particular spaces are especially important, such as Broad Street and Brindley Place – the image of the canal shows where Broad Street and Brindley Place overlap. Broad Street is, for all intents and purposes, Birmingham’s main entertainment thoroughfare; it houses numerous bars and the city’s biggest nightclubs, including Gatecrasher (~2500 audience capacity) which is pictured above in the image of the DJ. If Broad Street caters to a more youthful clubbing population, Brindley Place is aimed at the slightly more mature population, not least the thousands of business people who visit Birmingham every year to attend conferences in one of the many conference venues surrounding the Broad Street area.

Besides hosting the main thoroughfare of bars and clubs, the entertainment district is also the site of the city’s mega venues which include the National Indoor Arena (NIA) (~12700

audience capacity), the o2 Academy (~3000), the Symphony Hall (~2000), and the Town Hall (~1000). The Symphony Hall is pictured in the image above of the cello players. In this sense, the entertainment district is not only about the popular and mainstream music which is played in the numerous and varied bars and nightclubs, it is also about the classical and popular live music cultures which are housed in these major music venues. Both the Town Hall and the Symphony Hall are owned by Birmingham City Council, and are used both for classical and popular music. Of all the areas I have highlighted on the map, the entertainment district has the greatest concentration of formal musical spaces, but this means it is also the space which, in a sense, has the most power invested in it. The area around Broad Street and the major venues in the city centre are very often ‘the face’ of Birmingham, they are, for example, heavily featured in the city’s advertising, but they are also the main spaces in which most of the city’s residents and visitors engage with music in public. The entertainment district is crucial in shaping Birmingham’s cultural identity, and therefore significant resources are employed to shape it and protect it.

‘The Creative Quarter’

This refers specifically to the Digbeth area of Birmingham. Digbeth is an area a short distance from the city centre and has been identified, primarily within the cultural policy arena, as Birmingham’s ‘creative quarter’, or its ‘cultural quarter’. Historically, it is an area that is dominated by light industry and warehousing. In the 1990s one of the defunct factories – a custard production factory – was converted with funding from commercial and public sources into a multi-purpose creative business setting. Since that time, the Custard Factory complex has become identified as the centre of Birmingham’s Creative industries. Like the entertainment district, the creative quarter is crucial to the identity of Birmingham as a cultural place. It has become especially important in light of the changing and augmented emphasis within global city discourses on the production of so-called creative cities. I discuss,

at length, in Chapter Four the different ways in which the materiality and imagination of Digbeth has been shaped in relation to the desire of BCC to construct an identifiably ‘creative’ space in the city’s cultural economic landscape.

‘The Bohemian Area’

Finally, I want to highlight a particular area in the south of Birmingham – the ward of Moseley and King’s Heath – as, what I have termed, ‘the bohemian area’. In a sense, I have put this area on the map to provide a kind of counter-balance to what the gang territories stand for. Moseley and King’s Heath are, for want of a better phrase, and without wanting to make any crude assumptions, classically middle-class areas, and the identity of the areas is quite heavily shaped by key musical moments within those areas. If Handsworth and Aston are defined by the presence of gangster rap music and the post-code rivalry between B21, B6, and B19, then the bohemian areas are defined by the presence of super-cool music venues such as the Hare and Hounds pub in King’s Heath (and its sister pub The Bulls Head in Moseley). These are widely recognised as trend-setting music venues, but they are also distinctly middle-class and white spaces. The other defining musical landmarks are the annual weekend long Moseley Folk festival and Mostly Jazz festival, both of which are held in Moseley Park (a membership only private park in the heart of Moseley). This may sound like a provocative or even a crude perspective on these areas, but this is what my research suggests is the prevailing identity of these areas. They are widely referenced in Birmingham as ‘cool’ places; their identities are shaped by images of classic pubs, open air festivals, acoustic guitars, and good schools. All too often we are happy to give areas like Handsworth and Aston particular identities as black or poor, so we should be just as ready to give affluent, white areas similarly crude identities. Only then can we begin to make sense of how those identities are formed, and more crucially, how they might be challenged.

The 'Musicscape'

Before going on to discuss the methods and the research process, I want to briefly unpick and clarify my choice of the term 'musicscape'. For me the musicscape denotes a socio-spatial layer in the overall geography of a place. I see it as something which sits in amongst our other geographies – not isolated from those geographies but reciprocally connected to them. More specifically, the musicscape is formed of the spaces where music has a place. The musicscape consists of the more obvious, more public, and more permanent musical spaces such as the live music venues. But it also consists of the more ephemeral, enclosed, or private spaces of music such as the music we play in our homes, on our TVs, the busking on the streets, or the music we listen to on portable music players. But more than just the material spaces of music, the musicscape is also the imagined and representational spaces of music, it can be how we imagine certain musical activities or it can be a billboard with an advert for a music event or product. The musicscape is the collective geography of music's place in our lives, it is a geographical layer weaved into the surrounding geography of everyday life.

To be clear, the musicscape is not the equivalent to the 'soundscape' which is arguably much broader in its purview. I am not interested here in sound and hearing as such, I am interested in music; yes the sounds of music, but also the practice of music. I am interested in music from its aurality to its economics and beyond. I am interested in music even in the absence of music itself. For example, the Town Hall is still part of Birmingham's musicscape even when it is not being played in. Even in music's absence, people speak about and think about music; the act of buying music, for example, can easily involve no music being heard, but it is still part of the musicscape. The musicscape is about the place of music – that means the place of music in our cities, in our imaginations, in our discourses, in our cultures, politics, and economics. It is about the place of music in people's lives, and none of this is dependent, as it were, on the sound of music itself being directly present.

MULTI-METHOD QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

In this section I want to provide an overview of firstly the methodological axis of the geographies of music literatures, and secondly an overview of the three main methods I used in my fieldwork.

Musical methodologies

Perhaps one of the most significant contributions that the geographies of music literature has achieved, is bringing to the fore the need to account for the aurality and musicality of space in empirical research methodologies. Smith (1997; 2000; 1994), Kong (1995b), Leyshon et al. (1998), Wood et al. (2007), and Finn and Lukinbeal (2009) among others, have all experimented with sound and music in their research and have called for geography to broaden its methodological approach to include techniques that can access and account for the musicality of field sites. Even in the more recent geographies of music literature there are still calls to recognise the importance of continuing to ‘broaden our conceptual understandings and methodological engagements with music’ (Wood, 2012).

Current research that addresses the spatialities of music is, for the most part, conducted using the standard ‘suite’ of qualitative data collection methods such as interview, participant-observation, and secondary data collection. However, there have been various attempts by geographers to adapt these techniques in the field to account for the musicality of space and place, and in particular, to broaden what is heard beyond speech to include other aural, especially musical, encounters. For example, Smith (2000) in an attempt to better capture the physicality of listening during performances of early music, develops a technique she refers to as ‘audio-ethnographies’ (2000:626). There are also examples of research which examine experiences of music and place through ethnography. Saldanha (2002; 2005), for example, conducted an ethnographic study on the rave music scene in Goa. Here the closeness of the

research(er) meant that, above all else, his study was able to focus on the body, in particular, thinking about the body as both powerful and constrained as well as the embodiedness of music (see also Morton, 2005).

Current geographies of music research have adopted qualitative methods in different ways and with different emphases. In each case, however, and across much of the current research on the spatialities of music, combinations of qualitative methods are used to ensure that a multifaceted dataset can be produced (see Finn, 2009). As such, a multi-method approach is applied in this research and different qualitative methods have been used to emphasise particular aspects (including the musicality) of the different field sites I encountered. I discuss below how different methods played different roles in my fieldwork depending on the particular research theme or context.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the geographies of music field has, to some extent, been about finding new ways of including music in social scientific research. Over the past two decades, as this idea has been experimented with, different styles of qualitative research on music have been conducted in a range of different places, from karaoke bars and aeroplanes (DeNora, 2000) to Cuban street festivals (Finn and Lukinbeal, 2009), and from a range of perspectives, including amateur brass band musicians in Milton Keynes (Finnegan, 2007) through to hip hop musicians in Newcastle (Bennett, 2004). My own research, though situated in a single research location – Birmingham – has nonetheless been a multi-sited and multi-method venture. For example, I have witnessed drug gangs operating in the city's nightclubs and I have watched teen pop stars at annual musical festivals. I have recorded music in underground rap studios and I have performed music in the room above a pub in the city centre. I have been to meetings with local amateur musicians and I have observed a Council meeting on the future of music in the city. I have hung out with the hottest local promoters and I have sat in a car and listened to a local DJ's latest imported reggae-dub records. I have

had an impromptu jam with an ex-gang member and I have watched hours of rap music videos made by current gang members. Each of these moments, and myriad others, have been part of a process of conducting qualitative research in Birmingham's musicscape.

Research techniques

The qualitative fieldwork I conducted in Birmingham centred around three primary research methods: interviews, participant observation, and the collection of secondary audio, visual, and textual data. The methodology was intended to reflect the need to account for both the wider social processes manifesting at a city-wide scale and the more individualised experiences which make up Birmingham's local music scenes on a daily basis. Indeed, the research methodology was very much designed to enable me to seek out data from a range of different and sometimes disparate sources – a research design malleable enough to be relevant in council offices through to nightclubs. It was also designed to resonate with the broader theoretical underpinning of the thesis which is about allowing non-dominant voices to be heard and to shape the thinking process in the research.

The use of in-depth interviews (36 interviews conducted in total, see tables in the following section) served to align the methodology to a performative understanding of complex landscapes which emphasise 'context' and unfixed meanings. Whilst enabling the researcher to channel the conversation toward particular topics, interviews also provide participants a greater degree of autonomy in constructing their own narratives of experiences and opinions. As Valentine notes, interviews produce research material that is multi-layered and can be analysed using a 'textual approach' (1997:111).

Alongside interviews, I conducted participant-observation to get a sense of how different people and spaces work 'from the inside' (Cook, 1997:127) and in the context of their own 'everyday lived experiences' (Crang and Cook, 2007:37). Participant-observation can be

especially enlightening when used in conjunction with interviews, in that interviews provide an insight into how people ‘talk’ about their world, while participant-observation provides an insight into how people ‘do’ things in the world (Smith, 2001). Moreover, participant-observation has been especially useful in geographies of music research where there is particular emphasis on listening to, being part of, and even intervening in the musicality of place (as well as talking about it) (Wood et al., 2007). I conducted participant-observation in places where music was happening, such as live music venues and recording studios, as well as places such as the Birmingham Music Network Monthly meeting which is made musical by the topic of conversation rather than the presence of music itself. In either case, participant-observation was crucial in enabling me to get to know the field.

Finally, secondary data collection was also a crucial component at every stage of the empirical research. I used secondary data to navigate and access different parts of the field, for example, conducting online research about different music practitioners or music spaces before engaging with them more directly. Besides this, I collected considerable textual data on current policy practices in Birmingham, this provided additional detail to interview narratives about the reasons behind and effects of policy implementation. Naturally, one of the most significant areas of secondary data is the actual music and music videos being produced within Birmingham. I draw heavily, for example, on local rap music videos as a way of understanding key issues about the relationship between music and imaginations and representations of marginal urban spaces. Of course, any form of secondary data has to be approached carefully because they are invariably ‘replete with people’s ideas of what should (not) be recorded, how it should (not) be shown’ (Crang and Cook, 2007:109).

Particularly central to the qualitative data set is the audio-visual data I have collected, which includes music, music videos, documentary, and promotional material. As such, it is worth briefly detailing how I have incorporated and approached audio-visual texts in my analysis.

Conventionally, in areas of research such as film, cultural, and popular music studies, audio-visual texts (photography, magazines, music, music videos, film, television, documentary, etc.) are more typically viewed and analysed in, what I would term, an ‘exteriorising’ way. In contrast, I would describe my analysis as ‘interiorising’. This distinction is important. What I mean by it is that in film and cultural studies, analyses of audio-visual texts typically looks to the text to tell us something about the exterior society in which it was produced. The analysis is about the video being a ‘window’ into society and about phenomena happening at a societal scale. Or rather, it is about finding social and cultural ‘patterns’ being reflected in the audio-visual text (and vice-versa). It is about audio-visual texts being actualisations and productions of extant social conventions. For example, in his study, *Music and Urban Geography*, Adam Krims examines how changing understandings of the place of women in city-scapes is reflected in both the video for Kylie Minogue’s 2002 song ‘Can’t Get You Out of My Head’ and in the opening sequence for the American TV series ‘Sex in the City’. Both videos, Krims argues, reflect the augmenting mobility of women in urban space (see Krims, 2007:18-21). In Krims’ analysis he ‘reads’ society-wide shifts in the audio-visual texts. He is attempting to exteriorise the meaning of the videos up to a societal-scale. Hence, the texts are being read as being connected to and reflective of a social and cultural setting and set of meanings which goes beyond those directly involved in its making, and it is those exterior connections which Krims’ analysis focuses on. Generally speaking, in popular music studies, we see a strong tendency towards this kind of exteriorising approach to audio-visual texts. Analyses are often about reading popular trends in the texts being studied. For example, audio-visual texts have been used to explore changing sexual and racial practices (see Mercer, 2005; Andsager and Roe, 2003; and Railton and Watson, 2011), changing genre aesthetics and musical tradition (see Fenster, 2005) and the changing place of female musicians in popular music (Lewis, 1993). Such readings are about the connections between cultures and their cultural products.

In contrast, my analysis focuses on the connections between individual and groups and their own cultural productions.

In my research, then, I am not attempting to analyse audio-visual texts in an exteriorising way, but rather in a more interiorising way. Unlike conventional film, cultural, and popular music studies analyses which look to a text's connection to its exterior, I am interested in the connections between the texts and the actors – individual musicians, producers, institutions, etc. – who are directly involved in its production. That is, I am interested in the interior links and connections to meaning in audio-visual texts. This means that, for example, just as I would interpret interview data as an insight into the experiences, knowledges, and practices of the interviewee, in my analysis I will interpret audio-visual texts in a similar way with regards to the actors who produced them. More specifically, in my qualitative data collection I have two primary forms of audio-visual data. The first includes short promotional videos produced by local public bodies to market Birmingham. I will use these in the analysis to gain an insight into how the public bodies that produce the videos imagine and represent the city. The second type of audio-visual text is rap music lyrics and the rap music video. Again, rather than attempting to draw lines between rap music and society-wide processes, I engage with the videos and rap lyrics in my analysis in order to gain an insight into the lives – experiences, practices, and knowledges – of those who perform in and make the songs and videos. In both cases, I will however not attempt to interpret the audio-visual texts too literally or to present them as mirror images of the actors who produce them. They will be engaged with as forms of cultural and artistic representation and will be interpreted, like all my data, through a process of critique and triangulation. To be sure, however, such audio-visual data has been crucial and central in shaping this research and in shaping my analysis of the cultural, political, and spatial processes which shape Birmingham's musicscape.

Positionality

Valentine (1997:111) notes that one of the key advantages of the interview method is that it is 'sensitive and people-oriented'. Nonetheless, the intersubjectivity of this knowledge production inevitably means that qualitative research can present a set of complicated political issues relating to the relative positions of the researcher and researched which in some cases are not easy to overcome but in all cases require the researcher to be reflexive. In other words, it is important to recognise the potential power relations that exist between the researcher and the research participants.

I recognise that I inhabit a particular world that, from a number of perspectives, puts me in a position of privilege. Being aware of this is especially important when engaging in cross-cultural research with participants whose lives are different to my own and are also potentially subject to different forms of oppressive discourses, identities, and practices (see Skelton, 2001). This issue was especially relevant in relation to participants that live in deprived areas of the city or are in some way connected to urban gangs. Having said that and whilst recognising the potential accusations and danger of 'academic voyeurism' (Valentine, 1997:113), the methodology frames the research as a political act which should seek to shed light on the workings of power and that this inevitably involves encountering different power relations (see Smith, 2001). In relation to the feminist-Marxist work of Gibson-Graham (1996; 2006), this thesis attempts to adopt and enact alternative modes of measuring positionality which resist essentialising my own position in relation to dominant and idealised identities such as 'white middle-class male'. Instead I sought to recognise myself as always-already other to these positions and therefore open to new positions.

Although I recognise that research relationships 'ooze with power' (Katz 1992:496 in Valentine, 1997:114), by adopting a performative-cum-pragmatic approach, I am not forced

to equate this power with dominance. Instead, through acts of politeness, empathy, and generosity I actively tried throughout the research to use my own power to construct meanings which are enabling and not deterministic. Therefore as researchers, even in the short space of an interview, we can use whatever we have at our disposal to contest dominant power relations be it the money to buy someone a drink or the courtesy to listen and ultimately be open to things we do not anticipate (see Aitken, 2001).

THE FIELDWORK

In this section I want to break down how, in the field, I actually developed the narratives, thoughts, and arguments which make-up the content of the following chapters. Hence the discussion is arranged into three parts, each of which explores how I researched music's place in the three processes of normalisation, marginalisation, and resistance.

Researching Normalisation

My research on the process of normalisation was focused on exploring the idea that music can be used by powerful actors to shape parts of the city to suit their interests. I had a critical interest in this process, in the sense that the process of using music to normalise the city has potentially negative implications if it is done to exercise forms of dominance. In which case, I wanted my research to get at some of the potential tensions which emerge when music is used to produce uneven power relationships and uneven geographies in the city.

This area of the fieldwork ended up focusing on two things in tension with each other, on the one hand, the cultural policy being implemented in Birmingham and its increased targeting of music. And, on the other hand, the frustrated voices of local music practitioners who feel that cultural policy implementation is negatively impacting their capacity to engage with music in

Birmingham in the ways they desire. So how did I come to focus on this particular aspect of music's place in the process of normalisation, and how did I collect data on this issue?

The field work began with my experiences and encounters at the Birmingham Music Network monthly meeting. It was clear within a very short period of time, from listening to conversations and from speaking with people at the meetings, that the issue of what the public funding bodies such as Birmingham City Council (BCC) were doing to music in Birmingham was high on the list of things that affected music practitioner's working practices. Having already given the issue of music's place in cultural policy some thought in relation to the geographies of music literature, I began to develop questions that I wanted to address about the tension between cultural policy implementation and the everyday practices of local practitioners working on-the-ground, as it were.

Interviews became the key method for collecting data to answer some of these questions. In terms of who I interviewed, there were two distinct groups in this area of the research. The first group were the local music practitioners and the second group were individuals who had a role relating to cultural policy development within a local public body, such as BCC.

Essentially the first group includes everyone I interview who had a practical music role, the second group were those who had only a policy role in music (a non-musical role). From the outset of the interviewing process, some line of questioning about public bodies or cultural policy in Birmingham and their impact on music in the city was part of every interview I conducted. Of course, in some interviews this theme was more central and in others it was more marginal. For the most part, the interviews where this issue became a key talking point were those I conducted with individuals who had some kind of direct interaction with the implementation of cultural policy or with the public funding of musical activities in the city. It was in those conversations that I gained my most significant insights into the kinds of

tensions that music practitioners face with regards to policy implementation and which therefore form a key part of my analysis in Chapter Four where I examine the process of normalisation. The following table is a list of the music practitioners I interviewed (this list, however, does not include music practitioners who I interviewed primarily in relation to their practices connected to rap music, those individuals are included in the discussion below of marginalisation. Although, I asked many of the participants involved in rap about cultural policy, for the sake of this chapter, it is easier to separate them as a different category of interviewees).

	Name	Brief description of participant's musical role at the time of interview
1.	Andy Derrick	Freelance jazz musician, former Musician's Union consultant, and cofounder of Sostenuto music development agency
2.	Andy Roberts	Marketing Manager for Blue-Whale Recording Studios, writer for the Fly music magazine, and music blogger
3.	Anthony Hughes	Cofounder of Sostenuto music development agency, jazz music radio DJ, and former Director of Creative Media Strategies
4.	Arthur Tapp	Founder of Catapult Club music promotions and former promoter for the Jug of Ale music venue
5.	Ben Calvert	Folk musician, and founder of Bohemian Jukebox record label/promoters
6.	Beresford King-Smith	longest serving member of the CBSO Staff, and the CBSO's Honorary Archivist
7.	Clare Edwards	Freelance music consultant and event organiser, Events Manager for Soweto Kinch Productions (the Flyover Show), founder of Gigbeth music festival, Chair of Sound it Out Community Music, and former Chief Executive of ArtSites
8.	Helen (surname unknown)	Marketing Manager of The Drum (the National Centre for Black British Arts and Culture)
9.	John Fell	Co-organiser of the Mosley Folk festival and folk promotions company the Lunar Society, and member of folk band Goodnight Lenin
10.	John Mostyn	Music Manager for various Birmingham bands since the 1970s
11.	Malcolm Rowson and Paul Medson	Regional representative for The National Federation of Music Societies (Making Music West Midlands)
12.	Mark Sampson	Music promoter (Badger Promotions), founder and owner of Iron Man Records (independent record label), founder and Chair of Birmingham Music Network, band member of Last under the Sun and Police Bastard, music tour manager, and music blog writer
13.	Nick Townsend	Founding member of the band Weak 13, underground radio DJ, music promoter at Base Studios, and music magazine editor
14.	Ninder Johal	Founder and Managing Director of Nachural Records (Bhangra record label) and Bhangra musician
15.	Paul Birch	Founder and Managing Director of Revolver Records and Heavy Metal Records, and founding member of Music West Midlands
16.	Phil Savage	Music producer, musician, and Managing Director and engineer at Major Key Studios
17.	Robin Valk	(42 year career in radio) Radio DJ and producer, and radio programming software consultant
18.	Sam Baylis	Lead singer of the band Scarlet Harlots, and founder/manager of Bigger than Barry music promotions
19.	Spencer Cater	Freelance songwriter, Mentor for Access to Music Course, and former radio presenter/producer
20.	Tom Martin	Musician and owner of The Tower of Song music venue

Table 1: List of Research Participants (Group One)

Whilst I was in the process of conducting interviews with different music practitioners, and as the theme of cultural policy and public funding became a repeated topic within the interviews, I also began the second element of collecting data on the relationship between music and the process of normalisation. The second element, then, was about wanting to understand how music fits into cultural policy and what place it has in the practices of public bodies in Birmingham. The process of collecting data on this aspect of the topic involved, 1) interviews with individuals directly involved in cultural policy development and implementation, and 2) the collection secondary data, especially policy documentation and other outputs produced by public bodies which related to music in some way. These two sets of data formed the other side of the conversation about music’s place in cultural policy in Birmingham.

I interviewed the following five individuals involved in cultural policy development in Birmingham:

	Name	Brief description of participant’s musical role at the time of interview
1.	Cllr. Martin Mullaney	Birmingham City Council Cabinet Member for Leisure Sport and Culture
2.	David Furmage	Former Manager of the Image & Sound Cluster Manager at Advantage West Midlands
3.	Mike Olley	Manager of Broad Street Business Improvement District
4.	Simon Bennett	Manager of Birmingham Cultural Partnership
5.	Val Birchall	Head of Arts Team at Birmingham City Council

Table 2: List of Research Participants (Group Two)

The interviews I conducted with these individuals were an opportunity to gain an insight into the kinds of thought processes and ideas which fed into Birmingham’s cultural policy. To a large extent, the interviews were about complementing the more official lines that are

articulated in cultural policy documentation and other kinds of outputs produced by public bodies in the city. Alongside the more conventional policy documentation, I also collected secondary data in the form of, for example, the adverts that public bodies create to market Birmingham as a visitor destination. These data provide a somewhat more obvious, or direct, insight into how public bodies imagine music as part of the city.

Finally, my fieldwork in this area of the research was about paying attention to the city and to its music in my own everyday life (as a resident of Birmingham). It was about noticing the subtle ways in which music is arranged in the city and looking for the hand of public bodies at working those geographies. It was, in this sense, what I like to think of as a kind of ‘research by osmosis’, a kind of ongoing and slow absorption of the surrounding environment of Birmingham. In Chapter Four, then, I make use of these different sets of qualitative data to produce a narrative of how cultural policy targets music and to question what the cultural, political, and spatial implications are of cultural policy implementation.

Researching Marginalisation

To a great extent my thinking about music’s place in the process of marginalisation came from the research I discussed above in relation to thinking about what it is that powerful actors are doing to shape the musicscape. However, this area of field work soon began to diverge into a distinct field which was about two things: exclusion and rap music. Where these issues began to come into view started, again, with an encounter I had at the BMN monthly meeting. The encounter was with Andy Hitchings a musician and student who at the time were volunteering as music studio manager at the Young Disciples community youth centre in the Lozells area of Birmingham. I got to know Andy well and met up with him on a number of occasions after our initial meeting. Very quickly, because of his own extensive

knowledge of rap music in Birmingham, Andy opened my eyes to a world I had previously known very little about – the world of rap music, urban gangs, and Birmingham’s ‘ghettos’.

It was not long after meeting Andy that he began introducing me to different people – rap musicians, rap music producers, community leaders, ex-gang members, and current gang members. It was clear from beginning to engage with this area of the city’s musicscape that this was going to form an important part of my research, but there was one moment early on in my research which crystallised the connection between rap music and marginalisation. The moment was the banning of a film called *I Day*. The film was made and set in Birmingham and was about a day in the life of a Birmingham gang member, and the film used rap music as the primary narrative tool – it was, as the director Penny Woolcock described it, a ‘hip hop musical’. But when the film was released it was banned from every cinema in Birmingham due to advice from local police that screenings of the film would be targeted by gangs in the city. Why this moment was so important to me and my research was because it directly affected one of the first people I interviewed who was involved in Birmingham’s rap music world – the music producer Urban Monk who was also the music composer for the *I Day* film. I interviewed Urban Monk on two occasions and recorded music in his studio on three occasions, so I got to know him relatively well. At the time of the first interview, it was only a very short period after the release and subsequent banning of *I Day*, and was therefore a key part of our conversation, but it was also a huge source of anger and frustration for Urban Monk. As much as I was moved by his anger and frustration, I was more intrigued by the fact that the ban had come as very little surprise to him. Instead it simply confirmed the myriad experiences he had throughout his life of knowing that the music he likes is something which other people are threatened by. It was that moment and that tension which set in motion my fieldwork on rap music and marginalisation.

From that point on, the fieldwork took two courses; one involved interviews with individuals involved in rap music in Birmingham, and the other involved an extensive period of secondary data collection which was focussed primarily on the rap music being produced in Birmingham which I accessed via YouTube.

As in the first area of fieldwork on normalisation, the interviews I conducted were about getting an insight into the perspective of different individuals involved in this particular area of the musicscape. But it was an altogether more challenging space in the musicscape to navigate. Unlike what you might call your average musician or music practitioner, musicians in the rap world, for reasons relating to marginalisation, are generally more difficult to access. To some extent, it's not an overstatement to say that a large proportion of the local rappers in Birmingham are also affiliated to a street gang of some kind. Even where rappers are not affiliated with gangs, many rappers do not have a conventional public facing identity or route to contact. The rap music community in Birmingham, to describe it one way, is quite underground. It does not surface in obvious ways. Nonetheless, I managed to organise interviews with eleven individuals, each of whom had different connections with rap music and black culture in Birmingham. The interviewees are listed in the following table.

	Name	Brief description of participant's musical role at the time of interview
1.	Ammo Talwar	Founder and Chief Executive of Punch Records, Organiser of BASE Music Festival, Chair of Blackroutes, and former rap music promoter
2.	Andy Hitchings	Volunteer studio manager at the Young Disciples youth centre and rap musician
3.	Jordan (pseudonym)	Rap musician and ex-gang member
4.	Antonnie Walker	Senior staff member at Young Disciples youth centre
5.	Elijah Philips	Founder and Managing Director of Virtual Extreme Youth Media CIC and media educator at Young Disciples youth centre
6.	Fonzo	Rap musician and rap video producer
7.	Keith Fraser	Chairperson of Transit Trix Hip Hop Expressive Arts Organisation
8.	King Zukie	Reggae and dancehall music DJ for Luv Injection Sound System, Radio DJ, and sound clash DJ
9.	Levi (KMD)	Music producer and studio technician at Young Disciples youth centre and rap musician
10.	Marc Edwards	Founder and Managing Director of Young Disciples youth centre, and reggae musician
11.	Urban Monk	Music producer, owner and manager of Beat Oven Studios, and musical composer for the film 1 Day

Table 3: List of Research Participants (Group Three)

The interviews I conducted with people connected to rap music in Birmingham were however, only the first part of the story. Partly because I had struggled to access individuals involved in rap music, especially the rap musicians themselves, I began a lengthy process of finding the rap music itself that was being made in Birmingham to see what kinds of insights I could gain from the music. I had been introduced to some local rap music videos by Andy Hitching and Elijah Phillips. They showed me some rap videos that had been posted on

YouTube. As someone, who at the time knew very little about underground rap music in Birmingham, I was quite taken back by the rap music videos which showed huge numbers of young black men surrounding one or two rappers rapping about gang life in Birmingham. This instigated my research into rap music in Birmingham, and over the course of the past two years especially I have watched many hundreds of locally produced rap music videos. All of which have allowed me to see, from a certain perspective, into the world of gangs, rap, and street life in Birmingham.

In a sense, the interviews with people involved in rap provided me with a crucial insight in to the materialities of rap music's exclusion in Birmingham. They addressed important questions I had about why rap music does not have a normal place in Birmingham's mainstream music spaces. The rap music videos, on the other hand, have provided an insight into rap music's place in the margins. They have shown me how young black people use rap music in their everyday lives and in their own urban geographies. And it is these two narratives which underpin the analysis I develop in Chapter Five where I discuss the relationship between music and the process of marginalisation.

Researching Resistance

The final area of research is about how people attempt to change things in music and through music. And, as such, it is research which responds to the first two areas of the field work. It was research that was about being able to reflect on both normalisation and marginalisation in Birmingham and then about looking for moments where individuals or groups try to challenge those things. In this sense it was a more emergent process of fieldwork, it required much more reflection on what I had already found out in relation to the other themes. That is because I had, in a sense, to first explore what is making the uneven urban geographies in Birmingham before I could begin to think about struggles against them. Nonetheless, I found moments of

struggle and resistance in many places. Indeed, throughout the fieldwork, I continually saw what were often quite small or ephemeral moments of difference or challenge. But in order to develop the discussion of resistance I had to locate spaces which were more tangible, more robust, or at least robust enough to stand up to some form of analysis. In the end, then, I found these narratives of resistance in three spaces, each of which involved the use of quite different methods and research techniques.

The first example of resistance I engaged with in the fieldwork was the activities of Mark Sampson. Mark is the person who founded and runs the BMN. As I said above the BMN monthly meeting was a crucial space in which I was able to access many of my research participants. Mark is also a very active player in Birmingham's musicscape and plays a number of roles including being a musician, running an independent record label, formerly running a promotions company, and running a music tour management company. Mark is also quite an overtly political person, and his musical activities are shaped by his political ideas and so Mark's story became an important part of this area of my research. I interviewed Mark on two occasions, but I also participated in the BMN monthly meeting for over a year and interacted with him numerous times over the course of that period. In that time, I developed an in-depth insight into Mark's activities through the many conversations we had, my observations of his work, and his participation in the BMN meetings. I use this data and insight in Chapter Six to explore ideas about how resistance can be developed through knowledge sharing and through alternative economic practices such as running an independent record label.

The second example of resistance I came across in the fieldwork was the Flyover Show, an annual music festival that took place between 2008 and 2012 that was organised by Soweto Kinch, a jazz and hip hop musician from Birmingham. I heard about the Flyover Show through an interview with Clare Edwards, who at the time was providing a support role in the

organisation of the Flyover Show. Clare was Soweto's right-hand woman in organising the event so she gave me the first insight into what the event was about. The event stands out because of its unique location; it takes place under a dual carriageway flyover (hence its name) in the Hockley area of Birmingham, an area that has a large black population and has issues of deprivation and problems with street gangs. The Flyover Show was being organised in a politically purposeful way as an event which challenged both ideas about where music should take place and the stereotypical images of urban ruin that Hockley and the surrounding areas are identified by. The Flyover Show was also fortunately very well publicised and Soweto Kinch produced a substantial amount of material over the course of the four years he ran the Flyover Show. It is this secondary visual, textual, and audio (including musical) material which formed the data through which I analyse the Flyover Show as a space of resistance.

The third and final example which I pursue in the fieldwork is about the resistive spaces in rap music. I collected data on two examples rap music being used and created as a potential space of resistance. The first example comes from the secondary data I collected through rap music videos. I became very interested in the fact that many of the rap music videos I encountered had, what might be termed, positive messages. That is, I came across a particular vein of rap music in Birmingham which was asking critical and informed questions about the forms of oppression that shape the urban black experience. As such I used these songs to think about the rap music being made as potential spaces in which young black people can voice their struggles and their hopes. The second example of rap music as a space of resistance concerns the series of events connected to the making and release of the *I Day* film – the film which I mentioned above that was banned from cinemas in Birmingham. After *I Day* was released, it became a sort of catalyst for a second film – a documentary called *One Mile Away*. This second film was also directed by Penny Woolcock (the director of *I Day*), and it tells the

story of an attempt by ex-gang members in Birmingham to resolve the gang rivalries between the areas of Handsworth and Aston. I watched *One Mile Away* and did additional research on the behind the scenes process which led to the film being made. I also did research on the events which followed the making of *One Mile Away* which included the setting up of a social enterprise run by the ex-gang members who played the key roles in the documentary. I found it very intriguing that what had started with *I Day* as a kind of musical exploration of gangs in Birmingham, through a series subsequent of events, emerged into a kind of movement in Birmingham led by young black men, who themselves had faced marginalisation in the city, to confront gang culture and provide an alternative to it. This story, which in my own research had played an important part in getting my research going, also provides a narrative of resistance which I explore, along with the other two examples described above, in Chapter Six.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have introduced the research location – Birmingham’s musicscape – and provided a sense of the identities of the some of the key music spaces in Birmingham and in my research. The map I provide and the descriptions which accompany it are intended as a short but critical guide and a point of reference for the discussion in the following three chapters. Following this I considered the kinds of methodologies that have been used in other geographies of music research, and how this research takes lessons from those areas of research. I also introduce the three main methods I used in my fieldwork – interviews, participant-observation, and secondary textual, visual, and audio data collection. In the final section of the chapter I wanted to take the reader through my journey thinking about how and where I used different research techniques and how the research was shaped by different encounters in the field.

To note, in conclusion, conducting this research has also involved many unique challenges. I think one of the main challenges I faced in this fieldwork stems from my own style in approaching the field. I have pursued a holistic style of research, which is represented in the diversity of research encounters I had and the different spaces I conducted research in. One challenging aspect of this has been about being able to put different researcher 'hats' on; an interview with a councillor can be quite different from an interview with an ex-gang member. The challenge is not simply getting through the interview but getting the most out of the interview and that can depend on the researcher's own disposition and personality as much as on doing the right background research on the interviewee. Part of the reason for the diversity of research encounters was because the fieldwork, for me, was about getting to know Birmingham, not in an exhaustive way by trying to speak to every person or going to every venue, but instead, it was about a more intensive and immersive experience within different sites. Strangely enough, one of the most immersive experiences in the field was the time spent watching hours of rap music videos on YouTube. I was genuinely intrigued and continually surprised by what I encountered, and the music really drew me in. Indeed, I would encourage the reader to explore some of these videos; I provide links to the videos where I discuss them in the following chapters. The rap has a certain extremeness about it which is difficult to convey in writing and as such it may well be more effective to encounter this music directly.

Another challenge stems from the fact that I have been conducting this research over a long period of time, around five years. In this time many things have changed and many significant events have happened. Of course, it has been tempting when things change and when things happen to attempt to continually capture those things in the research. For example, the riots that took place in Birmingham in the summer of 2011 tapped into and raised some important issues about gangs in Birmingham, but they are nonetheless not part of the narrative I develop. It is impossible to be exhaustive in research (especially PhD research); the story the

researcher is able to tell is always restricted and limited. But that does not stop it being impactful and significant, which is what I hope the following three chapters achieve.

4.

MUSIC AND NORMALISATION: SPACING THE 'CREATIVE CITY'

I think music is like anything in the arts, it has a very important role to play, and I think when you get into funding art, funding music, funding styles of music, funding people who live in specific postcodes, funding certain events that appeal to certain audiences, you're actually getting in to the realms of changing the way people are developing and growing their own perceptions.

- Mark Sampson, research participant

INTRODUCTION

This chapter deals with the first of the key research themes – music and the normalisation of urban space – by critically examining the roles that powerful urban public bodies, especially Birmingham City Council (BCC), play in shaping musical spaces and practices in Birmingham. Moreover, the chapter explores the targeting and instrumentalisation of music within cultural policy which, in turn, plays a role in the normalisation of urban space in Birmingham. In this chapter, I examine the production of musico-cultural norms as being innately spatial. How music becomes meaningful is a question of geography – of where music takes place, and of which music belongs or does not belong to a place. What I want to explore in this chapter, then, is how the relationship between music and space is intervened in and controlled by urban public bodies. To be clear, however, what I present in this chapter is not a city which is operating wholly in one direction, the process of normalisation is multifaceted and multilayered, and is uneven in its efficacy and reach (it is messy).

The first section of the chapter begins ‘on the ground’, as it were, with the voices of different local music practitioners – including, musicians, promoters, event organisers, and music managers – who interact with, and are affected by, the implementation of cultural policies in the city in their everyday lives. Therein, I pick up on a specific concern that was repeated by many of my research participants regarding the increasing prevalence of, what they widely referred to as, a ‘tick-box’ approach to cultural and arts policy. I explore the kinds of concerns expressed by different individuals, including feelings that public bodies are increasingly constrained to ‘ticking boxes’; that they lack important knowledges about music cultures; that they are out-of-reach and out-of-touch with important parts of the local music scenes in Birmingham; and that ultimately some of their actions are having a detrimental effect on music practices and cultural life more widely in the city. The opening section, then, is about bringing to the fore an understanding of Birmingham’s musicscape and urban cultural policy as contested spaces.

In the second section, I examine how Birmingham’s public bodies have responded to, and have become part of, wider changes taking hold in global urban policy, especially in terms of the increased emphasis on the production of ‘creative’ and ‘cultural’ cities. Highly important to such changes is the role of music in producing the creative city. Using interview data with individuals working in public bodies as well as different local cultural policy outputs, I examine the kinds of ideas, practices, rhetoric, and discourses which have shaped the development of cultural policy and music’s place within it in recent years. One of the key critiques I develop in the discussion is that the rhetoric of the creative city hides a set of contradictions. That is, I challenge the neat picture of the creative city that public bodies in Birmingham present; I attempt to reveal some of the messiness and internal incongruity behind the rhetoric. I especially pick up on and challenge the assumptions made about where

creativity exists in Birmingham by exploring why it is that areas like Digbeth – the city’s official creative quarter – have become steeped in rhetoric of creativity.

In the third section of the chapter I focus more explicitly on the difficult question of who the normalised city is being produced for. I take on this question by focusing on the spatialities and cultural politics of live music in Birmingham. Moreover, I approach the changing nature of live music by examining the place of the indie-rock band (from here on, also referred to as ‘the band’), which I argue has become a kind of musico-cultural ‘master-signifier’ in the city’s cultural life. I explore how the band (and key music spaces closely associated with band music culture, especially the live music venue) increasingly provides a centred and fixed image of an idealised live music form which, crucially, identifies with, and reifies the dominance of, particular urban actors including especially young, white, middle-class, and mobile urban actors. I argue that the centred presence of the band normalises and reifies the dominance of those groups within the city. Hence, I argue that *the normalised city is being produced for urban actors who closely and positively identify with the band as a musico-cultural symbol*. Using different examples, I explore this argument by looking at the ways in which different musical practices that are led by and funded by public bodies are contributing to the normalisation of Birmingham as a band-centric musicscape.

I conclude the chapter by reflecting on how the issues around the production of the creative city and the band-centric city feed into the concerns raised in the opening section of the chapter about public bodies operating a system of ‘ticking boxes’. I also consider how this discussion of normalisation will feed into Chapter Five wherein I address issues of urban abnormality and marginalisation in relation to rap music in Birmingham. I begin, then, by examining the place and effect of cultural policy in the everyday life of Birmingham’s musicscape from the perspective of local music practitioners.

SECTION ONE: TENSIONS IN THE 'TICK-BOX' CITY

In this section I explore some of the tensions that were expressed by local music practitioners concerning cultural policy interventions by public bodies in Birmingham. In particular, I pick up on, and frame this discussion in terms of, the recurring idea expressed by individuals that urban cultural policy has increasingly become an operation of 'ticking boxes'. My argument is that this idea of tick-box policy corresponds with the idea that Birmingham is being produced as a city which conforms to the expectations of dominant cultural political groups in society. Those expectations are being mapped on to cultural policy in such a way as to produce a kind of 'checklist' of cultural and musical norms which can be ticked-off. The tick-box approach to policy is, however almost always a dual process. On the one hand, it is about providing and enhancing the supposedly positive attributes that will improve a city's image. On the other hand, it is about counteracting and concealing the supposedly negative attributes that will impair the city's image. What makes an attribute positive or negative is a question of cultural politics, in that, positivity and negativity are determined by the expectations and desires of dominant urban actors. Here, then, I begin by discussing the ways in which concerns about these issues were expressed by the different music practitioners I interviewed in Birmingham.

"It's the wrong way round"


Among the different public bodies, it was Birmingham City Council (BCC) that was most often highlighted for becoming increasingly restrictive in its approach to music and the arts in its policy implementation. Here, for example, Clare Edwards, who has worked closely with BCC and other public bodies in Birmingham since the mid 1990s, is expressing her frustration with how the tick-box approach has expanded over the 15 years. Talking about BCC's role in Birmingham's annual music and arts festival ArtsFest, something which she

has been involved with as a performing artist, Clare explained how the arts policy has changed.



In the interview I conducted with Clare she made it clear that the tick-box approach is something that she believes has emerged and become embedded within the arts policy arena over the past fifteen years or so. This time-scale corresponds with the wider changes in urban policy and the shift towards the culturalisation of the urban environment and the production of the ‘creative’ city. Clare described, in particular, how she has seen a move away from more ‘idea-led’ approaches in arts policy to the tick-box approach that she feels has come to dominate policy and which she feels like she increasingly struggles against in her own musical activities. Talking about her work in the 1990s and early 2000s with an arts provision project funded by BCC, she explained how “the idea was always the centre of what was going on” and key individuals would be able to manage relationships with the council in order to pursue specific and effective artistic ideas and activities.


Clare’s experience of the artistic “idea” being at the “centre” is something she feels has since been eradicated and replaced within BCC’s approach to arts funding. Clare referred to the UK City of Culture bid which Birmingham pursued in 2010 as an example of more recent cultural policy which she argued failed to work effectively because it had abandoned the kind of idea-centred approach that she had seen work previously, opting instead for the emergent tick-box approach.



For Clare, then, one of the fundamental consequences of the tick-box approach is the loss of artistic quality. In other words, something about the efficacy of the art and its impact is lost when the idea has to “fit” the funding criteria rather than the other way around. What was especially interesting and insightful when speaking with Clare is that she often referred to work that she had been involved with in the past (involving various types of public bodies) that she considered to have struck a ‘balance’, as she called it, between, on the one hand, the ideas and desires of the artistic practitioners and audiences, and on the other hand, the needs, or indeed restrictions, of a funding policy. One of the projects she notes as being especially successful is a project called ArtSites which was publicly funded by BCC and managed by Clare from 1999-2004. She explained how the ArtSites project was able to maintain the balance between ideas and funding criteria so that the art being produced and engaged with was worthwhile and effective. She explained her concern that over the past decade this balance has been disrupted as priority has increasingly been given to the funding criteria and less emphasis has been put on the artistic ideas.




Clare also raised a number of specific and broader issues about the changing approach to art and public funding and some of the implications of when a tick-box approach is adopted. One of the crucial implications/tensions is the sense that funding is being allocated as a means of reifying the place of public bodies, such as BCC, as the arbiters of the city's cultural and artistic activities, rather than funding being allocated in order to achieve effective and worthy art. For example, when I posed the question of who she thought was benefiting from the shift towards the tick-box strategy for arts funding, Clare replied:



Clare's frustration and her concerns are important because they come from someone who continues to work closely with funding bodies, and who believes in the potential good that can come from funded music and arts provisions. She is also someone who has worked within funded projects since the mid-1990s and so has witnessed and experienced what are arguably the localised manifestations of wider shifts in urban cultural policy. Moreover, Clare's views are important not necessarily because they accurately represent a particular history of funding in Birmingham, but more precisely because they express and provide insight into what appear to be really key tensions within the music and arts funding arena in Birmingham. To be clear, however, feelings of concern about arts funding were commonly held among a wide range of the different individuals I spoke with in my research.

For example, the tension between the artistic efficacy of an event or a production and the interests of BCC was highlighted by a number of the people I spoke with, including Mark Sampson, who again picked up on ArtsFest as an example of where the balance between art, ticking boxes, and the interests of local public bodies is having a negative impact on the city.



Here, Mark actually lists some of the ‘checklist’ of items – tourism, low crime, branding, family friendly – that he sees as being the shaping force which produces the eventual look and feel of ArtsFest, which, in turn, he also feels does not effectively capture Birmingham’s artistic potential. The frustration that both Mark and Clare express is arguably about two things, first, the instrumentalisation of art and music by public bodies, and second, the normalisation of a relationship between art and public bodies which reifies the public body as the natural arbiter of musical practices in the urban environment. Both instrumentalisation and normalisation have significant spatial impacts because, as Clare and Mark pick up on, they shape key geographical elements of the city such as where music should take place – in certain postcodes or in major festivals – and who should perform music in public and what types of music should be performed in public, and what purpose those things should have. Increasingly, it seems, the purpose of funding art is to achieve non-artistic goals and this is a source of frustration for local music practitioners.

Especially prominent among the music practitioners I spoke with, then, was the idea that funding criterion were increasingly taking priority over the artistic and creative desires of

practitioners and audiences. Anthony Hughes, for example, who at the time when I interviewed him was running a music development company called Sostenuto for amateur musicians in Birmingham, expressed his own concerns that the approach within arts funding in Birmingham was ‘the wrong way round’. He brought this issue up when we were discussing the individuals and organisations he had encountered in Birmingham who are implementing public arts funding policies.



Anthony’s notions of ‘creativity by committee’ and a ‘reversed’ system of funding resonate with Clare’s and Mark’s feelings about criteria increasingly taking precedence over artistic ideas within the public funding arena. Likewise there are shared feelings around what Anthony describes as ‘creative compliance’. Clare expresses a similar concern in her reference to the feeling that artists are approaching their work with the mindset that ‘we need to work in these neighbourhoods because they are the ones that can get government funding’.

The issue of funding being allocated in order to tick boxes was also something that Mark Sampson felt was creating a kind of imbalance in the way the musicscape in Birmingham was being shaped, which in turn was creating barriers for smaller music companies within Birmingham to develop. In other words, those musical practitioners whose practices do not

tick boxes, according to Mark, are finding it increasingly difficult to operate. He expressed this tension in the following way:



Different aspects of the problems that Mark is expressing here were also picked up by other music practitioners that I interviewed. In particular, many expressed a serious lack of trust in or a mistrust of the public bodies such as BCC to deliver effective arts activities in the city because of their focus on allocating funding as a way of achieving other objectives.

Lack of trust in public bodies

One of the concerns repeatedly expressed by the music practitioners I interviewed was general mistrust of urban public bodies in Birmingham to effectively engage with the city's musical activities. This feeling was expressed by individuals who had been closely involved with such

organisations, but also by individuals who have had limited contact or even avoided them. This mistrust took different forms including, perceptions of incompetence, perceptions of public bodies being out of reach and overly bureaucratic, and of them being out of touch culturally with the city's different music scenes. This mistrust often related back to the idea that public organisations such as BCC are simply implementing cultural policy as an operation of ticking boxes wherein there is a lack of accountability and even a lack of care. Referring to what he perceived as the incompetence of funding bodies and the schemes and organisation that they fund, John Mostyn (a local music manager) described his own frustration during his experience whilst on the Arts Council West Midlands board.⁷



What we see in John's description of his own frustration is a distinct feeling that the allocation of resources is shaped in part by individuals and groups who are able to obtain funding via their capacity to use particular 'jargon'. This, in turn, instils a sense of mistrust

⁷ I have removed the name of the local arts organisation that John referenced during the interview for his protection and that of the organisation in question.

both in the funding bodies and the organisations who receive funding. Indeed, a key part of the mistrust of public bodies, then, is this issue that funding is allocated to those who can speak a particular ‘funding language’, which many music practitioners consider to be detached from the kinds of knowledges and language that they use in their own everyday lives. In other words, funding streams are perceived as being channelled towards those with the professional business skills to overcome bureaucratic barriers, rather towards those who have artistic knowledge and ability.

These issues of mistrust were picked up on by Andy Derrick and Anthony Hughes in a joint interview I conducted with them. Andy and Anthony, both of whom have worked closely with public bodies, expressed concern over the issue of the funding system becoming increasingly led on both sides – funders and service providers – by those that can convince and be convinced by particular rhetoric and jargon but who lack the knowledge or creativity required to produce effective music activities. Speaking about who is leading the development of public arts provisions in Birmingham, Andy expressed the following concerns.




Again this feeling that the funding bodies lack knowledge about music and the arts was highlighted by John Mostyn when he told me that ‘there’s a Facebook site been setup called

‘Birmingham City Council knows fuck all about creativity or culture’. I was not able to find the site John was referring to, but it potentially illustrates a wider lack of trust in the competence and knowledge of individuals and organisations that are responsible for developing music provisions in Birmingham. John continued to express his own concerns over the ability of public bodies to understand and act effectively for the music sector in Birmingham. Talking about the closure of the regional development agency Advantage West Midlands (AWM) and the potential additional responsibility that BCC would now have for music in Birmingham, John expressed the following concerns.

[]

This issue of lack of effective and appropriate knowledge about music within public bodies was highlighted by Andy Derrick who expressed his own frustration with what he saw as the ineffective management of resources and collaborations among decision makers. He described a specific example of how he responded to a particular situation he confronted whilst employed within the Musicians Union, a role which meant he was invited to policy development meetings for the cultural wing of the Regional Development Agency Advantage West Midlands.



In light of the kind of frustration expressed by Andy and by other participants, there is arguably a growing feeling amongst music practitioners in Birmingham that the capacity of public funding bodies to develop effective cultural policy which aligns with the desires of local music practitioners is limited. This in turn, is resulting in a considerable feeling of mistrust and frustration towards the funding bodies who control key resources for developing music activities. At the heart of that tension is a feeling that the funding bodies lack practical and relevant knowledge, which has been replaced by ‘funding speak’ and ‘jargon’. Related to this, there is the feeling that music practitioners and creative practitioners (including their knowledge) are not represented within what many see as the corridors of power operating in public bodies.

Out of reach

Amongst the music practitioners I interviewed that were much less or simply not involved with the funding bodies in Birmingham, a number expressed concerns about the funding bodies being out of reach; difficult to understand; un-inclusive; and generally distant from their musical activities at the more commercial end of music in Birmingham. Speaking with Andy Roberts, for example, who at the time was co-managing an independent music

recording studio in Digbeth, I asked him if he had any interactions with, what I termed, ‘local authorities’ concerning funding for his music business, he responded saying:



Despite feeling distanced from the funding bodies in the city, Andy had attempted to approach funding bodies, and he described his experience of doing so.



This is clearly an important tension in terms of how public bodies are perceived. On the one hand, they are perceived as difficult to understand and to access. And, on the other hand, as the quote from Andy illustrates, even from within the more commercial areas of the musicscape in Birmingham, there still appears to be a discourse about the public funding

bodies simply operating via ticking-boxes. Again, this highlights a certain level of mistrust in terms of perceptions about funded music activities actually aligning with the desires of the music community in Birmingham.

I heard a similar experience to Andy's from Ninder Johal who runs a record label in Birmingham specialising in Bhangra music, and who for a long period of his career in music avoided interacting with public funding bodies due to what he perceived as too much of a distance between his music culture and public bodies such as BCC. Although Ninder has since engaged with Arts Council West Midlands, he explained to me his past perceptions as well as how a lack of understanding about his music culture within the public bodies remained unresolved.



Again, we see in Ninder's response the issue of feeling like there is a need to be able to understand how to 'talk' in a particular way in order to access funding for music activities and that the public bodies themselves are not representative of the music community that exists in Birmingham. More widely, these points connect, again, into issues about the public funding bodies not having the kind of music industry, or music culture, knowledge that practitioners feel would underpin the effective use of funding.

The point of the discussion in this opening section was, on the one hand to provide a space for the voices of those on the ground to be aired, and on the other hand, it was an attempt to use those voices as a way into thinking about the kinds tensions that have emerged around cultural policy in Birmingham. The following sections, then, are about following up on the concerns raised by the music practitioners by unpacking and critically exploring cultural policy development in Birmingham and how approaches to music and the city have changed in the city's recent history.

SECTION TWO: MAKING BIRMINGHAM 'CREATIVE'

In this section I explore the developing terrain of cultural policy in Birmingham. As well as thinking about how cultural policy is shaping and reshaping the materialities of music in the city, I am especially interested in the kinds of discourses and rhetoric about music and creativity which permeate the city's cultural policy. Given the wider context of global urban policy which has put ever greater emphasis on the production of 'creative' urban environments, I am especially interested in how those kinds of discourses have fed into the cultural policy developed in Birmingham. In light of these changes I especially want to question what kinds of tensions and contradictions are present within the cultural policy discourse and within the attempts to produce Birmingham as a creative city. In other words, I want to uncover some of the messiness which lies behind the neat rhetoric and veneer of creativity which has been painted over Birmingham. I want to reveal that the imagined geographies of Birmingham's creativity which increasingly appear as fixed and natural are in fact deeply contradictory and infused with power relationships which depend on the normalisation of what and where counts as creative.

Contradictions in the creative city

A marketing video produced by Marketing Birmingham, a subsidiary department of BCC, is a useful starting point and illustration of how public bodies in Birmingham are representing and selling the city to the outside world and what role music has in giving the city a consumable and creative identity. Marketing Birmingham's online video titled 'Birmingham: Progress' tells of how the city is progressing to become 'a truly international destination' and 'a top choice for visitors and businesses alike'. The video is shot without spoken narration and after a short introduction it starts outlining different 'progressive' elements of the city. It begins its story of Birmingham's 'progress' by celebrating the city's food and restaurants, highlighting a recent recommendation in the New York Times. Food is an interesting place to begin as it is perhaps the most consumable of products; from the outset it evokes the idea of the city as something that can be consumed, tasted, digested. The second thing it celebrates is music, and does so with the following image and caption:



Figure 3: Birmingham Progress (Source, Marketing Birmingham 2014)

Without wanting to overstate its significance, I would suggest that by placing food and music at the start of a narrative of Birmingham's progress the marketing video emphasises a city as something that can be consumed, tasted, and heard – that it will tap into and excite the different senses. It represents a new kind of consumption: the consumption of place, of the city as a product. What is perhaps just as interesting and telling is that in the promotional video, food and music are celebrated ahead of more conventional modes and cultures of consumption. For example, only in the screen following the music caption do we get to Birmingham as a place to shop and for retail. In this sense, the video perhaps illustrates our changing perceptions of what constitutes, or what it means to be, a progressive and interesting city, and music is very near to the top of the list. This repositioning, or re-placing, of music nearer to the top of what make counts as progress in the urban environment sits neatly with the kind of rhetoric that has emerged and come to dominate in the global urban policy arena. The positioning of music in the Marketing Birmingham video perhaps reflects the advice Richard Florida gave to urban policy developers:

‘support[ing] a local music scene can be just as important as investing in high-tech business and far more effective than building a downtown mall’ (Florida, 2002:229).

This example suggests that the city is changing, expectations about the city are changing, and with that, the place and meaning of music is also changing. The city, according to the rhetoric which we see in the quote from Florida about how to produce the creative city, is ever more dependent on music for its identity, and therefore for its capacity to survive in the highly competitive context of global urban capitalism. The place of key urban features – technology, retail, and cultural experiences – is being rethought.

The links between the wider global urban discourse and cultural policy in Birmingham can be seen in the way that policy references Richard Florida's ideas about creativity and place:

The creative industries also have much to contribute to some of the city's goals around culture and place-making. Richard Florida and other academics have argued that, in the modern knowledge economy, place is an increasingly important factor in attracting inward investment, as firms need to go to locations in which their workers will feel comfortable and stimulated. The creative industries are a key part of such an environment.

(Creative Birmingham Partnership, 2010:2)

This quote is taken from a report commissioned by the Creative Birmingham Partnership Board (CBPB) (part of the Greater Birmingham & Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership) to research 'Why the creative industries matter to Birmingham'. The report, I argue, engenders an essentialised understanding of *who* is 'creative', or rather which cultural group, or indeed which culture, counts as 'creative' and *where* is 'creative'. But, as I explore below, this essentialised understanding of creativity, actually instils a number of contradictory elements in to cultural policy as it tries to overcome the fact that the city does not fit neatly into this definition. In turn, a normalising rhetoric is required to cover up these contradictions.

Discussing the city of Birmingham and what might be termed the city's 'creative offer', the CBPB report describes the city and where creativity and culture exists in the city as follows:

[Birmingham] has a wide range of creative and cultural organisations, from high-profile performing arts companies, including the Birmingham Royal Ballet and the CBSO... There are a number of city-centre clusters of creative industries, in buildings like the Custard Factory and Fazeley Studios. However, these are sometimes 'islands' of creativity...

Making the city's people more aware of Birmingham's own strengths could help improve the negative perceptions of the city, and act as a basis for changing its image in Britain more widely. As Leadbeater argues in his newspaper interview, 'the really important thing is to have a distinctive story about where you come from and what you're particularly good at ... to create lasting change you need to connect with what is rooted in your culture'.

(Creative Birmingham Partnership, 2010:2-3)

A number of key things that arise in this excerpt are worth highlighting further. The first is about an apparent and inadvertent cleavage between the desire to do as Leadbeater suggests – i.e. connecting with cultural roots – whilst at the same time appearing to fail to heed that advice by framing the city's creative spaces around major institutions that have very specific and distinct problems with regards to how connected they really are to the cultural roots of the city. In other words, while the report professes the need to understand the local cultural roots and narrative of the city, it nonetheless, relies on framing the city using what might be termed the cultural 'headliners' – the Royal Ballet and CBSO – which arguably do not necessarily form the kind of distinctive story which Leadbeater (referenced in the report above) is advising cities to pursue.

This report is by no means the only one guilty of framing the city in terms of these major cultural institutions. Indeed, throughout the urban cultural policy literature recently produced in Birmingham there is a strong tendency to emphasise and forefront certain venues/institutions, especially (perhaps unsurprisingly) those venues which are most heavily subsidised by public arts funding – including the Symphony Hall (home to the CBSO) and

Town Hall. Because of this, what we arguably see in cultural policy is a tension and contradiction around the fact that the major headline venues and arts organisations do not provide a distinctive narrative of local culture, but rather tell a more specific story about the kinds of cultural experiences and spaces that public bodies such as Birmingham City Council desire to include in the cultural make up of the city. Hence, it is important that we critically explore some of these cleavages which play into the headlining of traditional music venues, whilst at the same time other notions of creativity – local, small-scale, non-traditional practices – are increasingly being seen as more ‘creative’.

The CBPB report continues with the following statement:

Birmingham City Council and its partners need to take a more strategic view and work with the creative sector to develop a clear message about what the city stands for. This needs to reflect the city’s distinctive strengths. Birmingham is a young, ethnically diverse city, yet its cultural offer tends to emphasise more traditional art forms, often aimed at business travellers. There was a strong sense in the interviews and focus group that Birmingham is selling itself short, and not making the most of the assets it does have. Delivery of services should be left more to the creative sector itself.

(Creative Birmingham Partnership, 2010:4)

In this excerpt the policy report notes the problems with the city’s identity being caused by the overemphasis on the ‘more traditional art forms’, yet the same report is guilty of doing precisely that by virtue of the fact that the first two arts organisations it refers to as symbols of Birmingham’s cultural offering – the Royal Ballet and the CBSO – are undoubtedly also the pinnacles of Birmingham’s traditional arts. The report does go on to reference more contemporary and specialist creative businesses such as Clusta and Substrakt (design companies based in the Custard Factory), but again I would question how well spaces like the Custard factory and Fazeley Studios – which have the financial and cultural support of

Birmingham's urban public bodies (including BCC) and which the report sees as 'creative spaces' – actually provide 'a clear message about what the city stands for' and elucidate 'the city's distinctive strengths' which the report claims to be 'youth' and 'ethnic diversity'. Arguably such spaces actually identify with a very specific and narrow axis of creative practices led by highly educated experts.

My point is that the policy discourse which is espoused in reports like the CBPB policy report are punctuated by what appear to be highly problematic tensions and contradictions between different positions which include: desires to emulate idealised images of so-called creative cities; the need to emphasise and normalise the presence of the cultural spaces which receive significant public financial support; and the notion that creativity is and should come from some form of organically embedded local creative space and community. The issue is that these different and contradictory positions are troublingly divergent, even at a relatively surface level these problems begin to emerge very lucidly. Take an institution like the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra; according to the CBPB report, as a traditional music organisation it has a lesser (and decreasing) part to play in creating an image of Birmingham as a cultural and creative city. Yet, it receives more financial support from the BCC than any other single music organisation in Birmingham (BCC, 2014). Besides this it is still heralded as a key creative institution within Birmingham. Clearly however, the place and identity of something like the CBSO within Birmingham is subject to increasing confusion as ideas about what counts as creativity are increasingly narrowed.

In the next section I continue to unpick some of these issues by thinking more specifically about how different urban spaces are counted as creative, and how in Birmingham the area of Digbeth – the city's creative quarter – is shaped by a process of normalisation which in turn hides a troubling series of contradictions which could undermine the creative badge bestowed on Digbeth.

Spacing the creative city

What I am interested in about these different discrepancies and tensions is how the city is being represented, imagined and materially constructed around ideas about creativity, including, who is seen to possess creativity, and whose creativity counts in the urban setting. So far I have tried to think about some of the contradictions in the cultural policy discourses between which spaces and practices are seen as creative and which spaces are strategically important to the funding policies within in the city. Here I want to focus in on the particular way in which Digbeth and the Custard Factory – a mixed use business complex – have been discursively and rhetorically constructed as *the* creative area in Birmingham.

Digbeth is represented in the cultural policy discourse as a creative area. For example, in a report produced by BCC, titled ‘Big City Culture 2010-15: Birmingham’s Cultural Strategy’, one the eight ‘Key Actions’ is to ‘Promote Digbeth/Eastside as a creative quarter’, areas which the strategy report also refers to as ‘the home of our creative sector’, it also refers to the ‘Creative cluster in Digbeth’. The notion of Digbeth as a creative space was also espoused by Councillor Martin Mullaney in an interview I conducted with him.



Both the Big City Culture strategy report and this quote from Martin Mullaney tap into the idea that creativity has a particular and natural place in the city. They reproduce a notion that

the activities happening in Digbeth are recognisably creative and that naturally they fit into a definition of creativity, which other areas, such as Broad Street – “Blackpool in Birmingham” – do not. Here I want to explore why it is that Digbeth has become the focus of a ‘creative’ rhetoric. My argument is not that Digbeth lacks creativity or that it is not creative, but rather that the identity of Digbeth as Birmingham’s creative quarter/area appears to stem from the desires of the local council to be able to say that Birmingham has a creative area – i.e. to tick a box – rather than the reality that Digbeth is more creative than any other given area in Birmingham. The implications of this are significant; by identifying one area and the activities within it as creative, this has the potential to deny the value of the creative practices taking place in another areas. In other words, the identification of Digbeth as creative is, I argue, part of the process of normalising the geographies and meaning of creativity in relation to the interests of powerful public bodies in Birmingham.

The following quote is again from the CBPB; it describes the Digbeth and Eastside areas of Birmingham:

Digbeth/Eastside. This area is promoted as a creative hub just outside the city centre ... yet to an outsider’s eyes it appears shabby and uninviting. The wider ambitions for Eastside are unlikely to be realised if Digbeth fails to achieve its full potential. Public bodies need to sit down with those creative industries that have established themselves in the neighbourhood to explore ways in which the infrastructure of the area can be improved to join up creative activity and build a ‘buzzy’ neighbourhood. Digital, music and youth hubs have all been proposed for Digbeth; the council and its partners need to decide whether and how fast to progress these ideas.

(Creative Birmingham Partnership, 2010:4)

Despite already being known, and widely referred to, as the creative quarter, the CBPB report quite clearly acknowledges that Digbeth, beyond the ‘island’ haven of the Custard Factory is

‘shabby and uninviting’, and to that extent actually lacks ‘creativity’ and ‘buzz’. Why, then, we might ask, is there an insistence on referring to Digbeth as the creative part of Birmingham, that is, as opposed to other areas? Moreover, if this report recognises that the area lacks creativity, why should Digbeth be the focus of a discourse about urban creativity? To a large extent, especially within the urban cultural policy arena, the focus on Digbeth as a creative area appears to revolve almost singly around the presence of the Custard Factory – a ‘hub’ of so-called creative businesses which are located on Digbeth High Street and set in 15 acres of restored Victorian factories. The Custard Factory is described on its website as: ‘the UK’s leading destination for creative and digital businesses, independent shops and alternative culture outside London’.

I am not questioning that the Custard Factory is a concentration of creative businesses and activities. But, to what extent does that mean Digbeth is also a creative area? As it stands, the Custard Factory sits in an area that remains dominated by light and heavy industry and wholesale retailers. Over time, however, the image of Digbeth has been aligned to the Custard Factory, and so Digbeth has been branded as a creative place because it has a creative place within it. However, even this could be questioned, not least because the Custard Factory actually includes a substantial number of more conventional non-creative businesses including a dentist, a psychotherapist, a recruitment agency specialising in the oil and gas sector, a specialist IT recruitment agency, a car buying agency, an industrial PR specialist, a specialist engineering recruitment agency, an education publisher, a service management software company, a barbers, a hair salon, a sweet shop, a security solutions company, a commercial consultancy company, a dermatologist, a small home appliance distribution company, an alcoholics recovery service, and the Prince’s Trust. The reason for citing this list of arguably not-so-creative companies is to highlight the potential cleavages present in defining, first, the Custard Factory as a creative hub, and, second, attempting to (re-)define

Digbeth as a creative space largely on the basis of the presence of the Custard Factory. To some extent, it might be much easier to define these spaces in other terms. For example, given the still strong presence of light industry, warehouses, transport links and hubs, and wholesalers in the area, Digbeth might just as easily be defined as the ‘light industry’ quarter. Despite this, many people including those within policy development, harbour images of Digbeth as a kind of organically manifesting creative hub. This image was recounted to me in an interview with Simon Bennett, Manager of the Birmingham Cultural Partnership



In relation to this image of Digbeth presented by Simon Bennet, the Custard Factory and Digbeth have, due to different forms of marketing and cultural discourse, increasingly been enveloped in a mythology of urban creativity and are currently presented as less of an island of creativity and more of a well-spring, or oasis, of creativity which has sprung up naturally and organically (something which Martin Mullaney also tapped into in the quote above). This idea, which I would argue is neither wholly truth nor wholly myth, that the Custard Factory is a kind of organically grown site of creativity, most certainly keys into the supreme urban mythologies of spaces like New York’s SoHo Area, London’s Shoreditch, or Berlin’s Kreuzberg, wherein creativity has emerged through an organic confluence or artists drawn to cheap rents and desolate spaces that no one else in the city wants.

To a large extent, however, the Custard Factory has much less of a claim to that kind of organic self-propelled emergence. It has been heavily funded by the state; in the first phase of development in 1993, a large public grant fund was secured; in 2007 the regional development agency Advantage West Midlands contributed £6.4million to further development of the site; and in 2013 a £3million scheme was announced to subsidise the rental of office and studio space in the Custard Factory. In this sense the ‘cheap rents’ have become an urban mythology of creativity that has to be state subsidised. Hence, despite the mythology of the Custard Factory as a natural convergence of creative types, it is, to a large extent, a highly subsidized and strategic manifestation of cultural policy and attempts to produce a material manifestation of an externally constructed notion of creativity. Furthermore, beyond the Custard Factory, in terms of creative convergence on Digbeth more widely there has arguably been no more than in other areas of the city. The point of raising this cleavage is absolutely not to be facetious, but to highlight some of the complexities of thinking about, imagining, and presuming certain parts of a city as creative and cultural and others as something other. Moreover, it is to challenge why it is that Digbeth has been bestowed with the creative badge and not other areas of Birmingham such as Handsworth or the Soho Road or Aston and Lozells, where, as I explore in the next chapter, there is a significant and indeed growing amount of creative activities taking place.

In relation to the discussion in the first part of this chapter this research suggests that there is a substantial cleavage relating to the idea of ‘tick-box’ cultural policy. The implementation of policy and the discourses and rhetoric which feed into policy appear to reflect the desires of public bodies to represent the city in ways which conform to idealised versions of a global city, but which fail, in a large part, to account for the reality of the city on the ground, a tension which was expressed repeatedly by many of the local music practitioners I interviewed.

The discussion in this second section has explored how creativity and music are conceived of and constructed within policy and how this produces a rationale for funding certain types of creative activities over others. However, as the definition of creativity and its meaning becomes increasingly narrower, contradictions and complications can emerge. When, for example, notions of creativity no longer include the traditional arts (e.g. the CBSO), but at the same time those same institutions within Birmingham continue to receive significant amounts of funding, it is perhaps easy to see why music practitioners within Birmingham can be confused and frustrated with the way funding is distributed. This confusion, I argue, is related to the contradiction which comes from an attempt to impose an essentialised notion of creativity on to policy and on to Birmingham, rather than developing an understating and knowledge of the diversity of creative practices which are engaged with by music practitioners and other creative people working in Birmingham. In other words, resources are arguably being allocated in order to tick boxes which are defined by an essentialised and externalised notion of what counts as creativity, rather than in ways which reflect the actual creative practices of Birmingham's music community. In the final part of the chapter I focus more explicitly on music's role in producing the kind of city that urban public bodies imagine.

SECTION THREE: THE BAND-CENTRIC MUSICScape

*We have a lot going on in Birmingham, but, what are the
barriers to success, you know, why isn't it us producing bands
like Oasis?*

- Cllr Martin Mullaney, Birmingham City Council Cabinet
Member for Leisure, Sport and Culture

The city (or any social space) belongs to, and is normalised for, those groups in society who most closely identify with those who are seen to be entitled to access and hold the 'public stage' (Rose, 1994:100). This is the argument of political musicologists such as Tricia Rose,

Jacque Attali, and Tia DeNora. The powerful normalisation of expectations about what should be heard on the public stage and who should be present on the public stage is at the heart of spatial and cultural politics. Here I argue that in Birmingham the public stage is held by *the band*, a musical culture whose identity is closely tied to the identities of white, educated, middle-class, British, mobile, urban actors. I argue it is for that group in society that Birmingham is being normalised for and who the city belongs to (and who belongs in the city), and that the band is both representative of this relationship and a tool used by powerful actors to reproduce it. I explore this argument by looking at the ways in which musical activities being led by and funded by public bodies contribute to and drive the normalisation of Birmingham as a band-centric musicscape.

It is widely recognised in the literature that music's place in the city has changed since the late 1990s (see especially Frith, 2007). However, much less has been said about how the changing relationship between music and the city has, in turn, altered the meaning and imagination of both music and urban space and what the cultural political and spatial implications of this are. Some exceptions to this include, Adam Krims' analysis of music and urban geography (2007) and Simon Frith's analysis of live music (2007).

The following quote is again taken from the CBPB report on the creative economy in Birmingham; it provides a useful starting point for thinking about place identity.

As well as being a significant employer in its own right, the creative and cultural sector ... has an important role to play in establishing and confirming the identity and character of a place. This 'place-shaping' aspect may help not just to attract tourists but also to encourage more permanent residents to settle in an area and to feel more attached to their neighbourhood. This idea resonates with Richard Florida's highly influential 'creative class' thesis, which draws attention to the role of culture in attracting workers and investors to an area.

(Creative Birmingham Partnership, 2010:6)

What this statement does is bring to light the important point that the ‘creative and cultural sector’ is directly and deeply connected to ‘the identity and character of a place’, or what the report terms ‘place-shaping’. What the report also does is recognise that this relationship can itself be strategically shaped and intervened in so as to produce particular identities and characteristics of place which, in turn, will ‘attract’ particular people to the city, for example, the ‘creative class’. Here I want to think specifically about the musical axis of this dynamic, and to think about how music is being strategically intervened in by Birmingham’s urban public bodies as a way to shape the identity, or image, of the city. More specifically, I want to do this along a particular line of thought; to explore the idea of Birmingham being a band-centric music-scape. What I mean by this is that, within the kinds of music that are embedded in Birmingham’s vision of the ‘creative’ or ‘cultural’ city discourse is the dominant presence of a white male band-centric vision of music and musical success. In other words, the vision of the creative city includes at its centre, the very specific image of the band as an idealised symbol of the live music experience.

Here I want to unpack these ideas and argue that the ‘band’ has become, in poststructural terms, a musico-cultural ‘master signifier’ – a central discursive identity around which other types of music orbit (closer or further away). What I mean by this is that the band has become a kind of presumed optimum state; the symbol of musical success; and more specifically the idealised live music experience. The band takes on an array of optimum/master musical categories such as ‘authentic’, ‘timeless’, ‘embedded’, ‘young’. Some categories are paradoxical, a band could be at once ‘local’ and ‘global’, but always taking on the favoured and positive version of these meaningful terms. In contrast, other music’s are imagined as precisely that, they are ‘other’, and they are given ‘other’ categories, classical music may for example be seen as authentic but also as ‘old’ and not embedded in local culture. Or dance

DJs might be seen as young but because of a lack of live instruments they do not provide the same authentic live music experience.

Thinking about the band as a musico-cultural master-signifier also serves an important geographical purpose; as I will discuss further, the band is a useful point of reference for thinking about how the city is musically spatialised, that is, which music is perceived to belong where in the city and which musical spaces are seen to have value in a discourse of urban creativity. To explore these ideas I examine two examples, both are cases of where the band, in a sense, is being used as Birmingham's soundtrack. And to quote DeNora again:

To be in control, then, of the soundtrack of social action is to provide a framework for the organization of social agency, a framework for how people perceive (consciously or subconsciously) potential avenues of conduct. ...control over music in social settings is a source of social power; it is an opportunity to structure the parameters of action. (2000:17/20)

'Meet Birmingham': A soundtrack to the city

The first example is literally a soundtrack; it is the soundtrack to a promotional video for Birmingham produced by the 'Meet Birmingham' branch of Marketing Birmingham – the 'city's strategic marketing partnership'. Marketing Birmingham is funded by Birmingham City Council, European Regional Development Funding, and local companies. The Meet Birmingham branch of the partnership is targeted at promoting 'Birmingham as the home of events and conferencing in the UK'; as such it plays a significant and undoubtedly powerful role in representing Birmingham to the outside world and in shaping imaginations of the city. In 2010, Marketing Birmingham produced a promotional video titled 'Meet Birmingham'. The basic setup of the video is a series of visual images and captions which begin with the word 'meet' followed by different buzz words such as 'our city', 'connections', 'creativity',

‘warmth’, and so on. There is no spoken narration in the video, only a music soundtrack, which consists of a single song played by a five-piece indie-rock band which features repeatedly in the video. The band first appear in the video visually when the caption ‘meet sounds’ appears, at which point we see an image of a guitar and a bass guitar be played. The band then appears shortly after to the caption ‘meet Bridge 55’ – the name of the band (see below). The image is of the band playing in a bar venue. The band is not widely known, they are a local band from Wolverhampton, but stylistically they conform to a conventional image and sound of a British indie-rock band. As the images below show, the band consists of a lead singer, two guitarists, a bassist and a drummer, the band members are all young white males.



Figure 4: ‘Meet Birmingham’ promotional video (Source: Marketing Birmingham, 2014)

In both an imagined and material sense the band provides the soundtrack to Birmingham as it is being represented to the conference and events world, and beyond. What is most interesting and perhaps most telling about the relationship between the band and the city is the way that the band fit into the video and into the Birmingham landscape as it is portrayed in the video. The video portrays a highly sterilised and passive image of Birmingham – focussing on retail,

conference, and leisure spaces. More than this, the city is portrayed as a wholly subservient place that is waiting and willing to serve its guests with a wide range of amenities and services. It is a city that will not trouble incomers; it is a city of uncongested roads and uncluttered pedestrian spaces; a city dotted with fountains and open spaces. It is in essence very much an image of a reassuring urban landscape; it represents a space which is comfortable and inviting and which above all offers familiarity and certainty.

In addition to the imagery of the urban fabric that is used, there is something very interesting about the music in the video which I argue underlines the feeling of urban security and familiarity. Not only does it employ a single song for the entire video, thus avoiding any kind of jumping between sounds, the band actually physically follows the viewer around the city as a kind of reassuring presence. Indeed, the band is the only feature that reappears in multiple parts of the city. The band begins in the trendy bar space, and as the video continues to explore the different parts of Birmingham the band follows the viewer into the various spaces. The band reappears in the foyer of Millennium Point (a multi-use space in the Eastside area of Birmingham city centre consisting of the science museum, a cinema, and a university campus), and then in the grounds of the historic Warwick Castle (See below).



Figure 5: 'Meet Birmingham' promotional video (Source: Marketing Birmingham, 2014)



Figure 6: 'Meet Birmingham' promotional video (Source: Marketing Birmingham, 2014)

I argue that the band in the 'Meet Birmingham' promotional video can be read as a symbol of cultural reassurance and familiarity – a sign that the city can be a place of stability and certainty. Thinking about the song itself, it uses musical conventions strongly associated with popular rock and indie music. The lyrics to the chorus are: 'everyone's laughing, everyone's

drinking, cars are passing, girls are singing, everyone loves it, there's nothing above it, nothing to stand in the way'. It is an optimistic and jovial song about having fun. It is unfrontational and innocent. Likewise, the band members are relatively passive in the performance. In this sense, I would argue the recurring presence of the band in the video is in itself, wholly reassuring to the viewer; it provides a consistency and certainty in terms of a range of cultural, aural, visual, political, and economic variables. The band and their song which acts as a soundtrack to the city is important because of the way it is being strategically and instrumentally used to reinforce the production of a very specific image of the city characterised by symbols of mainstream white middle-class culture.

Moreover, I argue that the meanings and values attached to the music and musicians (and even the musical instruments) in the video are being harnessed to embed a particular set of characteristics and identities (conformity, familiarity, passivity, youth, safety, and so on) into urban space which, in turn, shape perceptions of who and what belongs in the city, and of course, who or what might also be perceived to be out of place in the city. As much as this video might be seen as somewhat inconsequential, I would argue that the image of the city given in the video and the soundtrack it uses is far from inconsequential. Such a portrayal of Birmingham has geographical, cultural, and political significance because it informs and shapes expectations about what Birmingham should feel, look, and sound like, and so the city, in a sense, has to deliver on those expectations; it has to provide experiences of a passive and unfrontational city and a city of cultural predictability – things which are symbolised in the video by its soundtrack.

Moreover, there is significance in the apparent assumptions made in the video. It works as an effective way of identifying Birmingham based on the presumption that the city can be effectively represented by a white indie-rock band. Would the video have worked, for

example, if it was presumed that the city could be represented by a rap crew from Handsworth rapping about their street life?

This issue of what expectations are linked to Birmingham and its relationship to music was also highlighted in an interview I conducted with Mark Sampson. Mark has close connections to the punk scene in Birmingham, when I interviewed Mark he discussed the changing nature of the city which, he argues, has involved an increased feeling of being out of place and that his identity as a punk musician conflicts with ever narrower expectations about Birmingham's urban landscape and musicscape. Talking to me about punk music in Birmingham, Mark explained:



Mark hints at the subtle changing and controlling of feelings and imaginations surrounding inclusion and exclusion in the city – of who and what fits where in the city. Rather than feeling like punk and metal had been formally ‘pushed’ out, what Mark expresses is a sense of

urban space and cultural difference in tension, and a sense that certain practices, bodies, sounds, smells, and knowledges are *in place* and desired while others are *out of place*, and that musical identities are key to shaping those expectations.

It is interesting to consider Mark's experiences in relation to the image of Birmingham presented in the Meet Birmingham video. The conference centre, events spaces, and transport hubs that Mark argues were the things that his music culture became incongruous with are the very things identified as the symbols of Birmingham in the Meet Birmingham video. Therein the band also presents an image of the city as in harmony with its local music and cultures. But the contrasting feelings of undesirability and of being out of place expressed, for example, by Mark, are not experienced passively. Instead, as I explored in the opening section of this chapter, they lead to feelings of anger and frustration connected to the loss of space, the loss of power, and feelings of mistrust. And this urban political tension, as Mark described to me, is happening at the juncture between music, public policy, and urban space:



What Mark's insights, and his anger, highlight is that the normalisation of urban space and the instrumental use of music by urban public bodies to control and narrow expectations about what Birmingham's urban landscape can include, is being felt by musicians in the city. Mark's frustration reveals the geographies of music in Birmingham as a space of conflict and tension in which individuals and groups are struggling in different ways, not least in terms of finding spaces where they feel a sense of belonging and a sense of possibility for their musical practices and musical cultures.

Of course, this discussion naturally brings up questions about what happens to the musical sounds, musicians, and musical cultures which did not feature in, and do not fit in, the imagined Birmingham which is presented in things like the 'Meet Birmingham' promotional video; what place, if any, do other music's have in the city? To be sure, as I discuss at length in the next chapter, the answer is complex and varies according to the types of music in question. The point more widely, however, is that Birmingham's soundtrack, its public stage, is not only key to the city's identity and image, but the soundtrack is actively being shaped by powerful urban bodies. As the 'Meet Birmingham' example illustrates, the naturalised place of types of musical sounds and musical cultures, especially, as I argue, the 'band', shape expectations and perceptions of what is 'in place' in Birmingham and what, in turn, is as 'out of place'. Or rather, music feeds into and shapes the production of uneven urban geographies and it does so, in part, because of the way in which music is used to represent Birmingham.

Headlining the city

The second example I want to explore in relation to this idea of the band as musical master-signifier and the normalisation of urban space relates to the headline acts of what was Birmingham's largest city festival, ArtsFest, which took place annually between 1997 and 2012. My argument is that the headline performances on the main stage of the festival are

indicative of the kind of music that BCC, the funders and organisers of ArtsFest, imagines at the centre of musical culture; the music that sits naturally, or deserves to take, centre stage (literally). Looking back over the last six years of ArtsFest, these are the corresponding years and headline acts with photos:

Figure 7: Headline Acts at ArtsFest 2007-2012 (Source: Author)

My point is not that this set of headliners is somehow ‘wrong’, nor I am specifically, or even necessarily, interested in how well these bands ‘represent’ the city musically. Rather, I want to think about the relationship between the meanings these bands have, and are given, as headliners and how the city is imagined musically and spatially in relation to them. Hence this example is here as a means to continue to think about Birmingham as being a territory in which the band is an idealised musical form. The successful local band is in many ways the optimum, or pinnacle, version of a local music and it is celebrated though its dominant place in the public stage and in the city’s soundtrack. Again like the Meet Birmingham video, the concern here is for the presumption that underpins the placing of the band at the centre of the city’s main music festival – *who else would headline such an event, other than a band?* It is a concern for the unquestioned cultural geography of the band as the only musical culture that can represent the city.

Within the event of ArtsFest itself, however, there are other feelings about the meaning of the event and its relationship to the different people, places, and music forms in the city. Some of these conflicting feelings were expressed during an interview I conducted with a leader of a local hip hop dance group who was running a stall at the 2010 ArtsFest. The individual representing the organisation called Transit Trix was called Keith Fraser. During the short interview, he described his frustration and sense of isolation during the process of gaining access to ArtsFest. These feelings related to the fact that the people who Keith usually associates with, in his own creative and artistic world are, he believes, unable to access the ArtsFest world due to the bureaucracy which surrounds the event. Alongside this, Keith described a feeling of being ‘different’ to the other artists and organisations at the festival. The following is an excerpt of the interview wherein I discussed with Keith his experience of representing a black arts form at ArtsFest:



Again, rather than thinking directly about the question of how well the city and ArtsFest represents what Keith sees as his own musical cultures, such as hip hop, I want to pick up on

the feeling of difference, of feeling different, that Keith seems to express and how this relates to his place in a band-centric musicscape. In the first place, Keith refers to the festival and other cultural spaces in the city as being 'snooty'. For me, during the interview, I got the sense that what Keith was conveying in using this kind of language of 'snootiness' and 'bias', was something like a feeling of being an outsider and inferior; as not having, or being perceived to not have, the knowledge, attitude, or intellect to engage with the conventional and dominant spaces of music and cultural activity in the city. The sense of snootiness about ArtsFest, the feeling of isolation as a music form, the feeling of bias towards indie and rock (band music), and the bureaucratic barriers, potentially contribute to a feeling of being out-of-place. And more than this, I got the sense that Keith was actually expressing not only his own feelings but a wider sense coming from the musical culture in which he usually operates about the different barriers preventing them from accessing or being/feeling part of the cultural and musical mainstreams in the city. What we see in Keith's response is I would argue, a struggle to imagine his place, as a representative of a hip hop dance group, within the cultural and musical landscape of the city which he recognises and imagines as centred around and biased towards the indie band. In this sense, Keith recognises in the city and at events such as ArtsFest a set of norms which he struggles to identify with and which manifest for him as a set of different barriers.

Hence, the point of highlighting, on the one hand, the dominance of bands headlining ArtsFest and, on the other, the feelings of Keith from Transit Trix, is to think about how the imaginations of the musicscape are normalised through often very invisible actions, the invisibility of a presumption that certain styles of music have a natural place at the centre of the city's music and cultural spaces, and how the spatial division of certain bodies, knowledges, sounds, and ideas becomes naturalised through the actions of public bodies. What we see in the case of ArtsFest I argue is interventions by BCC shaping expectations

about urban space and the meaning of what counts as music or what is perceived as in place or out of place, or what fits naturally at the centre and what fits naturally at the edges of urban cultural life.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored how the power of music is harnessed and instrumentalised within the normalisation of urban space and in ways that reify certain cultural, political, and economic dominances. It has also critically explored music and cultural policy as spaces of contestation. It has thought about how the policy interventions that are made in Birmingham's musicscape affect different people in different ways, but also that those effects are not felt passively, they evoke strong feelings among many different music practitioners in the city.

In the first part of this chapter, I presented the voices of local music practitioners to explore some of the tensions that emerge in the relationship between music and cultural policy implementation. What I found is a quite widespread distrust in the ability of local public bodies to engage with music in the city in an effective way. In particular, there is a concern among local music practitioners in Birmingham that the funding bodies, such as BCC, who control key musical, financial, and spatial resources lack important knowledge about the everyday operation of music in Birmingham. Related to this there is a sense of distance between music practitioners who work on-the-ground in Birmingham's musicscape and the development of cultural policy. Particular barriers such as 'funding language' and a lack of understanding of who or where the funding bodies are, also plays into these tensions.

In the second part of the chapter I continued to explore the theme of normalisation by thinking about the spatialities of creativity, and in particular, the presumptions that are made and entrenched within cultural policy about who, what, and where in Birmingham counts as

creative. In exploring this, I attempted to uncover some of the tensions, contradictions, and cleavages which sit behind the often neat rhetoric about places such as Digbeth as being hotspots of organic creativity. In this sense, I wanted to find ways in which to locate and then challenge some of the presumptions that are made about creativity and the geographies of the city. This discussion about what, who, and where counts as creative in Birmingham, very naturally feeds into an allied set of questions about what, who, and where does not count as creative in Birmingham's musicscape. If areas such as Digbeth are rhetorically constructed, imagined, and represented as the natural spaces of urban creativity, then where is its urban other? Which areas are not creative? These questions are where I turn my attention in the next chapter, wherein I discuss how rap music has been constructed as an abnormal and transgressive form of (non)creativity, and think about how the places in the city that are connected to rap are rhetorically constructed and imagined as broken and destructive.

Finally, in the third section of this chapter I focussed more explicitly on the place of music in the normalisation of urban space and urban cultures. To do so, I explored the argument that Birmingham has a band-centric musicscape, and that the practices of public bodies in Birmingham reify and benefit from the cultural dominance of the band and the groups in society that identify with and are culturally represented by the band. I used two examples wherein the band is instrumentalised by public bodies to represent Birmingham. In both examples I discuss how the centrality and place of the band in the public stage is presumed and unquestioned. Like the discussion above about creativity, the discussion of who is entitled to the public stage, raises questions about who is not entitled to, and who cannot access, the public stage. These, again, are questions I address in the following chapter in my discussion of rap music.

5.

THE PLACE OF RAP MUSIC: MARGINALISATION AND MUSIC AS THREAT

...urban development[s] host varying ways in which the prospering society deals with those who are left behind.

Krims 2007:120

INTRODUCTION

Relating to the above epigraph taken from Adam Krims' *Music and Urban Geography*, this chapter is about the complex and often disturbing urban geographies of being 'left behind'; of being marginalised; and of being 'other' in urban life. Here I take local rap music⁸ and its relation to gang culture and urban inequality in Birmingham as my lens, and earpiece, through which to explore these issues. Moreover, this chapter is an attempt to understand the place of rap music in making and shaping the fraught margins of urban life in Birmingham. That is, I explore the roles (multiple and varied) that rap music plays in shaping the spatialities – material and imagined – of the city.

The story of urban gangs and deprivation in Birmingham, especially as it is experienced by young black people living in deprived areas of the city, is decisively one of music and

⁸ I will be using 'rap music' as an inclusive term to cover a range of what might also be termed 'black' or 'urban' music. Generally speaking these types of music descend from the hip hop music developed in the late 1970s. There are many variations of this genre, however, what links the music I am interested in here is the presence of rapping (aka MCing). The music is also characterised by a dominant (heavy) bass-line. Particular prominent sub-genres include, garage, hip hop, rap, gangsta rap, grime, drum and bass, and jungle. Where necessary, I will specify particular genres.

geography – especially rap music and the geographies of ‘the streets’. For example, when I questioned one of my research participants, a young black male and ex-gang-member, about what rap music meant to him growing up among gangs and in a deprived area of Birmingham, he replied “it became my mother, it became my father...it [rap music] was telling us [his gang] how to live” (Jordan)⁹. Again, when I asked the same participant about ‘the streets’ and their meaning in his life, he replied; “it was home, it was home; that’s the best way to explain it, the streets was my home” (Jordan). This lucid expression of life in Birmingham indicates quite how much significance rap music and the spaces of the streets have in urban experiences; they are equated to some of the most fundamental aspects of daily human life – parents and homes. Except, unlike the genuine security offered by real parents and real homes, rap music and the streets are far from compassionate or secure, they are highly confrontational and can be deeply violent and fearful spaces. But, perhaps what makes this area of research both challenging and necessary is that these daily struggles are a troublingly invisible (or otherwise misrepresented) part of urban life – they are an urban spectre for those who ‘prosper’ and an unyielding reality for those who are ‘left behind’.

In the **first** section of the chapter I begin by setting the scene of rap music’s exclusion from the mainstream music spaces of the city. To do this, I examine the very public and highly transgressive incidents of violence which have taken place at rap events in nightclubs in Birmingham. Therein, I conceptualise the nightclub as a meeting place in two ways; first, as a meeting place between rap music and gang culture (and between rival gangs). This meeting, driven to a large extent by the desires of young black people to engage in black music performances, has led to violent incidents in which local gangs have used nightclubs as spaces to engage in acts of violence. Second, developing on from the first, the nightclub has become

⁹ The name of this participant has been replaced with a pseudonym.

discursively constructed, imagined, and perceived as a meeting place between the geographies of the *urban norm* and the *urban other*. That is, the rap music event (set in the nightclub), as the site of very public incidents of gang violence, has become a spatial focal point in shaping localised understandings of the threat posed by gang and black culture in Birmingham. Relatedly, rap music has become a sonic and cultural marker of that violence. I explore the framing of rap as a threat to the urban norm, and the nightclub as its space of transgression into the normal city, as well as the experiences of those people in the rap community who increasingly feel excluded from the mainstream live musicscape in Birmingham.

In the **second** section, I shift the view beyond the spaces where the centre and margin meet to think more specifically about the wider urban context of rap culture. That is, I examine how the momentary violence which surfaces in the nightclub actually connects into a much wider geography of violence and marginality in the city – an urban underworld which is hidden and invisible from certain views. The aim of the section is to try to make sense of the city not as something which is occasionally and inadvertently punctured by violent moments, but as contingent on a layer of spaces and experiences in which violence is the norm.

The **third** section of the chapter is about the roles rap music plays in Birmingham's marginal spaces. I address this by looking at how young black people especially, use rap music in their lives in Birmingham. Therein I focus on the social, spatial, and emotional roles of rap music. I approach these issues by examining local rap music itself, including the lyrics, the instrumental sounds such as the beats, and the accompanying rap videos which have become a staple element of local rap in Birmingham. In examining the music, I think about the spaces of the city that rap music inhabits, territorialises, and represents. The intention of the third section is to build on the arguments explored in sections one and two about the place of violence and deprivation by exploring how the rap music of everyday life in Birmingham plays multiple roles in contributing to, shaping, and challenging those geographies.

SECTION ONE: “TURNING THE SPOTLIGHT ON RAP CULTURE”¹⁰

In this section I critically explore the spatialities of, and responses to, gang culture and rap music in Birmingham. The connections between urban street gangs and rap music have meant that both things have arguably become symbols of urban ruin and urban threat in the city. Here I want to think about the particular spaces that have been formative in shaping perceptions of rap music and gang culture in Birmingham. I consider especially the nightclubs where rap music events take place and where on numerous occasions gang tensions have erupted in violent outbursts.

*Meeting One: “Trouble in the clubs”*¹¹

Here I argue that the nightclub¹² is a particularly important space in making sense of the spatialities and cultural politics of rap music and gang violence in Birmingham. As noted above, I think about the nightclub as a ‘meeting place’ in two ways; first, between rap music and gangs, and second, between the urban ‘norm’ and the urban ‘other’. The nightclub is by no means the only place that rap and gangs meet, however, it is one of the most organised/formal and most publicly visible places in which rap and gang culture meet.

¹⁰ This phrase was used in a newspaper article following the New Year’s shootings in Birmingham (Hinsliff et al., 2003)

¹¹ This phrase is taken from an interview with KMD, a Birmingham rapper and rap music producer, talking about violence occurring at nightclubs in Birmingham.

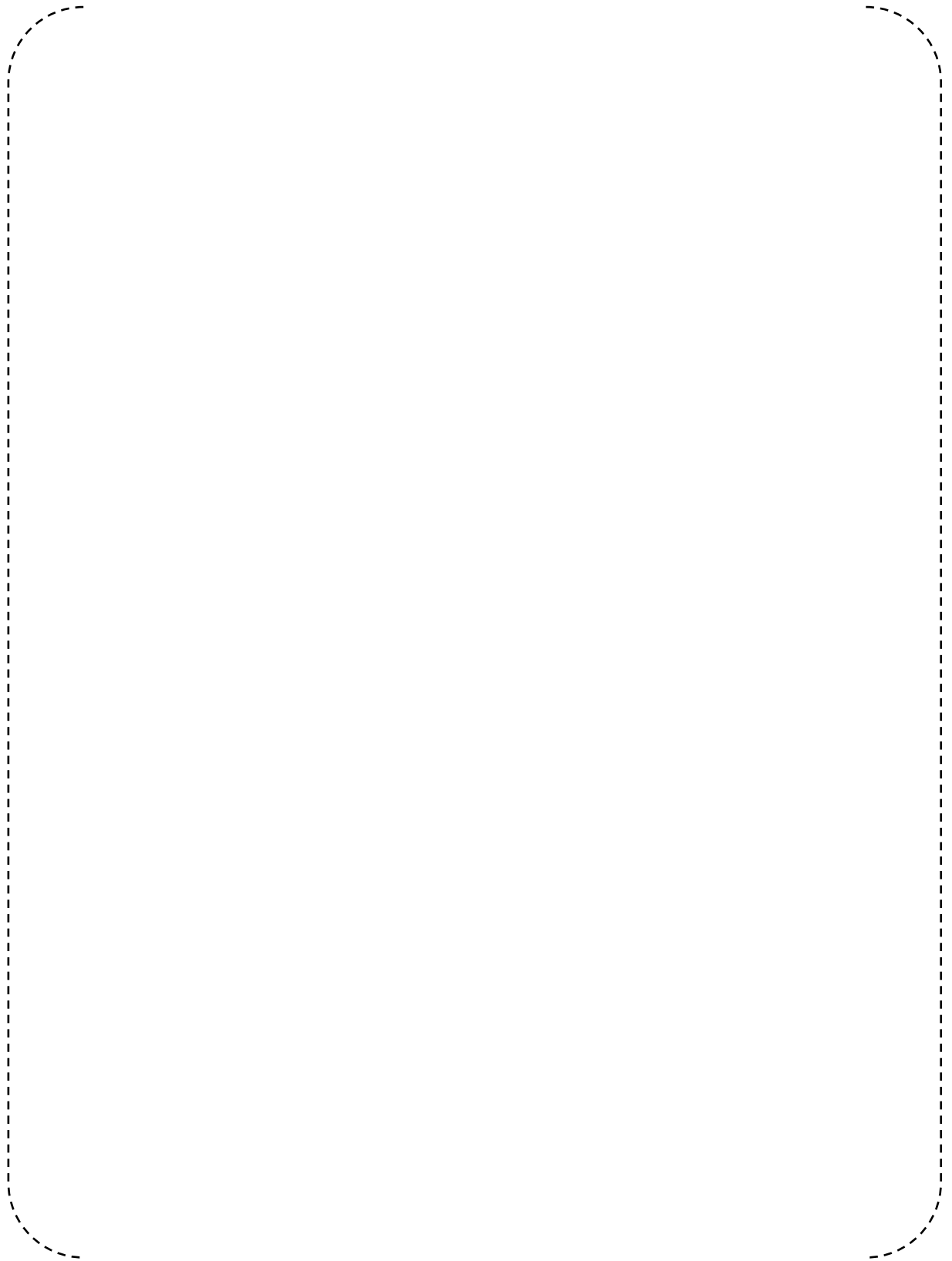
¹² To note, I am not referring to a single nightclub, I am referring to ‘the nightclub’ as collective term for the nightclubs in Birmingham where rap music is performed or played. It is worth noting also that when I talk about the nightclub or the ‘rap night’ I am referring to a public event which, like other musical performances, centres on a live music act performing on-stage to an audience. Conventionally in a rap performance, the performers include DJs (Disc Jockey) and MCs (Master of Ceremony). The DJ provides an instrumental backing-track using turntables.¹² The MC provides the rapping element of the music (sometimes referred to as ‘spitting’; to ‘spit lyrics’); the MC will rap either rehearsed songs or will improvise lyrics. Often there will be multiple MCs performing together; this is referred to as a ‘crew’. In some cases a rap performance may take the form of a ‘battle’ where MCs or crews take turns to rap at each other; this is known as ‘dissing’. In addition, when I refer to nightclubs in Birmingham, I am not referring to places which are solely dedicated to rap music. Such places are much rarer; indeed, I did not encounter clubs of that kind in my research in Birmingham. I am referring to nightclubs which host various musical styles/genres and cater to different audiences on different nights, including rap nights.

Moreover, the nightclub is a non-street/non-'hood space, so is materially and imaginatively beyond the spaces more typically associated with and used by gangs. Perhaps most crucially the rap night is an emotionally charged space driven by the music. This emotional aspect is crucial in shaping the rap night as a meeting place between rap and gangs; the emotional rewards of the music – enjoyment and excitement – are crucial in drawing in crowds of young people, but those same emotions and also contribute to eruptions of violence. The turbulence of different emotions, including aggression, in a context where rival gangs are present can and has resulted in violence.

In her very influential work on the cultural politics of rap music in America, Tricia Rose explores the changing presence of black performers and black audiences in the live music world of 1990s America. Her analysis frames the live musicscape in America as being the domain and the preserve of white people, and, the presence of black people in live music, especially poor black people, as being innately transgressive (see also Krims, 2007; 2000). Like Rose, here I argue that in Birmingham there is a process of marginalisation taking place wherein black culture has much less of claim to, or place in, the mainstream urban live musicscape and where rap music is therefore seen as transgressive. I explored in the previous chapter how the live musicscape in Birmingham is arguably a band-centric and white space. This chapter very much continues that story by addressing the question of what exists beyond the dominant musico-cultural centre; that is, what musics, feelings, and practices are also in the city; and what happens when those 'other' musical cultures *want* to be part of the live musicscape. I approach this, then, by examining the 'arrival' and the subsequent exclusion of live rap music in Birmingham.

Rap music took on a new identity in the early 2000s with the arrival of garage music – a genre of rap. Garage was popularised in the UK by a number of very prominent black music acts such as So Solid Crew who released their first album in 2001. Their second single *21 Seconds*

reached number-one in the UK charts, also in 2001. From the very beginning, however, So Solid Crew's music, and garage music more generally, was steeped in controversy because of close connections to urban gangs. The lyrics were controversial because they were often about things happening on the street between rival gangs. In the early 2000s Garage nights became a popular part of Birmingham's clubbing and live music scene. However the early 2000s was not only a time when excitement for live rap music grew, it was also a time when tensions between Birmingham's gangs were growing and changing. The garage night, as it gained popularity, was quickly becoming a new space in which the 'problems on the street' (a term used by KMD) were manifesting and erupting. To illustrate this and the kinds of problems that began to occur at rap music event in Birmingham, below is an interview excerpt where KMD vividly describes his experiences of a shooting that occurred during a garage music night at The Sanctuary nightclub [venue now under different name] in Birmingham in the early 2000s. (This was a period when KMD was regularly performing as a rapper and DJ at live events in Birmingham with his crew, Lo-Ki).




One of the striking things about KMD's description is the idea that such a violent incident was something he we 'used to', to the extent that he had his own safety-drill to get against a

wall to avoid gun shots. Indeed, KMD made it clear to me that other similarly violent incidents often took place at music events he attended during that period.¹³ Hence, I want to focus in on some of the issues which fed into rap music nights becoming spaces of violence, especially gang violence.


Musical desires and an explosive scene

I got the sense from talking to different people about the period of rap music in the early 2000s that it was a hugely exciting period for young black people in Birmingham who otherwise struggled to identify with popular music and, moreover, who struggled to access live music performances in the black music genres they preferred. In an in-depth discussion on this matter with a local rapper, Fonzo, he explained to me the kinds of cultural, musical, and street politics which shaped the emergence of the garage scene and the experiences of those within it. He described to me how, in his view, garage fits into a wider history of black experiences of music in the contemporary urban environment, which includes, on the one hand, a lack of opportunity for black people to engage with black music, and on the other hand, a historical sense that black culture is perceived as threatening. For example, Fonzo reflected on the controversy that surrounded garage music in his response to a question I asked about the fact that a music he wanted to engage with as a black teenager was widely being seen as bad and negative.

¹³ In section two of this chapter I discuss how violence is not restricted to nightclubs, and that it permeates various parts of life for many young people like KMD who grew up and now live in areas where deprivation and gang culture are part of the fabric of everyday life.

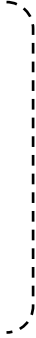
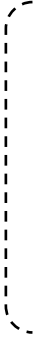


Fonzo's summary of how the scene emerged like something that had been suppressed and was waiting to 'explode' is particularly insightful. It potentially indicates the nature of the kinds of cultural struggles that young black people like him faced at the time and the desire they had to engage with musical performances in the city. Likewise, his experience of clubbing but not connecting with the music also illustrates a sense of being 'out of place' in the live musicscape, and accentuates the subsequent excitement of feeling a sense of belonging when he finally encountered the music he desired. Just as insightful is Fonzo's experience of the way the scene changed over time both in terms of the music – a shift towards 'more violent' grime music – and in terms of increasingly negative perceptions of rap music forms. Following on, I asked Fonzo whether the arrival of garage music in the early 2000s was something he was excited by. His response again revealed a somewhat muted struggle against a lack of cultural and musical practices which he felt he could identify with.



Again, Fonzo's experiences highlight the issue that the garage scene emerged/'exploded' in a space of tension; a space of lack for young black teenagers like Fonzo, who grew up in inner-city areas and who struggled to identify with, and feel genuine passion for, the music they encountered in mainstream spaces. Socially and spatially the potential ramifications are that young black people lack a sense of claim to, or place in, the cultural and entertainment spaces of urban environments because of the cultural and racial differences which they bear. What struck me about Fonzo's insights on this, and something which resonates with the discussions I had with others about this topic, is that garage, both as an event and as a music form, was rapidly tapping into young black people's emotional desires; it was getting them excited.¹⁴ This was something that KMD similarly picked up on in terms of thinking about why garage attracted violent crowds.

¹⁴ Here the term '*hyped*' is perhaps apt; it is a term often used in rap culture to describe a feeling of excitement about something like a piece of music, but it is also used to describe the emotional state of getting being agitated and becoming aggressive.



As much as KMD experienced the garage scene as something which was rapidly transformed by destructive forces, especially the problems with gang culture, he recognised that garage and grime music was something that, in his own terms, “everybody loved”.

This point about the feeling of cultural lack and the genuine excitement many young black people felt for garage music is, I would argue, particularly important as it highlights an area of rap’s local history that rarely gets picked up on in the more conventional, disparaging discourses. Finally, I asked Fonzo about his experience of what happened when the garage scene began to take hold in Birmingham and why, in turn, it became a space of violence and eventually became difficult to sustain.

Fonzo's experience of an almost sudden surge in the presence of rap music and the subsequent changes in the nature of rap events in Birmingham concurs very strongly with others that I spoke with and so I want to pick-up on a few of the different themes – violence in the music, emotions, black experience, and street politics – which Fonzo highlighted.

Ammo Talwar, someone who has 30 years experience working in Birmingham's music scene, was promoting live music events in Birmingham in the late 1990s and early 2000s and also recognised and commented on the surge of garage music in Birmingham. As garage music gained traction locally and Ammo became increasingly involved in garage promotion, it was not long before local gangs would disrupt those spaces. Ammo, who in the early 2000s moved from promoting Bhangra (Asian dance music) towards black forms of music such as garage and R&B, summed up for me the shift that occurred in the scene from his perspective as a promoter.



One of the things which stands out in both Fonzo's and Ammo's insights is that the actual composition of the music itself was a crucial element in the changing nature of the live garage scene and its entangling with local gang culture. Indeed, a number of participants I spoke with and who were involved in the early garage scene noted how the music being played in the clubs went through a series of transformations which saw it become increasingly "harder" and "darker". This was certainly something Ammo was keen to emphasise in the conversation I had with him about the changing rap music scene in Birmingham in the 2000s. As he describes in the excerpt above the music became more focused on the MC, the challenge, and the battle. In this sense the music became more aggressive in its style as it increasingly focussed on the confrontation both between rivalling MCs and between MCs and the audience.

Thinking about music and emotions, Ammo's insights are also very interesting; he talks about how the 'challenge' and 'battle' in the music actually replaced the 'fun'. Additionally, as this changed happened, he notes how, the 'girls stopped going'. The presence of females is perhaps seen as a signifier of more relaxed and more sensitive emotions connected with fun, and as the music changed, the presence of females was removed from the scene and the MC - the dominant masculine figure - came to the fore. As noted in a quote above, Fonzo also recognized this change from what he described as "feel good...party music" towards "local MCs" and "more violent music". In terms of the way the music was composed, Ammo explained to me that this meant "the music became minimal and sparse and the hooks [chorus lines] weren't there; the melodies weren't there".

Changes in the scene were also experienced by KMD, who has been a performing MC and DJ in Birmingham since the early 2000s. KMD highlighted the increasing primacy of the MC in shaping, and hardening, the styles of rap music that were heard in clubs in Birmingham.

Besides thinking about MCing as a chance to simply disrespect rival gangs, KMD's claims that 'everybody thought they could MC' perhaps highlights the excitement that young people felt when they encountered a music culture which they could be creatively, and productively, part of. Of course, on the other hand, it also highlights the fact that music became another tool in the workings of urban street gangs. What is clear is that rap music continually overlaps with and becomes entangled in complex social processes around black urban cultural experience.

It appears that as the scene developed it was the combination of harder sounds and the increasing emphasis on MCs, especially local MCs, which re-shaped what the rap night meant in the city. Indeed it is important to highlight here that distinctions are made about the meaning of the rap night when the performing MCs are from Birmingham rather than from elsewhere. All of the people I spoke to on this issue were keen to highlight the fact that problems in rap nights would be more likely when local MCs, who represent or even simply come from a particular area of the city, were performing. This issue was captured by Fonzo.

Perhaps what the local MC does in many ways is heighten the emotional experience of the rap performance, it brings it closer to the realities of everyday life, and of course in many cases it heightens feelings of animosity.

Rap's Dark Emotions

At the centre of this shifting terrain of rap music culture in Birmingham are, arguably, the emotional dimensions of the music including, first, the excitement of encountering black music forms, and second, the aggressive 'wild' emotions that have become part of both performer's and audience's experiences of live rap music in Birmingham. Speaking about the presence of aggressive emotions in rap performance, KMD explained to me his own experience of, and growing discomfort with, the rap scene in Birmingham. His description, I feel, lucidly illustrates some of the more visceral tensions that would penetrate audiences when harder and darker forms of rap music were playing.



In the mix of rap music, performance, street politics, and gang culture, the individual emotional subject seems to be key in shaping how rap music is encountered and given meaning. There is something gripping about the way KMD describes the anger and the ‘screwed up faces’ of the ‘possessed’ audiences he was either playing to or was part of. The emotion of excitement therefore was arguably replaced, in part, by other emotions of fear and aggression.¹⁵

Even more vivid than KMDs description of the emotional effects of rap music was a conversation I had with Jordan who as a teenager was heavily involved in violent gang activities and also engaged in rap music. During the interview he described and physically portrayed to me the feelings, the emotions, even the physiological effects he would go through when he listened to garage.

¹⁵ To note, there is a tension in KMD’s description about music’s causal role, at first KMD links the heavy beats and bass to the hyper actions of the audience, and then attempts to remove any blame from the music and puts it onto the problems on the street. In a sense, perhaps both aspects are right, and in any case it highlights how overlapped and entangled rap music and black urban experiences have become.



The point of highlighting Jordan's experience is to reinforce what this section has attempted to do, to shine a light on some of the different social, spatial, cultural, and emotional processes and experiences which shaped the place of rap music as a presence in Birmingham's live musicscape. The emotions and feelings which drove rap music in Birmingham – the initial excitement and the subsequent aggression – as well as the points where it became entangled in a wider story of urban deprivation and violence are part of understanding the place of rap music.

To summarise, before I think about how rap music has been excluded from the mainstream live musicscape, what I found insightful about the conversations I had with people about their experience of live rap music in Birmingham is that rap is anchored in a somewhat muted struggle around the issue of who, or what culture, and what music, has a place in the live musicscape. As the live garage and grime scenes grew, this struggle continued but it also mutated as it became increasingly entangled with local gang culture. This, in turn, changed

the composition of the music, and therein it appears the emotional experience and the meaning of live rap performance also changed. The live rap music event in Birmingham has to different extents become a space of fear, aggression, and violence. Hence, I turn now to think about how the presence of live rap music has been responded to, understood, and represented in the city.

Meeting Two: 'Gangland violence in the city'¹⁶

Here, I want to frame the discussion in terms of thinking about the nightclub as a being imagined and represented a meeting place between the urban norm – understood as having a particular cultural identity and as being largely harmonious and unconnected to violence – and the urban 'other' – an outside urban space of violence and discord. To be clear, the meeting between the norm and 'other' it is not a passive meeting, it is about the 'other' transgressing into the urban norm; disrupting it.

A particular moment in my research stands out with regards to this issue of Birmingham's nightclubs being seen as a space through which urban gangs can threaten the city. Early on in my research, I met a well-known local music promoter at a Birmingham Music Network meeting. We spoke informally after the meeting, and got onto the topic of rap music having a 'reputation', and the promoter told me in quite sure terms that, as a promoter for a large club/music venue in Digbeth, his position had long since been set on not promoting any form of rap music. He explained to me that if he was approached by a rap act then he would be all-but obliged to refuse them on the basis that an event involving music of that type posed a risk that was 'not worth taking'. What came to mind in reflecting on this conversation is the image of the nightclub as a gateway between one part of the city and another, and that gateway

¹⁶ Phrase taken from Birmingham Evening Mail 2001

increasingly being closed so that the certain things – people, sounds, practices – can no longer go between the two parts of the city.

The image left in my mind led me to think about the issue of how the club has become seen as a key meeting place, and a gateway between, the urban norm and the ‘other’, in the form of rap music and gang culture. More generally, encounters like this in the research led me to think about how the normal(ised) approach to gang violence in Birmingham has become dominated by practices and discourses which are principally concerned with keeping different sides of the city apart, with closing the gateway between them, and preventing transgressions between them. Much less visible in the public discourse about rap and gangs is any sense of reforming and addressing the issues which underpin the existence gang violence – inequality, deprivation, poverty, racism etc.¹⁷

It is transgression, then, that I argue is the principal discursive framing in which rap music and gangs are imagined and represented. This point relates to the discussion in Chapter Five about the live music scene being centred around, and being the proper place of, indie-band music, and wherein other types of music are always-already identified as ‘other’. To note, the framing of rap as ‘other’ and as transgressive arguably has at least two key effects on rap music’s place in Birmingham. First, the emphasis on transgression constructs rap as an always-already threatening agent or force. Rap has arguably become seen as a threat in itself, but also as a symbol of a wider threat posed by black people, gangs, and urban deprivation. I

¹⁷ To note, the analysis in this section, which is about the exclusion and stigmatisation of rap in Birmingham has been a difficult research terrain to navigate. The main challenge is in the fact that the research is trying to look for and highlight moments which indicate forms of injustice such as discrimination or racism. The difficulty is that these things play out in often very subtle and dispersed ways. Unsurprisingly, I did not come across blatantly racist or simplistically unreasonable articles or policy reports in Birmingham. The presence of injustice is in the accumulation of different and overlapping discourses and practices which reify the dominance of certain things (musics, bodies, spaces, practices) and undermine/stigmatise others. This is why following this discussion of the discursive construction of rap music in Birmingham, I return, at the end of this section, to the voices of those who are involved in rap to get insights into their experiences of exclusion.

argue that the language and identity of rap-as-transgressive has become, in a sense, the only way in which rap can be identified from the outside and that *other identities struggle to be counted*. Second, the emphasis on transgression, constructs a paradigm in which rap (and the things it symbolises) is understood as ‘outside’; as un-belonging to the city; and as not having a *proper* place in the Birmingham musicscape. Within the paradigm of transgression, rap is an ‘other’ which transgress into the city from an elsewhere place; it becomes an alien intruding on, and disrupting, place. I attempt to unpick some of these issues by looking at the nightclub as a key space from which discourses about rap music have emerged.

Where’s the threat?

Nightclubs tend to be central and easily accessible places, for example, located in the centre of Birmingham. Generally speaking, nightclubs are seen and imagined as relatively self-contained, neutral spaces which are part of the ‘leisure city’. In this sense, they are expected to be places which can be used for entertainment and enjoyment and without fear. Because of this, nightclubs and other live music spaces are absolutely central to 1) the city’s night-time economy, and 2) to the image of Birmingham as a place of entertainment, but also more generally, as a safe and welcoming place. Again, the types of people Birmingham’s commercial, public, and corporate actors are trying to attract to the city and to use the night-time economy are culturally specific; primary groups include students, conference attendees, entertainment tourists, and business people – typically middle-class, white, and educated populations – and the night-time entertainment industry is crucial in achieving/providing the ‘right’ urban experience. Hence, it is because of the night-time entertainment industry’s prominence in the image of Birmingham, and the level of control it is subject to, that any form of transgression is naturally heightened. For this reason the nightclub has become an important space through which understandings of, and responses to, gang culture, otherness, urban deprivation, and rap music have been shaped.

To illustrate the way in which the nightclub has become imagined as a gateway, or meeting place, between the urban centre and margin, I have drawn-up a map of gang-related violent incidents which have taken place in Birmingham's nightclubs in the past 15 years or so. The map is indicative rather than exhaustive.¹⁸ I have produced it based on research using the Nexis database of news reports and as well as general internet searches for reports on incidents. Each point on the map includes a short excerpt from the media report. The point more specifically of the map is to visualise this spatial layer of gang violence that has built up in Birmingham over the past 15 years. This re-mapping of the city has changed what the city means, how it is experienced and imagined, and has changed understandings of who or what does and does not belong in the city. It has changed the emotion and feel of the city; feelings of fear for example have altered geographies. This re-mapping of city is a confluence of different processes, including: the gang violence; the discursive response; and the actions that have been taken in response to the violence. On the map I present below, rap music is as much a culprit/harbinger of urban violence and threat because it represents the gangs, it has become their sonic marker, their cultural symbol.

¹⁸ In the research I did, I was unable to discern the exact number of violent outbreaks such as fights, shootings, or stabbings at rap music events involving local gangs. The annotated map outlines a number of the incidents that have occurred in Birmingham based on the headlines within the local and national press to provide an impression of how the relationship between gang violence and music is framed.

1999 - Police in move to shut club **The Que Club** (city centre): ‘fights had broken out at the club and how police had to break up a **gangland-style battle** between two machete-wielding gangs’ (Mowbray, 1999)

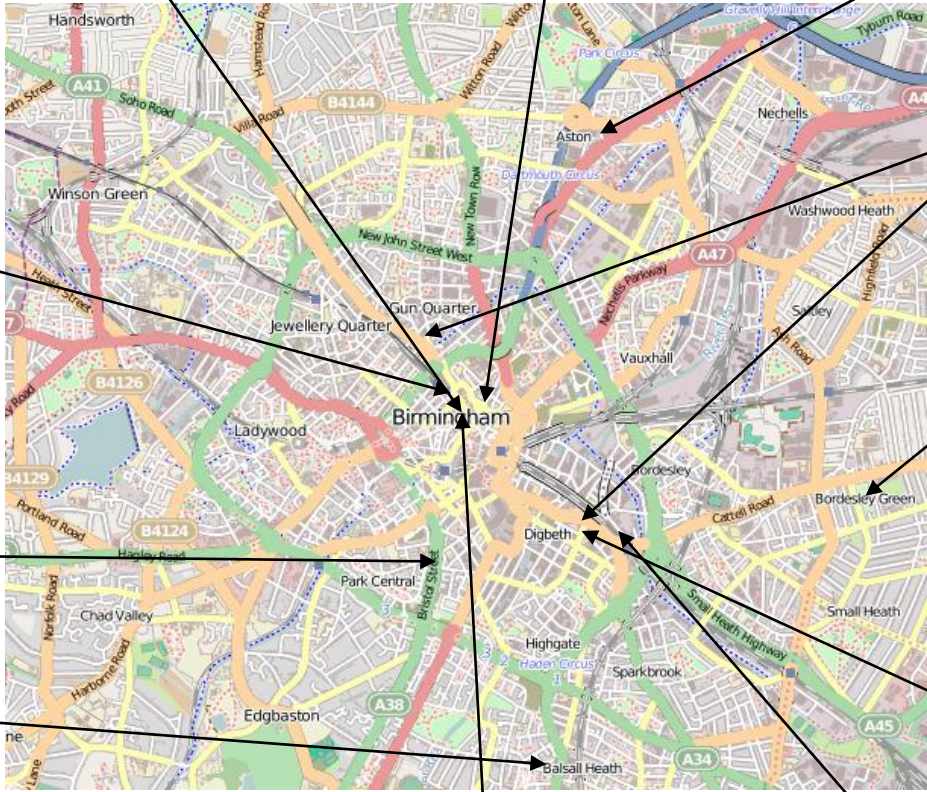
2000 - Jury told of **nightclub fight for gun: Groove Box club** (city centre) (Bassey 2004)

2001 **Four Shot At City Club: La Mustiques** in Aston, ‘gunmen blasted four people in a **gangland-style shooting at a Birmingham nightclub**’ (Birmingham Evening Mail 2001a)

2005 - **R&B Stars Attacked By Gang In Brum Club: Carling Academy** (city centre), ‘latest in a series of **violent incidents at Birmingham nightspots**, which have been blamed on the city’s **notorious street gangs**’ (Bassey, 2005b)

2004 **Shot Nightclub Solicitor Puts The Blame On Cops After Doorman Is Killed In Hail Of Bullets: Premonition nightclub**, (city centre) ‘The biggest problem are the **street gangs** who come to these gigs’ (Bassey 2004)

2002 - **Shots Fired In Club Row: Breeze club**, in Balsall Heath, ‘Gun-toting clubbers opened fire on a bouncer’ (EveningMail, 2002)



2001 - **Gangland Violence Fear After Shootings: Sanctuary nightclub** in Digbeth and **Bonds nightclub** in Hockley ‘fears of escalating **gangland violence** in the city’. (Birmingham Evening Mail 2001)

2010 - **24 Hours Of Carnage: Victoria Pub** (Bordesley Green), ‘Four people were shot outside a busy Birmingham pub after **gang violence erupted** ... those involved were believed to be from the B6 Slash gang, which comes from Aston’ (Sunday Mercury 2010)

2008 - **Police Still Hunting People Behind Irish Club Shooting (Digbeth)**: The incident has been connected to a recent **spate of gang-related shootings** and stabbings across the city (Irish Post 2008)

2008 - **Club Bosses Refuse To Bow To Police Curfew As Fears Run High Of Reprisals In Gangland Feud**: ‘fears of an explosion in gang-related knife and gun attacks after last Sunday Matthew Sutherland was stabbed to death outside the Q Club in Corporation Street following a **drum and bass music event**.’ (Goldby 2008)

2010 - **Four shot in nightclub sparking fears of gang warfare in Birmingham**: Chaos at Digbeth’s **Custard Factory**, when shots were fired inside the packed venue... ‘It was **predominantly urban music** which does tend to attract the odd troublemaker’. (Daily Mail 2010)

Figure 9: Map of violent incidents at rap music events in Birmingham (Source: Author)

The map illustrates that incidents of gang related violence are happening in Birmingham's nightclubs. The headlines and small excerpts I have attached to the map also indicate the discursive nature of the reports. The challenge in terms of this research is in understanding how the nightclub incidents (including how they are reported on and acted upon) shape how the geographies of gang violence and rap music are imagined in the city.

Narrativising Gangs in the City: "Summer of Gun Violence in Birmingham"

Here I want to examine the discourse of rap music as a threat in Birmingham by focussing on one particular gang-related violent incident at an event called 'Urban Music Gathering' in Digbeth in 2010. The event's promotional material listed garage, jungle, hip hop and drum 'n' bass (all include elements of rap) as the music being played and performed on the four stages that made up the event (see HalesowenNews, 2010). This is how a report in the Birmingham Review described the incident:

During the early hours of June 13th four people were wounded as shots were fired inside the Space 2 Warehouse, The Factory Club's main arena on the Custard Factory complex in Digbeth. No one was killed but the unforeseen attack sent shockwaves round the city.

(Birmingham Review, 2010)

There are two reasons why I have selected this incident in particular; first, it happened in the Custard Factory, which, as discussed in Chapter Five, is a highly significant space in terms of the city's image as a creative city; this accentuates the impact of the incident. Second, the incident received a relatively high level of attention in the local and national media and so exemplifies the kinds of discursive responses that materialise in relation gang violence in the city's nightclubs.

The point I want to make about the media attention around the event is not about critiquing it or accusing it of cultural prejudice or exaggeration, the point is about the geography of this

incident – its location in the nightclub and how this affects the nature of the response. Again my argument is that in cases such as this, the nightclub is perceived as a gateway and a meeting place between the urban norm and the urban ‘other’.

The first thing that stood out is the way reports framed the incident as something which impacts the city as a whole, as if the Custard Factory, because of its prominence, is like a main artery to the cultural body of the city. Simon Jones, the Managing Director of Factory Events, the company responsible for Space 2 club responded to the incident saying, “thankfully no one was more seriously hurt but it has traumatised the city.” (Birmingham Review, 2010). This was followed by him saying “I wanted to send the right message out and effectively try and clear our name, and the name of the Custard Factory.” (Birmingham Review, 2010). The Custard Factory itself is a flagship cultural institution in Birmingham; therefore, it is placed at the centre of why the violent incident is so negative. In this sense, incidents that happen in nightclubs become about place. This is of course partly because nightclubs are commercial and public businesses which depend on have a sound reputation, but it’s arguably about nightclubs being spaces which represent the city’s desires and dominant cultural relationships – which are to some extent about preserving cultural spaces as white and free from the threat of urban black populations. Hence, Simon Jones’ final comment in the interview with the Birmingham Review was:

The Factory Club are no longer booking any commercial Urban music events. The only way I could comfortably host one would be with airport security and police sweeps of the area, akin to the security measures for visiting dignitaries. I don’t want to put on shows where that’s necessary.

(Birmingham Review, 2010)

I find the reference to airport security interesting in relation to the image of the club being a gateway between the urban norm and the urban ‘other’. The gateway is closed to the other, as

Jones refuses to book ‘urban music’ again. Related to this, the issue of security was repeated in a number of the reports that followed the incident. Again, this emphasis on security I would argue is driven by geography; rather than focussing the discussion on the tackling of the wider issues which drive gang violence in Birmingham, the debate focused on the securitisation of spaces – gateways – such as nightclubs, where gangs are known to transgress from *their* side of the city – the deprived areas where such violence is seen as part of life – into the normal city. One of the measures of security raised in a number of reports concerned the use of stricter licensing rules. Headlines, for example, included:

“Custard Factory Shootings: Concerns over security levels at urban music event”

(Birmingham Mail, 2010)

“Licence review pledge after four shot in Birmingham”

(BBC News, 2010)

“Review of plans follows Birmingham shooting”

(BBC News, 2010)

What is perhaps most important about the geographies of this event, from the perspective of this research at least, is the way in which it became constructed as a convergence point between the normal city, gang violence, and rap music. As already seen in the quote above, the initial response from Simon Jones, who managed the venue, was to prevent this kind of violence by excluding the style of music that was being played at the event. The causal connection between the two things is seemingly unquestioned in Jones’ response. A number media reports also quoted Jones on this matter, and again they did not question the causal link between the two. Similarly a Birmingham Mail report quoted an employee from the Custard Factory venue saying:

“It’s an event which has a high-risk profile and at previous events there has been some sort of police presence. It was predominantly urban music which does tend to attract the odd troublemaker. It was total mayhem in there.”

(Birmingham Mail, 2010)

When gang involvement was confirmed by the police, the response changed again. Birmingham Mail, in particular ran two reports which questioned whether the shootings would spark what it called ‘a summer of violence in Brum’. One of the reports, which was published at the end of June 2010 following a number of subsequent shootings in Birmingham, stated that ‘the terrifying violence’ which had been happening during June ‘first erupted on June 13 after four people were shot outside the Space 2 venue at the Custard Factory, Digbeth, following an urban music event.’ This specific detail is interesting because no evidence is given to actually suggest that the Custard Factory incident was where the latest spate of violence stemmed from. Given the lack of evidence and the fact that 2010 had already seen a number of gang related violent incidents prior to June, the reason the Custard Factory incident is framed as the starting point of the violence is because this is when the press first noticed the presence of gang violence in the city. The construction of the narrative in the press is, in this sense, about geography, it starts at a point of transgression, it does not start when the violence really starts on ‘the street’ in Birmingham’s deprived areas. The narrative finds its hook in when violence transgresses into the normal city via the rap event and the nightclub. And as I have briefly explored the response is geographically shaped, its focus becomes the space of transgression, it becomes about the securitisation and protection of nightclubs themselves both physically in terms of banning rap music and tightening security measures but also in terms of the image. The response becomes about protecting the city against transgression, against the tarnishing of its image, as Simon Jones, the manager of the club where the incident occurred said in an interview with the BBC:

"The Custard Factory - which was not associated with the management of this event or the premises on which it was held - provides a unique, creative space in Birmingham. Our absolute priority remains the safety and security of the public, staff and others who use the Custard Factory. For that reason, *we have decided that we will not hold this type of event again.*"

(BBC News, 2010)

"No Garage Allowed"

Having explored, how the connections between geographies of rap music and gangs are imagined and represented by those outside the rap community, in the final part of this section I explore some of the changing experiences and implications within Birmingham's rap community with regards to the stigma attached to rap and the struggles in accessing mainstream live music spaces. In the excerpt below Urban Monk, a Birmingham based rap music producer, captures the accumulation of discourses about rap music which over time have fixed its meaning and its identity as an innately and always-already threatening musical culture, and how rap's presence as a musical performance is perceived as a threat.

What Urban Monk's comments highlight is that the identity of rap music has become increasingly reduced and fixed around negative and threatening notions of the music, but also that the proponents of rap in Birmingham are aware of its predominant identity. Hence, as argued above, rap struggles to inhabit other identities. The increasingly immovable and immutable position in which rap's identity now finds itself, means that for many of those

involved in rap music, the mainstream musicscape in Birmingham has become a space of exclusion where their music, and they, are unwanted. It is somewhere that they feel 'out of place' in because they are seen as disruptive and threatening. The discourse and idea of rap as threat has become increasingly totalising, and there is continually less room to move for rap.

In light of the stigma that rap has been subject to, arguably, for many young black people who live in Birmingham's more deprived areas and continue to relate to rap and street culture, the city's musicscape has increasingly been experienced in exclusionary ways. Fonzo, for example, expressed his own frustration with the constricting way in which garage music became identified in the press, and how dominant and often one-dimensional understandings of rap actually hinder possible opportunities both for artistic creativity and for social change among people who wanted to be involved in rap music. Fonzo, in the excerpt below, recognises from his own experience the alternative identities and ways of being involved in rap that are not simply negative, but nonetheless recognises how rap's treatment in the media has contributed to rap's exclusion from the mainstream live musicscape.



The point is that the paradigm of rap as transgressive and as a symbol of urban violence has arguably become totalising and it has had significant spatial implications for rap music; rap is

struggling to occupy a place in the live musicscape that isn't fraught with issues of threat and fear. KMD summed up for me the kind of changes and sense of exclusion he experienced in Birmingham following the violent incidents happening at rap events:



Clearly, the place of rap in the live musicscape has become constricted, but what is less understood is rap's place in the city beyond the mainstream music spaces from which it is increasingly excluded. In the following two sections I think about rap's wider context. First I explore the geographies of violence which are part of the everyday lives of many young black people in Birmingham; I then explore what role rap music has in shaping those wider geographies of violence and marginality

SECTION TWO: “OUT ON THE BLOCK WITH MY GLOCK”¹⁹

*It's just another day in Handsworth or another day in
Newtown; you know what I'm tryin' to say? Just another day.
So what becomes terrible to you lot, becomes everyday to us.*

- YT, Birmingham rapper and reformed gang member speaking in the
documentary film *One Mile Away*, 2013

So far I have considered the place of rap music in relation to the experiences and processes which have shaped the live musicscape in Birmingham. In particular, the overlap between rap music and gang culture/violence in the garage scene that emerged in Birmingham, and the responses to and implications of this in the ensuing period. In this second section, I want to widen the focus beyond the ‘public stage’, to explore the wider urban environment and context in which rap music is being made in Birmingham. I want to explore the place rap music has beyond the nightclub, but also beyond the headline grabbing moments of violence and beyond the discourse which focuses on rap as being something which transgresses into the city’s entertainments spaces. Moreover, the point I want to explore in this section, is that the ‘problems on the street’ (as KMD referred to them) provide an omnipresent background to the more public incidents which occur in the city’s nightclubs. That is, for many young black people, in particular, who live in areas of Birmingham which have high levels of deprivation and a high presence of urban gangs, violent incidents – be it a fight, a robbery, a revenge or dispute attack, or a gun or knife attack – and the fear of violence are often seen as more ordinary than they are extraordinary.²⁰ This wider urban context is something I spoke about

¹⁹ This phrase is taken from an interview with Jordan wherein he was giving an example of the lyrics he would use in his rap music whilst he was in street gangs.

²⁰ The relationship between violence and social inequality and deprivation is something that is accounted for in research highlighted in a report produced by the Barrow Cadbury Trust. For example, the report notes that ‘the rates of emergency hospital admissions for assault are around four times higher among people 10–29 years old in England who live in the most deprived areas than among those who live in the least deprived areas’ (p.22

with many participants. Indeed, the excerpt below from the interview I conducted with Jordan, who has been deeply involved in gang culture, encapsulates what this section is attempting to do – to reveal *another*, invisible, Birmingham.



Figuratively speaking, this section is about the picture of Birmingham that Jordan said he would paint which properly accounts for the deeply troubling, unjust, and often violent, but also often invisible, context in which Birmingham's rap culture is produced. The discussion of these issues forms both a crucial additional narrative to the issues explored so far with regards to the mainstream musicscape in Birmingham, but it also plays an important contextualising role for the discussion in the next section where I focus again on the music more directly to ask where rap goes when it is excluded from the mainstream. Below, as in the sections above, I explore these issues through the voices and experiences of some of the participants I engaged within in my research.

Barrow Cadbury/Brap *Stuck* Report). In this sense, violence is simply a more ordinary and normal part of everyday life in deprived areas, especially for young people.

A backdrop of violence

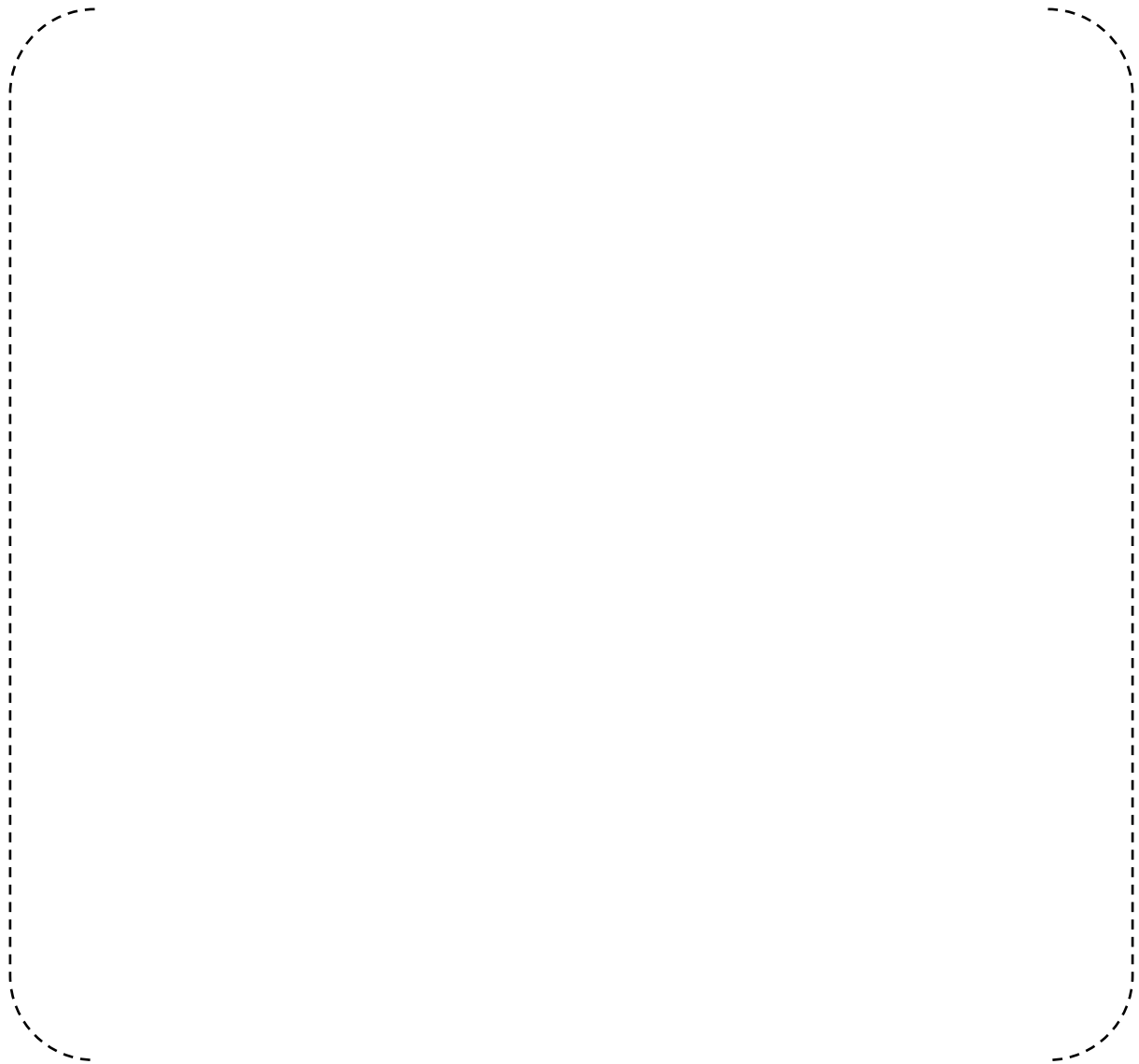
Talking to me about his life before he moved away from gang affiliation, Jordan, who grew up in the Handsworth area of Birmingham, described the pervasiveness and overwhelming levels of violence he has experienced, which he admitted to being both a perpetrator and victim of.



Jordan's description of life in a gang in Birmingham highlights in a very harsh light that violence is not only something which suddenly and occasionally surfaces in an otherwise harmonious urban environment. Instead, as he described, it is something which became his life – an unyielding presence. In this sense, the ongoing geography of violence experienced in certain areas of the city is just as much a part of what makes the city as the relative harmony and safety that so many of Birmingham's residents live in.

The presence of violence is not something that is simply restricted to a select few gangsters (as in Jordan's experience). Instead, I was told by a number of participants how violence is almost built into the deprived areas of the city. For example, one of the key relationships I developed during the research was with Andy Hitchings, a volunteer at the Young Disciples youth centre and community music studios in Lozells. Andy volunteered as a Studio Manager for three months, during which time he kept his own volunteer diary wherein he recorded his

experiences as well as some of the conversations he had with staff and the young people who used the studio facilities – Andy gave me access to his diary for my research. The experiences he recorded in the diary highlight the extent to which violence pervades everyday life in areas of Birmingham such as Lozells and Aston, the main intake areas for Young Disciples. In the excerpt below, Andy is reflecting on his confusion as to whether the deeply violent rap lyrics he had heard being recorded in the Young Disciples music studio reflected reality.



Andy's insights highlight the kinds of ways violence is encountered in areas like Lozells as a 'matter of fact' presence in everyday life. But, what perhaps stands out most from Andy's experience is his surprise when the extent of the violence in the local area is revealed to him.

Andy was, however, not the only person I encountered in the research that was not from Birmingham's deprived areas and that expressed surprise on this matter. This is arguably because the violence which is taking place is restricted to the cultural, political, and economic margins of the city and is often invisible from elsewhere in the city. The idea that these experiences are hidden and unknown to the city was something I picked up on from other respondents. For example, in a particularly disturbing summary of his own feelings, Jordan described to me his experience of, and feelings about, the inequality in Birmingham and what he saw as the distance between how different people live in different parts of the city.




This sense of abandonment and injustice, added to the feeling that the struggle of deprivation is invisible or forgotten about, arguably contributes to the backdrop of violence which I am exploring here. These are, however, the social violences which coincide with, shape, and are shaped by the physical and mental violence that are, to different extents, a part of everyday life for many people in the urban margins of Birmingham. Indeed, I want to turn my attention to think further about the issue of how different forms of violence manifest and are

experienced in the urban margins, especially with regards to the spatialities of ‘the street’²¹ as a set of spaces where violence is encountered and feared. As already explored to some extent in section one, ‘the street’ plays a number of roles in shaping the place of rap music in Birmingham and as I will explore in section three, they play a key role in shaping the actual production of rap music and culture in the city. Hence it is important to explore what the ‘problems on the street’ means in Birmingham.

The geographies of street violence and fear

One of the repeated narratives that I encountered in the research was that for many young black people the streets are a primary space in which both the threat and fear of violence are experienced. This violence has a very particular geography related to the territorial aspects of gang rivalry. It is also a geography that is primarily mapped on to deprived areas in Birmingham. King Zukie a reggae music producer and sound-system DJ who, now in his forties but grew up in Birmingham, summed up to me how the streets of his own area of Newtown (part of Aston) are experienced as spaces of fear of violence and attack, especially, but not only, for young black people.

²¹ To some extent, as much as ‘the street’ refers literally to the space of the streets in the city, it also denotes a wider set of spaces which may include particular domestic spaces, such as people’s houses or drug houses, it may include youth centres or community centres, it includes other outdoor public spaces such as local parks, subways, sports areas, etc. Other terms for this particular geography may include ‘the road’ or ‘on road’, or may be referred to as the ‘hood, or as the ghetto.



King Zukie's insights again highlight the idea that violent incidents in spaces like nightclubs in Birmingham city centre take place against a backdrop of a wider urban geography of fear and violence which is experienced by black people²² in certain areas like Newtown where deprivation and urban gangs are a part of the fabric of that place. King Zukie's experiences also provide an insight into the idea that individuals learn to understand the violence of/in the spaces around them and learn to 'defend' themselves against it by changing their practices, their bodies (the 'swagger'), and their knowledges (knowing who's 'a bad man').

This idea of people living in deprived areas having to change how they act and the way they use the streets in order to avoid feelings of fear and the threat of violence was something that Jordan also raised. Jordan's explanation of this process, however, revealed how feelings of fear can lead to more violence. Jordan explained to me how he would numb his feelings and emotions through acts of violence, a kind of practical conditioning in order to be known on


²² To note, it was clear in the context of King Zukie's description that the feelings and experiences he described applied to black males in particular.

the street as the 'bad man', as King Zukie called it, and not to be victim of violence. This is how Jordan explained to me the need to engage in violence when he had a 'street' life:



In a sense, it is these quite subtle but massively impacting emotional and practical aspects of the geographies of violence that are crucial in shaping the everyday life of marginal urban geographies, but are also invisible and hidden from the perspective of the urban norm where reductionist narratives centred on transgression fail to account for these significant details.

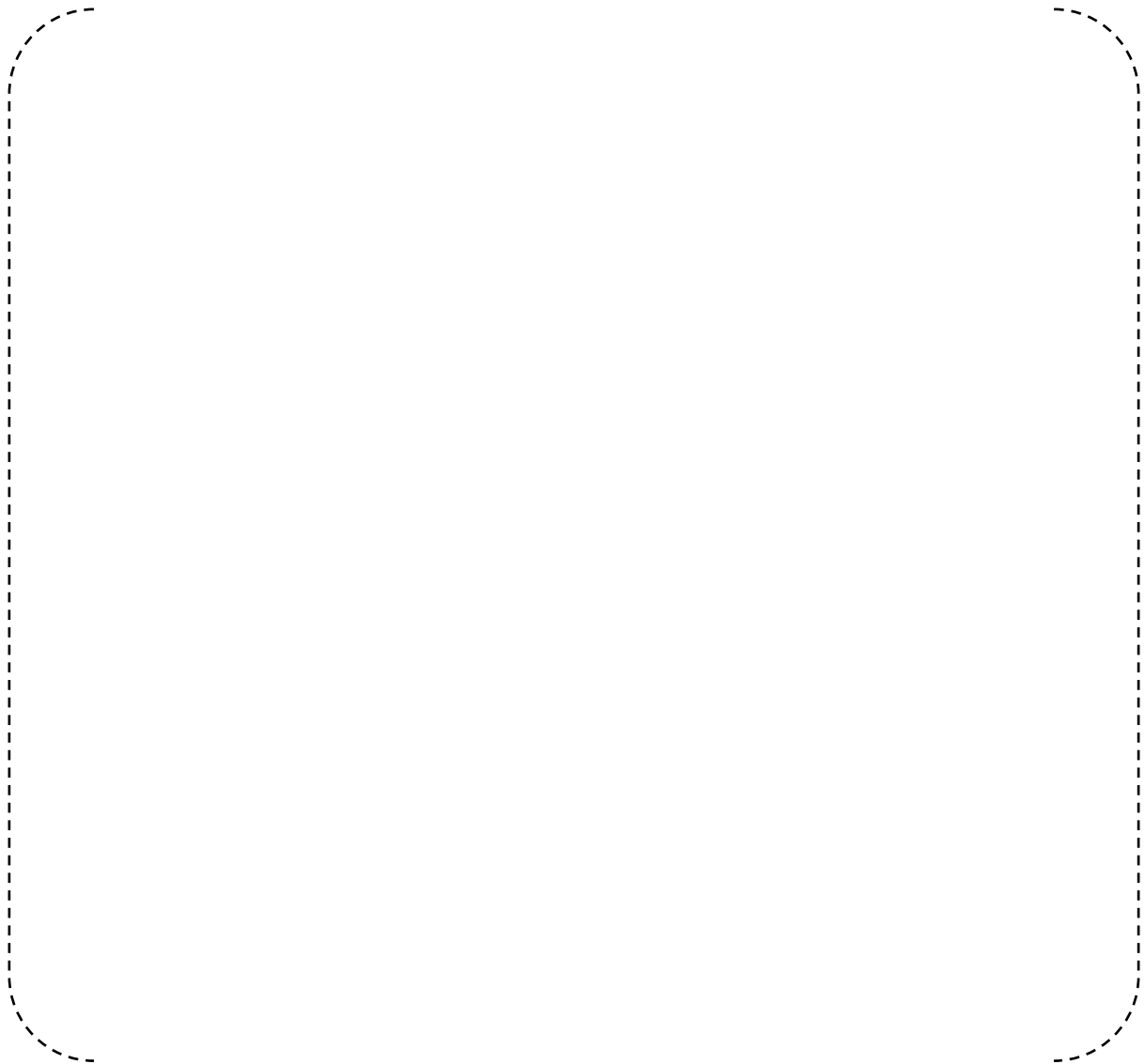
Speaking in more detail, Jordan described to me his experiences and fears of living in Birmingham and the aggression that he believes has become instilled in the everyday practices of black people. Again, Jordan's insights really reveal the sense that this layer of violence in the city is something which is invisible to the urban norm. In this case, Jordan recognises that some aspects of the violence that pervades the city are only impacting on and visible to black people and are almost literally invisible to white people in their everyday lives. There are intricate cultural as well as racial elements at play in what Jordan discusses in the excerpt below, but the paradigm of violence in Birmingham he refers to is arguably rooted in a wider set of cultural, political, economic inequalities which favour white people and harm black people in contemporary urban contexts. He is talking here about the challenges of being in the city as a black man from a particular area.



As well as highlighting the threatening and fearful feelings that are shared by black people in Birmingham, Jordan's description also highlights how, in 'certain parts' of the city, which he refers to as the 'hood', violence is experienced as an almost constant spectre; something which is built into those places; always behind you or over your shoulder; or waiting for you outside your front door. In contrast, the 'more white' area that Jordan has since moved to is experienced as absent of that violence.

Especially crucial to the geographies of the street is the gang territorialism which in some parts of the city stiflingly pervades everyday life. One of the consequences of gang territorialism is that many young people in various areas of the city not only feel threatened or uncomfortable in their own areas, but will feel greatly more threatened in another area or a

rival area of the city. The following two conversations with young people from the Lozells area of Birmingham were recorded by Andy Hitchings in his volunteer diary; they demonstrate this sense of fear about the city both for individuals who are closely involved with gangs (the first conversation), as well as for those who are not directly in gangs but simply know gangs members through school or in the local area (the names of the respondents were changed by Andy):



For many young people, the experience of the city as a divided series of gang territories plays a key role in shaping how they mentally map the city; there are those spaces which they identify as their own, and those spaces which threaten them and that they fear. Across the

various discourses I encountered in this research concerning the experiences of black youths in Birmingham, including during the interviews I conducted, this issue of the city being experienced as a space of divided and violent territories was continually repeated. At the same time, the discourse hovers just below the surface; despite its very real impact on so many young people's lives it remains, to some extent, a hidden story. Those aspects of the story of urban gang violence that do surface, as explored above in the case of the very public incidences of violence in nightclubs, are often framed in terms of transgression and threat, and the issue of a population or community suffering the impact of violence in their everyday lives becomes lost from view. One way in which these geographies of violence are expressed and brought back into view by young people is through rap. As I explore in the next section, rap music has become a key tool in expressing what happens on the streets, I argue it is also a tool for negotiating and territorialising the streets.

SECTION THREE: "THERE'S A TYPE OF MUSIC YOU HAVE TO LISTEN TO"²³

"You hear it in the music; the gang rap is part of the cry-out of the community. You can see it as 'all these niggers', these people, that's what they talk about. Or you could see it as; there's really a division going on; you can see it as a cry-out of the communities."

- Jordan

Having explored the exclusion of rap from the mainstream live music scene and the broader urban context in which much of Birmingham's local rap music culture is rooted, in this final section I think about the place of rap music in the urban margin and how rap music actively shapes and gives meaning to the urban margin. Here, I focus my attention on the music itself,

²³ Phrase taken from interview with King Zukie

including the sounds, lyrics, and images created and used in locally produced rap music. Again, I also draw on interviews with research participants who have direct experience of rap music in Birmingham.

Taking inspiration from Simon Frith's argument that 'making music isn't a way of expressing ideas; it is a way of living them' (1996:111), I suggest that rap music is part of the way young people, especially young black people, live and make sense of their lives and, in particular, the ways in which they navigate the spatialities of the marginal city. Here, my discussion is about two specific ways in which rap music is used in Birmingham to 'be' in the world and to 'make sense of it'. In the first discussion, I explore how rap music is used by young black men in Birmingham to emotionally condition themselves in order to help them negotiate the geographies of violence that they inhabit in everyday life. And, in the second discussion, I explore how rap has become a way of conquering particular territories within that geography of violence; how rap is used by young black men to assert dominance over, and to territorialise, different spaces within the city.

Negotiating the margins: Rap as emotional weapon

I begin then by exploring rap music as an emotional weapon which young black people use in their everyday lives for negotiating and navigating the urban margin and 'the streets' as a space of violence, fear, and threat. Linked to the conversations above, I want to think about how rap music is being used by young people to condition their emotions in ways that make them both feel and appear emotionally harder and therefore more resilient to the geographies of violence they confront in the city. This is something I have touched on in the discussion so far, for example, in the discussion of how garage music became harder as it became more influenced by local gang culture; I highlighted Jordan's experiences of garage and grime as something that instils in him feelings of anger and aggression. In my research on the rap

music being made in Birmingham, it became apparent in the way the music is constructed and, especially from the accompanying videos, that aggression is a key element of the music itself. As in Jordan's experience which he described as going from one emotional state to another – from relaxed to angry – much of the rap I have encountered in the research could be said to have a similar emotional agenda. My argument here is about how the transformational nature of rap, its capacity to change emotions and instil feelings of aggression is being used by young people to negotiate violence in the urban environment. This paradigm was perhaps best captured by King Zukie when he was talking to me about the role of music on the streets.



This practical-cum-emotional relationship between rap music and young black people living in deprived areas of Birmingham is unlike any other relationship with music I came across in my research. It is a relationship which is established on a value-system which no other music culture in the city appears to share in the same way. Here music is valued on the basis of a capacity to alter the emotional and practical state of the listener so that they can better negotiate aggressive and violent relationships within the city.

In light of this, I would suggest that it makes sense for young people who experience the streets as a space of fear which relates specifically to their race and their urban identity (including where in the city they live) to engage and seek out music which instils and affirms aggressive emotions and behaviours. In this way, rap music becomes part of an emotional

arsenal, and in doing so it takes on new values and new geographies. The music becomes part of a conflict as different actors experiment with using rap music in different ways.

Producing rap as a space of confrontation

In terms of thinking about the music more directly in the following short sections I want to explore some of the ways in which the rap song is actively being constructed as space of confrontation; and as a space which purposefully excludes more positive, or softer, emotions, and instead actively exaggerates aggressive, or harder, feelings and emotions. The discussion is broken down into different musical elements of rap which, I argue, contribute to the construction of the rap song as a space of confrontation and aggression.

Bass

A common characteristic of the rap music I encountered in the research is that the bass line²⁴ is intentionally intensified – extended and deepened – to a point where it becomes the driving force of the instrumental track. Often, its intensity means it can be quite forcefully felt in the listener's body. Such intense musical encounters can be experienced as disruptive and unnerving. Moreover these bass lines can be experienced as an intrusion into the body; a disruption of expectations; or, even as something like an attack on the body. In any case, to some extent, the heavy bass line enables rap to interact with, confront, and get into the body in more extreme ways than other types of music. Generally most people understand that sound is meant to be heard and not necessarily felt (or at least minimally felt) and so the heavy bass in rap music disrupts this normalised expectation around where and how music is experienced. In this sense, rap includes and constructs confrontational bass sounds; favouring

²⁴ Bass is a very important part of rap music, it is mostly produced through sampling and using electronic and digital instruments.

bass lines which are purposefully dominating and powerful. But the bass line is very much a starting point of rap's confrontation.

The voice and masculinity

Added to the 'heaviness' of the instrumental track in rap music, the sounds of the rapper's voices (especially male rap voices) often reflect and incorporate a heavy, deep, and bass-ey style. The heaviness, or what might be called the 'gravel', in the tone of male rappers voices appears, in part at least, to connect them and the music to a set of masculine capabilities, especially physical dominance and aggression. The gravelly voice is representational and indicative of real and desired aggressive capacities and physical prowess. The gravelly and heavy voice is, for example, reminiscent of the way the voice changes in response to anger and at times even resembles shouting. Moreover, and importantly, the aggression in the rap voice endows the music with a strong sense of confrontation. Unlike more conventional styles of vocals found in other popular genres where the aural quality of the vocal is often more passive, the rough voice of the rapper feels much more like a direct confrontation with the listener. In this sense, the aggressive rap voices are performed in such a way as to pull the listener into a kind of struggle, or fight, and constructs the song a space of aggression, violence, and conflict in which the rapper holds the dominant position. The rap voice constructs a feeling that the song intentionally 'gets up in the face' of the listener. In doing so, rap music again disrupts the more conventional relationships between musician, song, and listener. And it does so through the inclusion of dominant and confrontational vocal effects and highly charged emotions. These aggressive aural components contribute to what could easily be experienced as, and perceived as, a highly abnormal musical experience, but it is also one which plays a specific emotional role within rap culture as a source of cultural and emotional conditioning to deal with the presence violence and the threat posed by 'the street'.

The body

A very common visual trait used in rap videos is the rapper and their crew performing a number of aggressive or symbolic gestures towards the camera/viewer, these include swearing, gang symbols made with hands, and gestures of gun toting and firing. Besides conveying very specific meanings, I would argue that the gestures are very effective tools for emphasizing the physical aggression and hardness of the rapper. The images below are taken from screen shots of two rap videos made in Birmingham. The first shows a rapper acting out the snapping of bones as he raps the lyrics “If you act up, stone cold stamp, I’m not gonna stop until your bone go snap!” The second image shows the use of a gun firing hand symbol, and a dominant posture.



Figure 10: Rap video Screenshot (Source: YouTube)



Figure 11: Rap Video Screenshot (Source: YouTube)

These aggressive outstretched gestures of the rappers combined with the heavy, gravelly, and aggressive voices, and the deep and intense bass lines all contribute to the feelings of aggression and confrontation that rap musicians bring to the fore and attempt to engender in the music. Again this physical display of aggression in rap is I argue part of individuals and groups use rap music to feel harder and more able to fend for themselves as they negotiate ‘the streets’.

The lyrics

Closely related to the nature of the sound of rap is the often highly confrontational nature of the lyrics that many rappers from Birmingham use in their songs. The lyrics are a key space in which the confrontational and aggressive nature of rap is developed. Here I want to think about rapper’s use their lyrics to assert their aggression and to get across an image of themselves as hard people, hard enough to handle the streets. To begin, the following lyrics are taken from a rap song made in Birmingham, it is performed by a number of rappers. The

song does not have a title as it was a ‘freestyle’ (improvised) rap. What is interesting about the lyrics is the way the rappers constructs their identities through fact that they have been involved in street life and are not to be messed with; they even expresses in the song that they will kill anyone if they cross their path.²⁵

Deeze Tv (Freestyles) R.M.D G.R.P Jd Ninerz An G.Man Hip Hop

*I've grown older,
Saw a lot of shit, Saw a couple of sticks [guns]
Saw the food [drugs] got chopped up into bits
... Now the roads are kinda crazy
So I pray for my dogs [gang members]
... Now I'm sat there fucked, emotionally scarred
listen, stuck, trapped behind fucking bars
... what's my life like? Nigger, don't ask
... you know us, H-Town [Handsworth]
You know that we bang [attack rival gang members]
Body bagging [killing]
... no lies, if its beef then we're bumping on that! [We will fight]
If you fuck around then you're gonna feel the bass line! [violence]
I don't know who I'm gonna see in my path
But I won't know, so I got to roll with a strap [gun]
Leave him stone cold
Brains gushing out like a tap
This is real roads
Why? Why is life like this?
Bang Bang, 21, RMD... [gang names, and B21 postcode]
...Fuck all you fake actors on the road side talking shit*

www.youtube.com/watch?v=mtAu4oTACHU

Figure 12: Rap Lyrics Example One (Source: YouTube)

²⁵ In each of the songs I explore in this section I will clarify the meaning of slang terms in [...] brackets.

This rap is especially interesting in terms of how it sets up the streets as space which has emotionally scarred the rappers, and as a space which is ‘crazy’, but then essentially describes why the rappers are equipped to handle the streets. For example, they describe the fact that they have guns and the physical capacity to be violent, but more importantly they express their emotional capacities to engage in violence; their lack of fear of violence, and their mental preparedness to engage in violence. They claim that they will kill people – leave them stone cold – who they come across on the street that try to threaten them. I would argue that this highly aggressive style of rapping is partly about reflecting on and boasting about the violence that these rappers have engaged in, but it is also about portraying an image of themselves to rival gangs, who, from what I have heard in my research, are very likely to watch a video like this which is made by locally well known gang members/rappers. The song, in this sense, is a message to those other gangs that these rappers are hard. The sheer aggression in the lyrics is about achieving the edge in terms of how people perceive the kinds of violent lengths they will go to. This is why I argue that the rap song can be used as tool to negotiate local geographies of violence. In a strange and troubling way, a song like this may save/protect these rappers from being confronted by violence on the street because it portrays them as people to be feared; it is partly there to simply make other street gangs think twice about attacking these rappers/gang members. They might think twice, for example, if they think that these rappers are carrying guns and are prepared to use them. This, then, is how rap music finds its place in the urban margins, as something which young black people can use to negotiate, the streets, identity, and violence.

We see similar themes being rapped about in the next song, again another freestyle rap, this time made by gang members from the 515 gang associated with the area of Highgate and Leebank in Birmingham.

515 Remtrex Ramo Rm Hood 2 Hood Freestyle
Mandem knows that I am living this mobster [gangster] life
And I'm not gonna be stoppin'
...B5 that's where my squad's at
Fuck with me and you will see where God's at [threat of murder]
Coz I'm a criminal
Highgate, Leebank, yeah you know the code [postcode]
...you act bad around here, you won't be going home
You better tuck in your chain, you better hide your phone
Yo nigger have respect, I don't care if your bad or what gang you're in...

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vf5-nJ9ozFO

Figure 13: Rap Lyrics Example Two (Source: YouTube)

In a very real sense, it possible to see, if we think about this song in relation to the one above, how this song responds to other violent gang rap songs – it says ‘*I don't care if your bad or what gang you're in*’. Again, the rap is a message to other gangs and rappers to claim that these rappers have the violent edge – ‘*Fuck with me and you will see where God's at*’. However, more than it just being about saying that the rappers/gangs have the violent edge, the song also demonstrates how rap is used to define an area as harder than other areas – ‘*you act bad around here, you won't be going home*’. It also begins to highlight the fact that the rap song is a shared space with the margins; first, it is shared within a gang as somewhere to confirm and strengthen ties with other affiliated gang members. Both this and the song above are performed by multiple members of the same gang, and it is a way of showing strength in numbers. Second, rap is also a shared space between different gangs. Opposing gangs will watch each other's rap videos. I am aware of this happening, in part, because the comments sections under the videos posted on YouTube will have negative comments which ‘dis’ the rapper's gang and ‘big up’ their own gang. In which sense, it is part of the world that rappers and gang members construct in their marginal urban geographies and geographies of violence.

The next lyrics are from a song titled, 'Wah Do Dem', a reference to violence attack on other gangs. Again we see in this song the very explicit references to violence set in the context of the streets – the hood – being 'hot'.

GRIMEBLOG - R.M.D "Wah Do Dem" Chundarg, Dre & JD /hoodvideo

*What's my life like, some rocky roads
Hood's hot like my mother's stove
You get sucked [attacked, mugged] if you don't know the roads
I keep it moving, always on my toes
R.M.D [gang name] only, no time for foes
Shower a nigger, leave you drenched from the hose [gun]
I'm from the 21 resident [Handsworth]
I bust a heat [gun] with no hesitance
Know what code you're in when you're rolling round these ways*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ZbP5jEsCMo>

Figure 14: Rap Lyrics Example Three (Source: YouTube)

Again like the songs above the rappers are asserting their readiness to engage in violence – '*I bust a heat [gun] with no hesitance*'. To some extent, what we also see is the creativity with which rappers express violence – '*leave you drenched from the hose [gun]*' for example is a reference to murdering, but it is done with slang and rap language, which, generally speaking, only those within the street life understand. This, in a sense, reinforces the place of this music as being part of a marginal geography rather than having a place in the more mainstream musicscape.

Again the lyrics below from a song titled 'Since When' demonstrate awareness of the streets as a place of violence and gangs.

RC.TV - Grimsta & Youngah Tabz - Since When [Hood Video]

I don't know your sides, but my ends are madness...

... I don't know your sides, but round here it's tense.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=jJlg3XbNYOM

Figure 15: Rap Lyrics Example Four (Source: YouTube)

What is most notable about these lyrics, however, is the age of the rappers who are rapping them. From research based on other videos they feature in, the rappers of these lyrics are young teenagers around 14 and 16. The point of noting their age is to highlight and reiterate how an awareness of urban space as fraught with violence or fear, is gained from a young age and rap appears, given its prevalence, to be a primary means of communicating and performing, and gaining, that knowledge. Rap, in this sense of growing up, seems to be a way of indentifying with the spatialities of aggression and the tensions that these young people are part of from childhood. Moreover, rap is a space in which to match the tension of street life with further aggression – a message of I'm harder than this space. In regards to age, 16 is by no means the youngest age group I have encountered performing in rap videos. In one rap video in Birmingham, a rapper who is part of the Birmingham 515 gang (also known as the Black Gang) is rapping about shooting people and making money, saying that 'I'm on this road shit'. The rapper admits he is only 14 but that he has been rapping since he was seven (see, Silence TV - 515 HIP HOP TING). Again, the following lyrics are from a song performed by rappers who are clearly still young teenagers. Below the lyrics is an image taken from the music video which accompanies the song.

Ninerz. UNDERSTAND (Hood Video) 9inaz

*You got some't nice around me, it's gettin' taken
You wanna fight back, it's death you'll be facing
There's no way out of this life I've been raised in*

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

Figure 16: Rap Lyrics Example Five (Source: YouTube)



Figure 17: Rap video Screenshot (Source: YouTube)

To some extent, it arguably makes sense for these young people who encounter the streets in their everyday lives as spaces of violence to present an image of themselves in this way, as hard, but also as part of gang, a group which has strength in numbers. As the lyrics from the song also suggest the streets are a place in which attacks, such as muggings, are something which young people think about and are threatened by. So, to gain the violent edge, the rapper in this song claims the position of the mugger himself 'You got some't nice around me, it's gettin' taken'. As in all the songs above the rapper is using the rap song to make a place for himself in the street, in the margins, and in the geographies of violence which surround him in

his everyday life. The place these rappers make for themselves is about constructing an identity which makes them part of the violence of everyday life, and rap music plays a central role in forming those identities. Rap music changes the identity of the rappers, it makes them look like ‘bad mans’, but it also changes their emotional state, it makes them feel like ‘bad mans’ so that if they do end up in a real confrontation on the streets then they might either have the aggressive or defensive edge. Rap music is part of what makes the geographies of violence in Birmingham, but it has become entangled in those geographies, it is not simply a cause, or a symbol, of gang violence, it is part of the cultural practices, knowledges, and identities of young black people living in Birmingham’s marginal urban geographies.

Re-Territorialising the margins: Rap as Spatial Conquest

Alongside thinking about how rap music is used by young people to shape their identities and emotional relationship with violence, I also explore examples of where rap music is used to territorialise the urban margins as spaces of their making. That is I want to imagine rappers, as Forman does, as ‘alternative cartographers’ of place (2000:65-66).

One of the very first videos I remembering seeing was shown to me by a member of staff from Young Disciples. The video, titled *Welcome to SLASH-Town* is produced by the SLASH gang whose territory is the Aston (B6 postcode) area of Birmingham. The image below is taken from the video and illustrates the numbers of young black men that can be involved in making rap music videos. The video is shot in a housing estate in Aston and a tower block forms the background to the video.



Figure 18: Rap video Screenshot (Source: YouTube)

The overriding feeling this video left in my mind when I first encountered it was about the space where the video was shot and thinking that B6, Aston, or SLASH-Town as they refer to it in the video was literally their territory, that they had a stake in controlling it, and personally thinking I would not want to go there for fear that I would be entering a violent space which is shaped by affiliations to the SLASH gang and to the postcode. And this is the important thing, this is what makes the rap video a source of 'alternative cartography', the rap video is territorialising the space by territorialising the meaning of that space and in particular understandings of who or what belongs there.

In the excerpt below taken from a freestyle rap song, the rapper is claiming the area he lives in B5 and B15 as his own – *'B5 straight to B15, That's my spot'*.

515 REMTREX RAMO RM HOOD 2 HOOD FREESTYLE

*No lies, I roll deep daylight and night time
515 is [unintelligible]
It's not a dead spot, It's nothing but a hype spot
Gun slash [/] knife spot
Might be not to you, But to us it's the right spot
B5 straight to B15, that's my spot
My ends is baked now
So I think we need a new spot
But we're stuck here
You're not here
And you never grew up here
So don't come and [unintelligible] what we do or how we move
All my niggers are strong there's not one weak dude...*

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vf5-nJ9ozFO

Figure 19: Rap Lyrics Example Six (Source: YouTube)

Despite not being able to make sense of some of the words the rapper uses in this song it is clear from the message of the rap that he and his gang are the ones that really understand their area, 'But we're stuck here, you're not here, and you never grew up here'. He is saying that he does not need other people to tell him what his area of the city means, whether that is other rappers, or even the police or other local authorities. This kind of rap music is about territorialising a space in the city, even if that space is violent and causes those within it problems. Those spaces are where these rapper's construct their identities as people of the street, and so they feel and express in the rap a deep connection to the streets and to their area. Moreover, as the various rap songs I have explored reveal, many of these young people are, or at least say they are, prepared to kill or be killed for their postcode, for their space in the city. Arguably, this deep and violent attachment to place stems from the fact that other spaces in the city are inaccessible. On the one hand, other gang areas are inaccessible because of the

fear of violence and, on the other hand, mainstream normal urban spaces are also difficult to access and feel 'in place' in because young black men are identified as threatening within those spaces. The hood, then, becomes the place in the city they know, as the rap above notes however, the rapper feels 'stuck' in that area. It is a space of tension, but it is also a space which they want to have a stake in and rap music is one way in which they territorialise that space within the urban margins.

Across all the rap songs I have explored each of them has a territorialising aspect. As I highlighted in the previous chapter, Tia DeNora argues that 'control over music in social settings is a source of social power', and as much as this power can be harnessed by large powerful urban bodies such as BCC, it can also be harnessed by rap musicians on the margins of the city. Moreover, in creating this rap these rappers are also creating the 'soundtrack' to their areas, they are using their music to define what their areas mean, and what and who belongs in those areas. But to be sure, this is part of the process of marginalisation, because this rap is not about escaping or challenging the presence of violence. It is the opposite; it is the perpetuation of that violence driven by a fear of violence and rap music has a place in the cycle which underpins the marginality of young black people and the areas they live in.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have explored how rap music and gang violence and their cultural political and spatial context are narrativised. I have attempted to add nuance and texture to our understanding of the role rap music plays in shaping contemporary urban geographies of marginalisation. In Birmingham, a particular material, representational, and imagined mapping of rap's control and exclusion – where rap should and should not be – has manifested and has become increasingly fixed. Closely related to, and operating within, these

geographical fixings are a series of real-imagined subject positions, including, especially, rappers-as-black-youths, rappers-as-violent and rappers-as-gangsters. These subject positions interplay and intertwine with rap's geographies of exclusion, in that, rap subjects become perceived as mobile sites of threat and are therefore also subject to geographical distinctions about 'where rappers should and should not be'.

Given the fraught nature of the topic, the narrative I developed in the chapter confronts pressing and conflicting issues about the tensions and inequalities in contemporary urban life. At times it has simply been quite a sad and harsh story to engage with; the research has listened to various forms of violence happening in the city including the headline-grabbing gang murders as well as the everyday social, mental, and physical violence experienced by marginalised individuals and groups, aspects of which are re-told in the rap music being made in Birmingham. To note, and to be sure, the general argument I put forward above is not applicable to all rap music in Birmingham (or beyond). Rap like any musical genre, or culture, is experienced in multiple and diverse ways.

The rhetorical position 'with rap comes gang violence' has instigated and legitimised a series of spatial, cultural, political, and economic practices which have, on the one hand, constrained the material presence of rap in Birmingham, and on the other hand, increasingly fixed the discourse of rap as threat. Spatially, rap has arguably become increasingly marginalised in Birmingham over the past 15 years. The material marginalisation and exclusion follows a series of very high profile 'gang land' murders in Birmingham in the early 2000s. One of the most significant implications of rap's marginalisation has been the instigation of a process, or vicious circle, whereby, as rap becomes more marginalised and as its geography becomes more fixed, so too, rap's transgressive position becomes ever further exacerbated.

As much as society in Birmingham wants to think that the harmony of city is being disrupted by urban gangs, what I think this research, in a wider socio-political sense, reveals is that gangs are not *the* problem. Instead, gangs are *a* problem, and a symptom, but it is the inequality, deprivation, racism, poverty, exclusion, division, and separation in the contemporary urban environment that is the problem. It is not the norm that suffers the problem of urban gangs, it is the gangs themselves and those closest to them, their friends, families, communities and neighbourhoods, which suffer the problems of gangs.

It is in suffering these problems that rap also finds a new place in the city, it finds a place in actually perpetuating the violence of marginalisation. I explored how rap music is used by young people to find their place in the violent spaces of the street. As the rap songs repeatedly say, those spaces are not nice to live in, but they are also places in which the young people feel trapped. Because of this, they use rap music to territorialise those spaces, and to define those space on their terms.

6.

MUSIC AND RESISTANCE: REFRAMING, REREADING, AND CREATING BIRMINGHAM'S MUSICSCAPE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the relationship between music and resistance by exploring the different roles – cultural, political, and spatial – that music plays in struggles to change uneven urban geographies. It is, more generally, about re-framing the myriad urban geographies of centres and margins and the concomitant urban power relations discussed in Chapters Four and Five as spaces of possibility, as ultimately unfixed, and as open to change and to difference. Moreover, it is about music's roles in the struggles against forms of political, economic, and cultural hegemony. Finally it is about music as a practice of resistance; music as a challenge to unequal and oppressive power relations. To begin, however, the aim and key themes require some degree of framing.

This chapter is, in a sense, perhaps the most challenging of the three empirical chapters both in terms of the research and the analysis. The challenge is partly captured in this short quote from Tricia Rose's research on rap music and cultural politics:

'The fact that the powerful often win, does not mean that a war is not going on'

(Rose, 1994:101)

What does this capture about the challenge of this chapter? In a sense, Chapters Four and Five have been about the 'powerful' winning – about the manifestations and victories of hegemony in creating normalised urban cultural relations and geographies that are beneficial to them.

Looking at the narratives that underpin Chapters Four and Five, it is arguably quite difficult to see the signs of a war ‘going on’ – i.e. a struggle against the powerful. However, it is not only the fact that the powerful are winning that makes the war difficult to see. My additive would be that the ‘war’ can be difficult to see because oppositions to power – the struggles and resistance against hegemony – can themselves often be difficult to detect because they are perhaps ephemeral, slow, small, or weak, and so on. That is, and as a more general point, the extant forms of resistance that exist in the face of capitalistic and state hegemonies and in neo-liberalised cityscapes are almost innately difficult to detect and to make sense of (see Amin and Thrift, 2007b). This is an important point to expand on because it underlies the approach to resistance in this chapter.

Take for example a debate in political geography, which I will call the ‘What’s Left’ debate, between the heavy-weight leftist geographers Neil Smith (2005), David Harvey (2006a), and Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift (2005; 2007b) (published in *Antipode* and *Transactions*). Among other things, the debate arguably highlighted a kind of crisis of identity that contemporary leftist anti-hegemonic politics has been going through at least since the 1990s, especially in the West. In part, this identity crisis partly feeds into, and from, a lack of recognisable and joined-up political resistance in recent history (especially in the neoliberal period) (see Thrift, 1997). More to the point, the authors in the debate recognised that the fundamental questions such as ‘how to resist’ or ‘what alternatives to pursue’ are far from settled in leftist politics. As a consequence of this, the current period of leftist politics is somewhat defined by, among other things, a high degree of experimental political action and uncertainty, which, in turn, makes seeing and identifying the full gamut of political actions all the more difficult. Relatedly, the challenge is also in thinking about resistance not simply in terms of the more spectacular and explicit moments – such as protests, riots, unions, rallies – but in terms of the everyday existence of resistance – resistance as a part of everyday life and as part of the everyday

political terrain of the city (see Gibson-Graham, 2008; 2006; 1996). Of course, the more explicit, public, or spectacular moments of resistance are an important part of the narrative of political alterity, but in order to understand, as Rose calls it, the ‘war’ that is going on, it is important to seek out a politics of possibility as it goes on in everyday life, and here I want to understand what roles music plays in that politics.

What contemporary debates like ‘What’s Left’ highlight is that there is no real script to follow in terms of the larger picture of resistance in urban Britain and the West more generally. Furthermore, there is arguably even less of a script in terms of where music fits into the narrative of resistance. The point is however, that there should be no reason to finish the thesis where the obvious script ends – with power winning and no sign of war going on. That would arguably be another small victory for power. But more importantly, despite the lack of script – despite the lack of a blueprint for how to resist the powers of capitalism and state in the West – there are forms of resistance taking place; and there is a political need to identify, understand, and if possible, facilitate them.

With regards to the place of this chapter in the thesis as a whole, its aim is to push the political analysis of the geographies of music beyond the narrative of how urban hegemonies construct centres and margins and towards the question of how those uneven geographies are challenged/resisted and how alternative geographies are created. One of the key challenges in this comes from the fact that the lack of script and the lack of answers to questions about ‘how/what/where to resist’, means that the forms of resistance that do exist are more or less confined to paradigm of experimenting with resistance. Hence, resistance today arguably exists not in the form of a coherent and recognisable marching unit, but as a series of experimental nodes with more or less tentative connections both to each other and to the world. This lack of unity/identity and the experimental nature can quite simply make resistance difficult to see/hear; it makes the ‘war’ difficult to see (and the victory of the

powerful appears all the more inevitable). Nonetheless, the purpose of this chapter is to uncover and explore concrete examples (however small) of resistance happening in Birmingham, in particular, resistance which includes and makes use of music.

*Chapter layout: Framing resistance*²⁶

In light of the brief discussion above, this chapter attempts to counter the invisibility (and inaudibility) of resistance and to account for its *experimental* nature by exploring three detailed cases studies about local music practitioners in Birmingham who are experimenting with music as a practice of resistance. Crucially, as a way of framing the discussion, I use the ideas of the Marxist-feminist geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham. As discussed in Chapter Two, Gibson-Graham have developed a particularly effective and progressive approach to post-structural and anti-essentialist political thought, and I make use of their ideas here to frame, structure, and open up the discussion of music and resistance.

What makes Gibson-Graham's ideas especially useful as a framework for the analysis of resistance, is the way in which they construct their own analysis as a way of both practicing and understanding political difference. The key concepts in Gibson-Graham's analysis are presented as half 'tool' for *doing* politics and half 'lens' for *understanding* politics – they use the term 'doing-thinking' to capture this concurrent engagement with intellect and political praxis. Although my research does not have an explicitly active or practical political element, Gibson-Graham's doing-thinking approach and their ideas, I argue, are especially useful for

²⁶ One of the more theoretical challenges I have faced in thinking and writing about resistance, is the terminology involved, in particular, the question of what we should call 'resistance'. To some extent, the lack of unity in the face of questions such as 'how/what to resist' and 'what alternatives to pursue' means that the language of resistance is also inevitably un-unified. I have chosen the term 'resistance' which is by no means uncontroversial as a term (see Rose, 2002). Nonetheless, here I use resistance as a point of convergence for myriad related terms, notions, and ideas, including among others: alterity; a politics of possibility; change; struggle; difference; anti-essentialism; a politics of hope; radical politics; political struggle; the new; and counter-hegemonic politics. To some extent each word could replace and encapsulate the others, and so, in parts, I will use these different terms interchangeably with resistance.

uncovering and understanding the practice of political resistance and alterity, especially every day, localised, and experimental forms.

I draw on three ‘techniques’ of doing-thinking which Gibson-Graham set out in *A Postcapitalist Politics* (2006). The three techniques are ‘*ontological reframing*’ which involves producing ‘the ground of possibility’; ‘*rereading*’ which involves ‘uncover[ing] or excavat[ing] the possible’; and ‘*creativity*’ which involves ‘generat[ing] actual possibilities where none formerly existed’ (2006:xxx). In this chapter, I make use of these three techniques as thematic headings to structure my discussion of music and resistance. I am using the techniques as ‘lenses’ in my analysis to identify forms of resistance in Birmingham’s local musicscape. The use of Gibson-Graham’s ideas here is not meant to envelop and define the analysis, but rather provide, what they themselves might call, a set of ‘coordinates’ – stepping stones – for navigating the inevitably tricky terrain of resistance in the contemporary political context. This is not a chapter about Gibson-Graham; it is a chapter about the relationship between music and resistance, but given the convoluted nature of the topic, the theoretical approach of Gibson-Graham provides a useful and robust analytical framing in which to interpret the empirical data. Moreover, Gibson-Graham’s analysis of the production of centres and margins has been significant in shaping the discussions in Chapters Four and Five; here the engagement with their ideas on resistance is made more explicit.

The first section of the chapter, then, extends the technique of ‘ontological reframing’ to the analysis of, what might be termed, the ‘musico-political activism’ of local musician Mark Sampson. I examine how Mark’s pursuit of independence as a musician and record label owner has involved attempts to re-construct parts of the local musicscape as spaces of openness and possibility. Therein the focus is on thinking about spaces which disrupt and cut-across a determined and essentialised ontology of what *should* happen in the musicscape.

The second section extends the technique of ‘rereading’ to an analysis of the musico-political activism of Soweto Kinch. In particular, I examine the Hockley Flyover Show, a music festival established by Soweto in 2008, as a project of reclaiming both place and culture in some of Birmingham’s most deprived areas. Therein the focus is on thinking about how music can be used to re-imagine and give new meaning to a particular place beyond its conventional narrative.

The third section extends the technique of ‘creativity’ to an analysis of emergent forms of musico-political activism in local rap music. Therein, the focus is on music’s capacity to enhance cultural, political, and spatial creativity. I also use the discussion of political creativity and rap music to address questions about the problems and paradoxes which feed into resistance. The extension of Gibson-Graham’s three techniques to the analysis of these different empirical examples is aimed to enhance our understanding of how actors can and do engage with music as a practice of resistance. But it is also about wanting to overcome the invisibility of, and to account for the experimental nature of, contemporary forms of resistance.

SECTION ONE: REFRAMING THE MUSICSCAPE

This first section explores the musical practices and activism of Mark Sampson through the lens of ‘ontological reframing’. Mark has been an active music practitioner in different guises in Birmingham for over twenty years. Mark was drawn to Birmingham in the early 1990s by the prevalence of heavy metal and punk music and has remained in the city ever since. In that time, Mark has engaged in a number of different music roles including: music promoter under the name of Badger Promotions; independent record label owner under the name of Iron Man Records; musician with the bands Police Bastard and Last Under the Sun; the founder and

organiser of the Birmingham Music Network (BMN); and music tour manager. During the course of my research I met and spoke with Mark on numerous occasions at the monthly BMN meeting which Mark chaired. I also interviewed Mark on two occasions.

From my very first encounter with Mark, it was clear from engaging with him that he had what I would term, a will to non-conformity. Mark is not an over-stated character and his way of engaging with different ideas and people demonstrates a considerable degree of sensitivity and generosity. It is also clear that Mark has an acute knowledge and awareness of myriad cultural, political, and economic processes which shape Birmingham's musicscape. In turn, he expresses, at times, an assured position with regards to what might be termed his 'philosophy' about what music is and can be in people's lives. It was clear from engaging with Mark that threaded through his different musical practices was a desire for change and new possibilities (be they artistic, musical, economic, cultural, or political) and that music was his weapon of choice, as it were. Here, I discuss two areas of Mark's musical activity as forms of resistance – the Birmingham Music Network and Iron Man Records – which I argue can be understood, in Gibson-Graham's terms, as instances, or spaces, of 'ontological reframing'.

Gibson-Graham describe 'ontological reframing' as a political activity which creates:

...the fertile ontological ground for a politics of possibility, opening the field from which the unexpected can emerge, while increasing our space of decision and room to move as political subjects. (2006:xxx)

Ontological reframing is about creating a clearing in the ontological landscape. It is about creating spaces – material and imagined – which are un-bound from dominant ontologies of culture, economics, or politics, and in which there is the possibility of constructing ontology as an open rather than pre-determined question.

Within their definition of ontological reframing, Gibson-Graham's notion of 'increasing' the 'room to move' is especially helpful as an image for resistance and more specifically as a way of thinking about the kinds of music spaces that Mark has created in Birmingham. There is something deeply experimental but also generous in the spirit of this particular notion of resistance which relates to making room for the 'unexpected'. Such an image connotes the idea of putting effort into something difficult and testing – creating a space of openness and possibility – whilst at the same time keeping the outcomes of that effort open to the desires and actions of the range of potential actors who might fill and give meaning to that space. Indeed, this idea of 'increasing' the 'room to move' is what I got a strong sense of when I observed and spoke with Mark about his different musical activities. As I explored in Chapter Four, Birmingham's musicscape is, to a large extent, being constructed around what Gibson-Graham term an 'enduring core or essence' (2006:xxx). That is, questions of who or what belong in different parts of the musicscape are being essentialised in ways that reify the dominance of certain capitalistic and state actors and processes. I argue that Mark's musical activities queer and decentre dominant discourses and ideas about who should or does occupy particular spaces or places – be they live music venues or funding panels – within Birmingham's local musicscape. Moreover, I argue that the Birmingham Music Network and Iron Man Records act as 'acentric', or 'decentred' spaces, and are constructed on the basis of a refusal to align the existence, identity, and meaning of those spaces to essentialised, fixed, and determined ways of being.

The aim of this discussion is not to construct an image of Mark as some kind of 'hero' but rather to analyse his actions/work in detail as a means of highlighting the subtlety and fragility of pursuing difference. In some ways, Mark's activities are not obviously resistive and at times may be ineffective and even conducive to the norm; in all cases these spaces are not straightforward or neat. They are complex and they overlap with, and are entangled with,

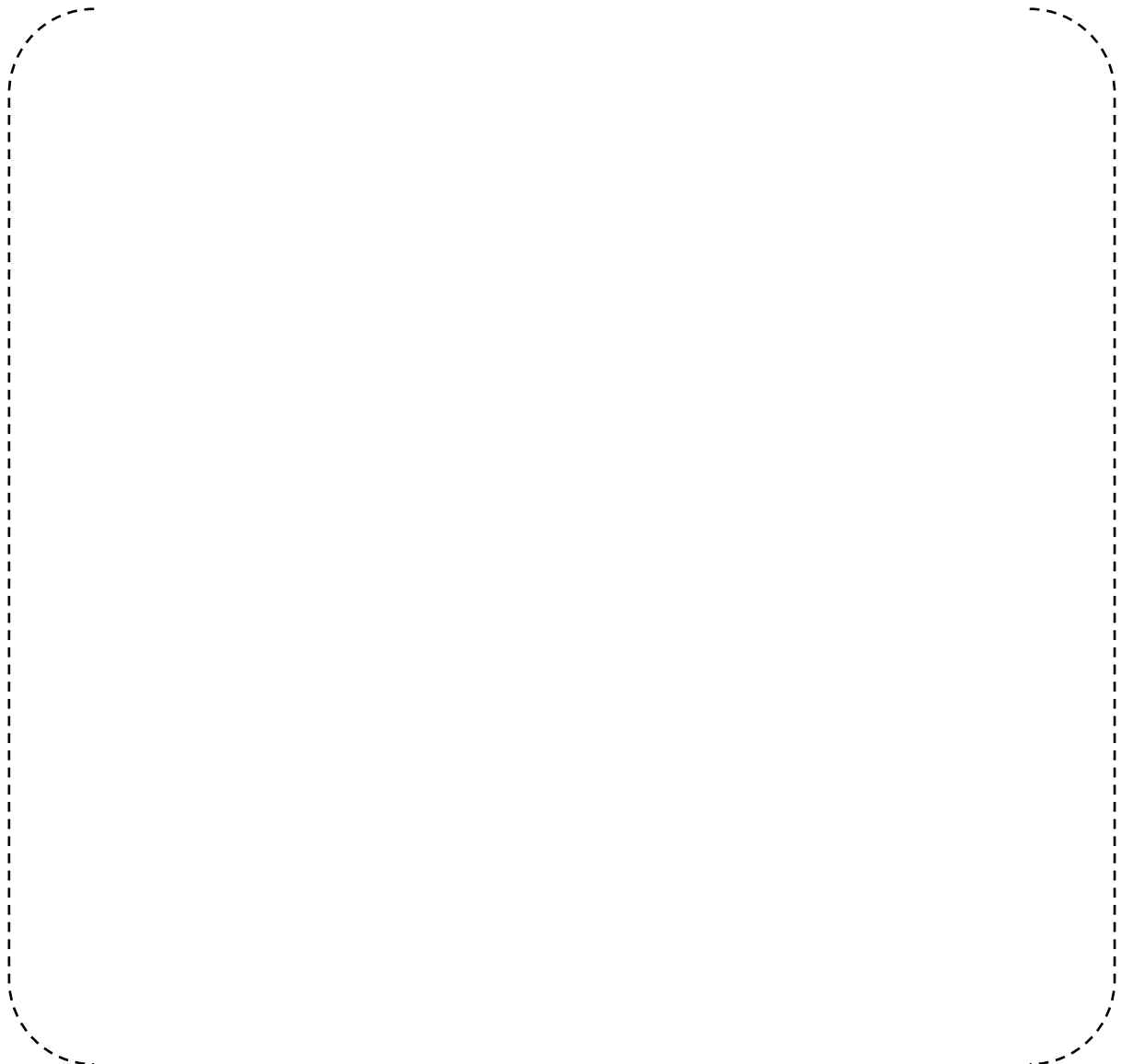
a network of other spaces and power relationships. Nonetheless, there is, within Mark's activities as a music label and founder of the BMN, moments where he works very hard to allow for difference, to allow for something emergent to happen. Whether or not this happens is not only about Mark, it is about the other people he engages with and that engage with him. Ontological reframing, as it is described by Gibson-Graham, is to some extent about being a conduit for and to difference, this is what I argue Mark has done.

The Birmingham Music Network: Demystifying the musicscape

The Birmingham Music Network was setup by Mark Sampson in 2000 with the aim of providing a space for music practitioners in Birmingham to communicate with each other. The idea was developed from an existing online forum setup by the founder of a local promotions company, Discordian Promotions, who were a sister company to Mark's promotions company, Badger Promotions (both operated in the Old Railway venue). The primary function of the BMN is a monthly meeting which is organised and chaired by Mark. Mark described to me his role in the meeting and the impetus for organising the meeting:



The un-defined nature of the BMN meeting, its lack of hierarchy and agenda, and its focus on providing a space for active local music practitioners is also partly derived from an attempt to counter the power of public bodies in Birmingham. As I discussed in Chapter Four, Mark Sampson has strong views about the capacity of BCC to act effectively on behalf of the musical and other artistic communities in Birmingham. Mark discussed the reasons why he saw a need for the BMN in relation to, what he argues are, the damaging activities of public bodies. In particular Mark explained how he sees the BMN as preventing bodies such as BCC from commandeering the kind of ‘forum’ space which BMN inhabits in the city. He explained:



The role of the BMN should not be overstated; it is not a 'project' of some sort and it is not attempting to aim for a particular goal or eventual outcome. It may be tempting to ask questions about what it has achieved or what difference it has made, but that would miss the point of the BMN. The BMN's starting point is the Birmingham musicscape, it was setup by Mark as a space within the musicscape for people involved in musical activities to meet and communicate with one another about their activities. In this sense, BMN finds itself in an invariably complicated space. There are multiple and varied of processes, relationships, and knowledges which play into the everyday life of Birmingham's musicscape (as this thesis has demonstrated), as such, it is not an easy terrain to navigate. Even among those practitioners who may have an in-depth knowledge about a particular aspect (or multiple aspects) of the music in Birmingham, there are almost certainly areas which are much less clear. For example, I met Andy Roberts at the BMN; at the time Andy was a marketing manager for a recording studio in Digbeth and a local music journalist. Andy had extensive experience of interacting with local promoters and indie bands in Birmingham. However, he also demonstrated a real dearth of knowledge about the public funding of music projects in Birmingham. He explained that he saw it as a real 'tight-knit' area of the music industry in Birmingham. For other people at the meetings however, engaging with the public side of music was their primary activity, and for them the local indie scene may appear just as tight-knit or 'cliquey' (as one respondent described it).

The point is that Birmingham's musicscape is complex and is only partially seen and known by different individuals. Some parts may be comprehensible, but different parts can inevitably appear shrouded in mystery. Crucially, I would argue that the ways in which knowledge of the musicscape is formed relates to the processes of cultural and spatial normalisation which shapes the meaning of different parts of the musicscape including who and what belongs where within it. I argue that the BMN monthly meeting is a space in which the music 'game'

can be demystified. This particular function of the BMN has important political potential in undoing fixed understandings of the cultural meanings and spatialities of music in Birmingham.

As discussed in both Chapters Four and Five, music spaces, whether they are live music performances or council meetings about music funding have a 'script' which shapes how different individuals and groups encounter and engage with music – these spaces are defined by a particular agenda. That agenda can be prescriptive and limiting in terms of the potential for difference, sharing, and exchange. In contrast, by creating the BMN as a space without an agenda, or a script, it enables the potential for people to learn about the difference around them in Birmingham's local musicscape especially in relation to areas they might not otherwise engage with. For example, attendance at the BMN is not based on invitation or selection process, it is not genre based (or biased), it is not solely about commercial or public music activities, it is aimed at the knowledgeable as much as the knowledge seeking. Because of this I argue that the BMN is an act of de-territorialising in that it is about the removal of the normal markers and coordinates for understanding the musicscape, and about allowing for encounters with other markers and coordinates in an open rather than prescribed way. By opening up a space in which different and disparate music practitioners can come together and communicate, the BMN meetings have created an opportunity to *demystify* the musicscape, and in relation to this there is the potential to unfix and re-think the musicscape. Here Mark explains how he sees the interplay of inspiration and development which feeds in and out of the BMN because of the way in which it allows for learning about the difference.

I would describe the BMN paradigm as - *by engaging with difference there is the possibility of increasing difference*. Here I am thinking about difference as specifically something anti-norm, it is about allowing difference to replace and challenge norms. For example, by learning about the mechanisms of public funding it might be an opportunity to un-presume that certain parts of the local musicscape are the natural domain of BCC or the Arts Council. Or, by learning about how local independent promoters operate there might be an opportunity to un-presume that certain parts of the local musicscape are the natural domain of major corporate music companies. Or, by learning about the practices of local music studios there might be the opportunity to engage directly in local music production. Or, by learning about a particular music event or a new genre which had not been part of a person's musical experience, new forms of music may come into view. These are all real examples I witnessed in the many BMN meetings I attended. These and other discussions took place, at least in part, because the BMN allows people to come together in an un-prescribed way.

One might argue that there are many similarly open spaces in the musicscape. For example, anyone can buy a ticket to a public gig. However, this research has demonstrated that the local musicscape is organised in relation to a normalised cultural political geography which imposes material and imagined boundaries that shape 'who goes where'; which, I argue prevents genuine openness. Yes, a gig may be open to the public, but there are many processes which shape who belongs there and who feels in place or out of place. My argument

is that because the BMN it is not shaped by a particular agenda it creates an opportunity for openness, for people to discover what people are doing in the musicscape, and to make sense of how it operates and to reflect on the kinds of spaces they inhabit or do not inhabit.

De-territorialising the musicscape

It is difficult to capture the vast diversity at these meetings but to give a taster; in the course of a year I encountered individuals and groups who were engaged in a wide array of genres from gospel to contemporary classical, and from thrash metal to teen pop. In terms of economic approaches, I met people who were engaged in mental health charities though to regional managers of large pub chains. In terms of types of practitioners, I met internet entrepreneurs through to community studio volunteers. It is this very difference and the capacity to share knowledge between the different music geographies that makes the BMN a de-territorialising space and the knowledge sharing aspect is crucial to this. Within a territorialised and normalised ontology of the city's musicscape, the BMN acts a space in which the territorialisation of knowledge is challenged as people openly share their knowledge of the music territories they operate in. This transgression and un-presuming of boundaries through the sharing of knowledge is a key part of the mechanism which makes the BMN a space in which the ontology of the musicscape can be reframed. The normalised boundaries between, for example, commercial and public, rock and rap, centre and suburb, guitar and oboe, are potentially undone and new connections can take their place.

The people who attend the BMN meeting all play different roles in the musicscape and each attendee has a particular music geography – the music spaces they use and inhabit – which is shaped by the cultural politics of the city. Their geographies are also territorialised, that is, their geographies are constructed in relation to their understanding of particular territories and understandings of who and what belongs or doesn't belong in those different territories. The Symphony Hall, for example may be seen as the naturalised territory of classical music and

the city council, or Broad Street as the territory of a drinking and entertainment culture, and, as demonstrated, there are resources and energy invested into making these things appear fixed and natural.

Music geographies are shaped, in other words by a musical, cultural, political, and economic ontology of what the musicscape is – what territories it consists of. I argue that the BMN enacts a form of ‘ontological reframing’ because it is a de-territorialising space. Its emptiness of an agenda, of specifications about who is welcome, and so on, release it (de-territorialise it) from the prevailing ontology of Birmingham’s musicscape. Its lack of specification makes it a non-territory, a territory without meaning, a territory not accounted for in the prevailing ontology, and therefore open to new possible meanings. Of all the music spaces I encountered in my research (including gigs, recording studios, council meetings, car parks and many more) the BMN was one of the most diverse spaces in terms of the people that attended and from month to month the attendees continued to vary in an unpredictable way.

Mark Sampson himself recognises the BMN as an attempt to create an alternative space, a space which defies, challenges, and un-presumes the normalised relationships and spatialities imposed on the city by capitalistic and state actors. At the same time, he also recognises it as an experimental space, and even as a fragile space. Even if its impact and efficacy is limited, such experiments and engagements with difference and alterity have a political significance.²⁷

They signify an active refusal to be seduced by normalised relationships, and where such experiments exist, questions need to be asked about their meaning; about how they can be

²⁷ To be sure, I am exploring the BMN in this language of resistance, deterritorialisation, and ontological reframing, not in order to frame it as some heroic force for change in Birmingham; but rather to highlight it as a potentially insightful and important political space. Moreover, by discussing the BMN in this way, I am not necessarily arguing a point about its efficacy, but, more simply, about its potential. My research did not attempt to measure what effect the BMN is having on Birmingham. It was about wanting to make sense of the cultural politics of the space BMN has created in Birmingham. I argue that The BMN provides an insight into how music can be part of the way resistance is and can be enacted in Birmingham.

protected or enhanced; and about how they might connect into a wider network of resistance. As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, many political theorists recognise that things like fragility, ephemerality, and even weakness, are potentially defining features of contemporary counterhegemonic politics. BMN has now been operating for 14 years and it has facilitated the production of an open and un-prescribed dialogue between some of the individuals and groups who make up Birmingham's musicscape. Its capacity to de-territorialise and to reframe the ontology of the musicscape is something to both think about and learn from.

Iron Man Records: Increasing the 'room to move'

...as a music promoter and as a record label, by necessity, I've always chosen to work with independents who neither have funding or have attachments with a brewery, or a big company, or a brand of drink, or whatever. I've always opted for the independents.

- Mark Sampson

If resistance, and ontological reframing in particular, can be thought of in terms creating a space 'from which the unexpected can emerge', then the cultural political context in which Mark has engaged in different forms of resistance can to some extent be described as one in which the threat and possibility of the 'unexpected' is continually being reduced. It is, in other words, the context I explored in Chapter Four; Birmingham's musicscape being normalised in relation to essentialised and fixed notions of what counts as music and creativity and of who and what belongs. Here, I turn to look at how Mark has sought to create a space of difference – a space for the unexpected to emerge – through his independent record label Iron Man Records.

Here Mark describes the politics he has attempted to set in motion through Iron Man Records:



In this excerpt Mark expresses both his ideas about how music and art should be engaged with and experienced, and his frustration with the limits which he and others around him encounter as music practitioners. It is in response to this tension that Mark developed Iron Man Records, a space without a prescribed ‘direction’ – a space for the unexpected.

Mark established Iron Man Records in 1996 and began releasing records in 1999.²⁸ Still operating today, the label has signed and released material for fourteen different music acts. Mark initially established the label to help some of the musicians he knew through the music promotions company he ran in the 1990s in Birmingham (Badger Promotions) to overcome the problems they faced in terms of developing their music on a sustainable economic basis, but with the focus on allowing the musicians to retain their artistic autonomy. Mark was aware that he lacked the capacity to emulate the operations of major labels, but was not inclined to believe that this meant the project was infeasible. He sought to harness other capacities, resources, skills and knowledge in order to develop an independent record label.

²⁸ The role of a record label is not strictly defined, but in very simple terms it consists of three main areas, finding musicians to work with; providing funding for the recording and production of an album; and the distribution and promotion of the music product. (For a detailed study of record labels and their function within the music industry see Hull et al., 2011).


From the outset of Iron Man Records, the language Mark used to identify the label was divergent from the kind of hegemonic discourses operated by corporate record labels. Mark arguably challenges the dominant discourse of “commercial development” and “intellectual property rights” operated by major labels to ensure that ownership equates to profit (cf. Gibson and Kong, 2005:545). Mark challenges this by opting instead for a language based on notions of support, freedom, and sharing.

The key for Mark was to create the label as a means to allow the bands he signed to develop their music with the greatest degree of freedom and autonomy possible and to avoid inserting limitations (such as ownership or profit) prior to the creative process and the production of the music. Perhaps most significant to the operation of Iron Man Records was ensuring that profit was not the driving force for either Mark or the musicians he signed. This is not to say that Mark was against the bands making money, but Iron Man Records was setup as an ‘acentric’ arrangement in which no single feature dominated or determined the signing and production process. Materially, the goal of the label was to give the musicians the financial and developmental support to record an album, since this is a requirement most bands have to fulfil in order to access more extensive national or international touring circuits. Mark explains how the label sought to support bands who struggled to overcome barriers within the local music scene; he also demonstrates the kind of alternative approach that Iron Man Records adopted:



There is, in Mark's approach to the label and to the artists he signs a seemingly inherent 'openness to change and uncertainty' (Gibson-Graham, 2006:xxiv) and a reticence to determination or fixed definition. In relation to this, 'independence', which in a sense is the nucleus of Mark's politics, cannot be thought of as an 'ideal' form which can eventually be reached, instead it much better understood, in Gibson-Graham's terms, as a 'coordinate' (2006:86). Iron Man Records is not *a priori* defined by a particular destination such as 'increased profits' or ticking a particular box, instead it has been developed by Mark as space to be shaped by the 'decisions' of the musicians he signs to the label. Iron Man Records' path, as it were, is drawn, as Mark says, only in terms of letting musicians "develop and grow in their own way and on their own terms".

Where, then, have the coordinates of independence, support, artistic freedom, and sharing, lead Iron Man Records? First, the ways in which Mark sourced bands is a key part of Iron Man Records' make-up. Mark explains here the approach he takes to signing bands:



In practical terms, this is where the ontological reframing of musical spaces clearly emerges. Here conventional measurements for signing musicians – commercial success/viability – are un-presumed and other approaches are instilled. Mark has signed bands based on his own experiences, interactions, and relationships with each musician. When describing the kinds of relationships Mark established with the different musicians that Iron Man Records has signed, in each case, there was clear resonance with Gibson-Graham’s notion of a ‘coordinate’ which guides, but which is supple enough to allow for change and uncertainty in a given context. Mark has personal connections with each of the musicians signed to Iron Man Records which he has established through either his work as a promoter or a musician operating within Birmingham or on particular tour circuits. Mark explained how when he was promoting at the Old Railway (venue) he was attracted to bands that “just write their music, do their lyrics, perform their shows, and just don’t really care whether people like them or not” and he had a desire to extend his contribution to their music beyond just providing gigs.

Take for example, the Birmingham punk band *Nightingales* which Mark signed to Iron Man Records in 2006 to release their first studio album after rejoining as a band following a split in

the 1980s. The band had been active in the Birmingham music scene since the 1970s and, having followed their progress, Mark explained how:

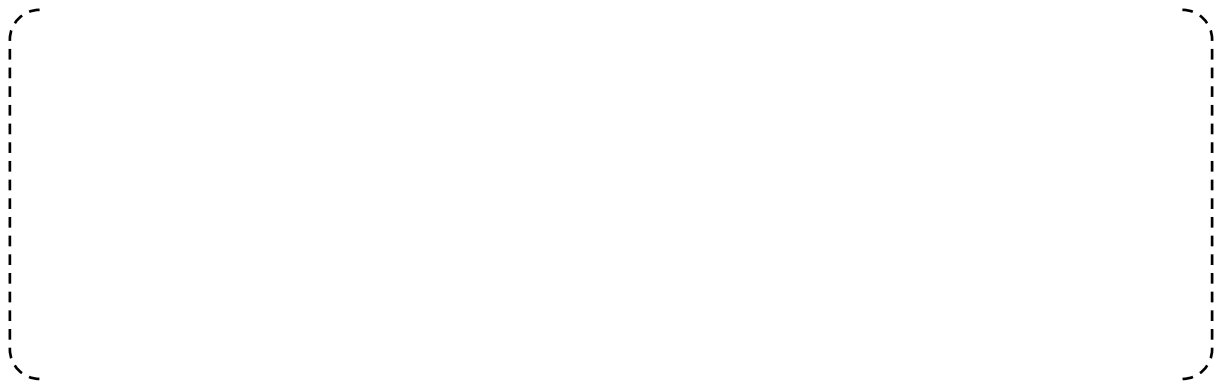


Mark's awareness of the band was based on his knowledge and respect for them as musicians both in terms of their abilities and their integrity, and his intention was to provide support to allow them to enhance these qualities and to support them in recording their music.

The band *Gorgeous*, also signed to Iron Man Records, presented Mark an opportunity to push the contestability and contingency of the musician/record label relationship further still. Mark describes the guitarist for *Gorgeous* as “phenomenal”, and a “great song writer” but with a “twisted sense of humour”, adding:



Even in this situation Mark was fully aware that signing *Gorgeous* involved taking risks on a band that was inherently difficult to place within existing categories or tastes, his feeling was that because the band were, in his view, so honest, it was all the more important to support them, and in doing so provide a space which was different to conventional record labels. Part of producing this space was about Mark protecting the artistic creativity of bands like *Gorgeous* from the machinations of more conventional profit-led labels:



Here, Mark is not so much attempting to reclaim a particular space, but trying to rethink and reframe the relationship between artists and labels and to remove foreclosures based on conventional discourses or identities such as ownership, brand, or commercialisation/marketisation. The emphasis is on occupying positions from which it is possible to realise the unexpected, from which to imagine and act freely, creatively, and powerfully, outside a paradigm of dominance and subordination.

The argument presented here is not about the supposed authenticity of music which is produced in relation to commercial or state actors. I am not arguing, for instance, that music performed in the o2 Academy or events funded by BCC are inferior or inauthentic. What the research has shown is much more politically specific than this, it is to say that these corporate and state actors are using music as a means to establish and maintain positions of dominance within the local musico-cultural landscape and that this is imposing discourses and identities on musical subjects which, in turn, restrict openness to cultural difference, change, and

possibility. The activities of Mark Sampson and Iron Man Records have acted against hegemonic attempts to determine the musico-cultural landscape and attempts to represent the landscape as defined in relation to a core or essence. They have countered and rejected a systematic division of local musico-cultural activities wherein certain musical practices are favoured over others because they can be used to sustain the dominant position of cultural, political, or economic hegemony. Mark is not concerned with the reality of how local music turns out, be it in the form of heavy metal or new-age folk, his concern is that the ground on which it is developed is one which is generative of and open to possibility, and that it is not built on the basis of a normalisation of cultural practices centred on an ontology of structure and dominance. As such, this research has demonstrated how this case study of activities both at the BMN meetings and Iron Man Records presents an interesting and compelling example of music as a process of resistance in different ways.

SECTION TWO: REREADING THE MUSICSCAPE

This section considers the Flyover Show, an annual music event organised by the jazz musician Soweto Kinch, through the lens of ‘rereading’. The Flyover Show, I argue, is about seeing something in the culture and geography of Birmingham which is present but is not accounted for, which is invisible, in the normalised view of the city. It abandons the normal script of culture and space and provides a new narrative. The Flyover Show is, as Soweto Kinch described it, about “representing the unrepresented”, or as a local music journalist and historian described it; a place where the ‘impossible is possible’. I argue this enables a ‘re-reading’ of the cultures and spaces which surround the very unusual site of the event – under a raised bypass. It is useful to begin, however, by providing a some context to the Flyover Show. Firstly, Figure 19 shows the space where the show is held – underneath the B4100 road

which connects North Birmingham into the city centre. Soweto, who lives nearby the flyover, saw this area as a natural amphitheatre.



Figure 20: Hockley flyover (Source: Google Streetview)

Besides being held in such an unusual space, the Flyover Show’s wider geographical context is also crucial to its politics. The Hockley flyover is located in between what are, on the one hand, some of Birmingham’s most deprived areas, and on the other hand, the most notorious ‘gang territories’ in Birmingham, including Lozells (B19), Aston (B6) Nechells (B7), and Handsworth (B21). The flyover’s proximity to these areas and the wider geographical context of North Birmingham is shown in Figure 20. In addition, Figure 21, a Birmingham City Council ‘Priority Neighbourhoods Map’ which identifies certain parts of the city in terms of deprivation levels,²⁹ shows the Hockley flyover itself (indicated by the arrow) located within the priority neighbourhood of Newtown, Hockley, and St. Georges. The adjacent areas of Handsworth and Lozells are also defined as ‘priority neighbourhoods’.

²⁹ A priority neighbourhood is defined as an area that falls ‘within the worst 5% nationally for multiple deprivation’ (BeBirmingham, 2012); there are twenty-five in Birmingham.



Figure 21 Hockley flyover and surrounding area (Source: Google Maps)

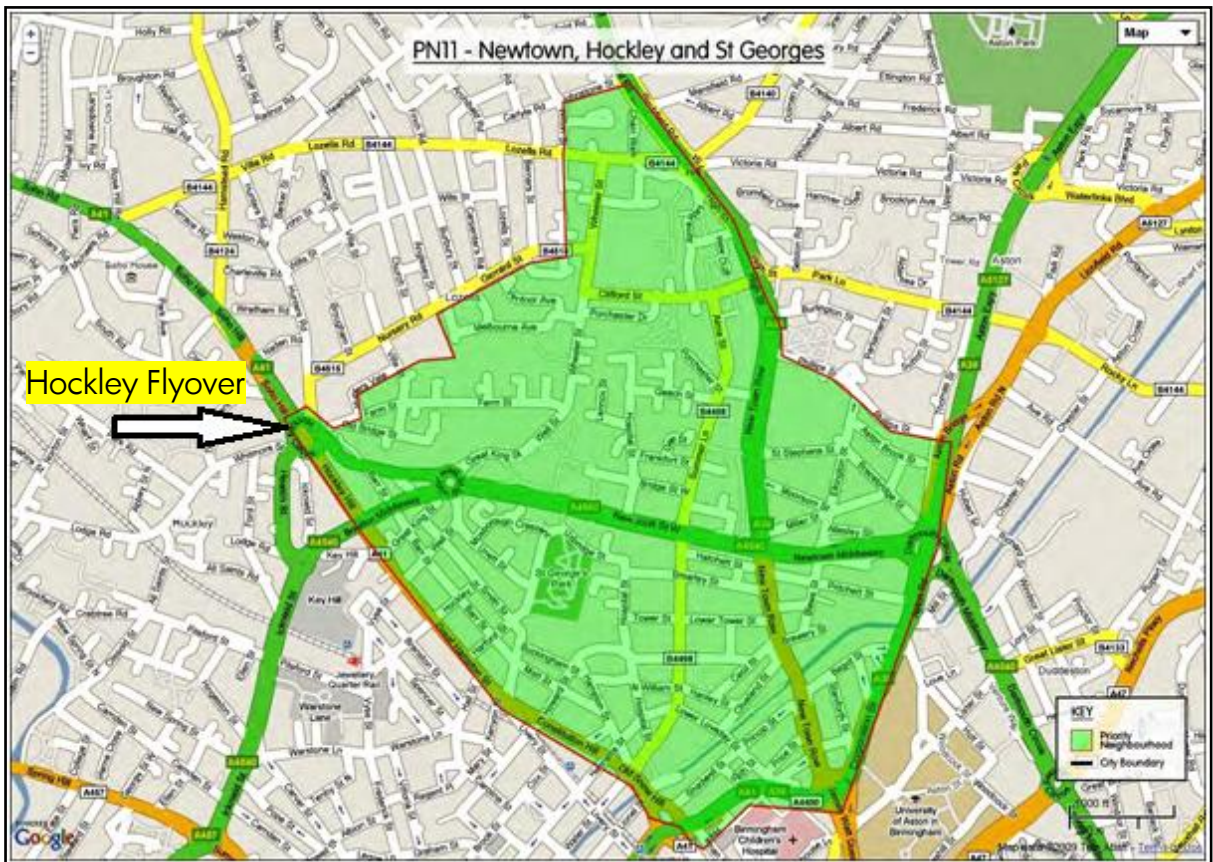


Figure 22 Priority Neighbourhood map (Source: BeBirmingham, 2012: annotated by Author)

Also, to give the reader an idea of the Flyover show taking place, the photo below is of the event in 2012; the picture shows Soweto Kinch himself performing on stage under the flyover.



Figure 23: Flyover Show 2012 (Source: Clare Edwards)

In the following discussion I explore how Soweto Kinch has attempted to use the Flyover Show as site through which to challenge the normalised narratives which shape the identities of the areas and communities which surround the flyover. I begin by briefly unpacking the idea of re-reading.

Rereading people and places

“It was very important for me to take this locality as my inspiration... I want to show that there are no easy assumptions to be made about people or places.”

- (Soweto Kinch quoted in Ashton, 2006)

Gibson-Graham adopt a broadly post-structural approach to their political project which treats social systems not as transcendent and ‘preestablished’ but as immanent and ‘contextual’. For Mitch Rose (2002:390), this approach ‘begins with the assumption that social life is fundamentally textual’. Here ‘text’ refers not to written scripts, as such, but to any form of social phenomena, from landscape to art and from gestures to commodities. For a text to acquire meaning some form of ‘force or action’ is required. To denote this, Rose uses the term ‘enactment’ – a ‘strategic practice that connect texts in a fashion that gives them definition and purpose’ (2002:391). Here, enactment is understood as the exercise of power. As such, while this approach denies a preestablished system, it does not deny the existence of power and domination. For Rose, ‘enactment’ at once gives social life meaning and purpose but it can only achieve this by situating, violating, closing-off, and circumscribing other forms of enactment. Thus, he writes,

...the practice of defining texts – the process of making them meaningful aspects of daily life – is inherently *violent*. The struggle to define texts cannot be thought outside of power... It is the means through which our potential for defining the world and ourselves is both opened and closed. (Rose, 2002:395 emphasis added)

Rose, in recognising the ‘overdetermination’ of texts as well as the violence of enactment, offers both ‘closings’ and ‘openings’. His political-moral recommendation is that we ‘take care of texts’ (2002:397), by which he means our politics should seek to avoid ‘being seduced

by what seems essential' whilst also recognising 'the potential of texts' (2002:397). Gibson-Graham's (1996; 2006), technique of rereading, then, is precisely about this simultaneous refusal to be seduced by the essentialisation of texts and the enactment of potential other meanings. The technique of rereading is a counter-hegemonic reading of texts; it involves 'uncovering what is possible but obscured from view' (2006:xxx). Gibson-Graham define the technique of rereading in more detail as something which:

...fractures and disperses the object of attention, dislocating it from essentialist structures of determination.... Techniques of rereading adopt a stance of curiosity, rather than recognition, toward claims of truth. Rereading offers us something new to work with, especially useful if we are trying to produce raw materials for other (political) practices. Possibilities multiply along with uncertainties, and future possibilities become more viable by virtue of already being seen to exist, albeit only in the light of a differentiating imagination. (Gibson-Graham, 2006:xxxi)

As much as rereading is about undoing and dislocating, just as crucially, it is also a productive process, or act. It is about producing, what Gibson-Graham call, the 'raw materials for other (political) practices', and this can start in even the minimal form of simply an 'imagined' difference. For Gibson-Graham, 'imagination' and 'curiosity' become seen as politically useful, they can act as a starting point. My argument, which I develop below, is that Soweto's curiosity and his imagination in the space of the flyover and in music provides a kind of raw material for rereading Birmingham's musicscape and in particular for rereading the place of live performance in the city.

The Flyover Show: A positive rereading

*Expect the unexpected, the whole site is gonna be awash with
colour...*

- (Soweto Kinch 2012)

*Soweto Kinch did what many couldn't and wouldn't – he saw a
downtrodden, forgotten corner of the city's urban landscape
and re-imagined it as an amphitheatre. Turning it from a place
people avoid to one that families flock to every year.*

- (FlyoverShow.com, 2012)

Soweto Kinch, a highly acclaimed alto-saxophonist and MC whose music fuses jazz and hip hop,³⁰ first organised the Flyover Show, a music, dance, and arts festival, in 2008 and continued to run the show annually till 2012. It was following the release, in 2006, of Soweto's second studio album: *A Life In The Day Of B19 - Tales Of The Tower Block*,³¹ that Soweto began to think about how he could “bring the [story] to life” (Soweto Kinch quoted in Booth, 2008). In a sense, Soweto's musical exploration of his life and surroundings provided him with a platform from which to see some of the hidden meanings in the places and people he encountered in his everyday life. One such place was the Hockley flyover, which prior to the Flyover Show was a predominantly sinister space which many local people feared because it was used as a hang-out by gangs and drug dealers and users. Despite its reputation and its appearance, Soweto began to see and imagine the flyover in new ways, and in particular, as a space with the potential for hosting live music. Here, Soweto describes how he began to

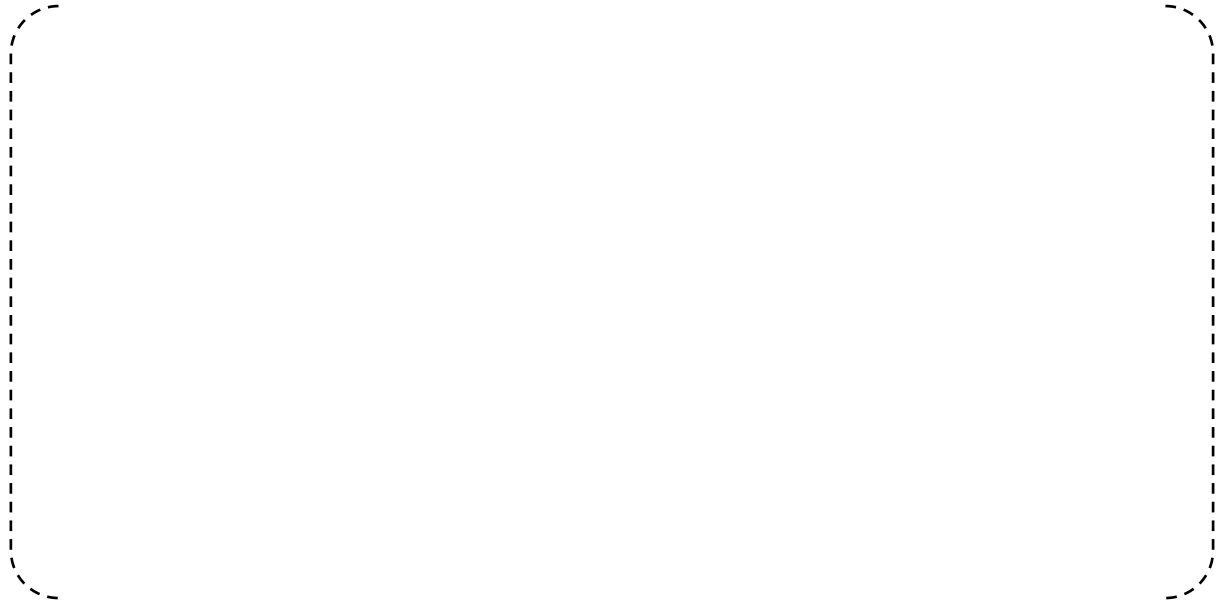
³⁰ Soweto's first album, *Conversations with the Unseen*, released in 2003 was highly acclaimed; it was nominated for the 2003 mercury prize. In the same year Soweto was awarded a MOBO for best Jazz Act, this accolade was repeated in 2007 following his second album, *A Life in the Day of B19 - Tales of the Tower Block*, released in 2006. Soweto has toured extensively both nationally and internationally and has been involved in numerous musical collaborations. A more detailed biography can be found at soweto-kinch.com.

³¹ A concept album based on Soweto's own experience and ideas about living in a tower block in the B19 area of Birmingham.

imagine the Hockley flyover beyond the detritus which had come to define it and which threatened to continue to define it.



This description taps into a notion of wanting to realise and ‘uncover’ something which is ‘obscured from view’ (Gibson-Graham, 2006:xxx). Behind the syringes and mess which symbolise the area’s decay and ruin, Soweto could see what those things obscured, both in the space of the flyover itself but also in the communities and areas which surrounded it. It is arguably from this starting point that ‘possibilities’ began to ‘multiply’. Soweto’s idea of a live music event in the flyover set in motion a multiplying effect in which different texts could come into focus and be re-imagined. The Flyover Show was to become Soweto’s way of showing others what he saw: his way of rereading the city. Here Soweto explains where the ideas for the Flyover Show began:



It is clear that Soweto was instilled with a reluctance to align his way of thinking, seeing, and reading of his own cultural political context and geographies to the way they are represented by hegemonic discourses wherein identities are defined by criminality and deprivation. Indeed, challenging these essentialised and totalising images of the areas which surround the flyover, and where Soweto and his friends live, was central to the political rationale for developing the Flyover Show. As Soweto explains here, his experience of being inspired by the different areas and communities around the flyover did not match up with their dominant representations.



So, it was in this context of wanting to challenge dominant perceptions of the life and city that Soweto knew, that he began the development of the Flyover Show.

Jazz is Gangster

I live in the community. Not forgetting where you come from – that works... Art doesn't only happen in a Ballet House or Opera House or in a venue in a city centre, art happens all the time. So how do I kinda get that message out?

- (Soweto Kinch quoted in Edwards, 2012)

As a way into thinking about the kind of thought process and the politics that shaped the Flyover Show, I want to explore a short documentary style film titled *Jazz is Gangster* that Soweto produced in the build up to the first Flyover Show in 2008. In a way, the video (which was published on YouTube) begins to answer the question Soweto asks in the quote above – “*how do I get that message out?*” – Soweto’s answer is the Flyover Show. The question, however, as the quote suggests, is also one of spatial politics – how to challenge the normalised spatialities of music. The challenge is to make new openings, new spaces for music, and to show that music which takes place outside conventional spaces is valid and valuable, and not subordinate. These are questions I will continue to explore following my discussion of *Jazz is Gangster*.

In the *Jazz is Gangster* film we see various visual and audio tools used to take the viewer on a journey from a *dystopian-reality* though to a *utopian-vision* under construction. The film begins with Soweto having a conversation with a group of young children in the open space beneath the flyover and against the sonic backdrop of the whirring traffic on the busy road above. The conversation sets the scene with a juxtaposition between the local children’s excitement at the prospect of a festival happening under the flyover, and the seemingly unyielding fact that the space is haunted by ‘badness’.



Soweto: What would you say if I took over this whole space here, put big lights in, a big projector, and a stage, got some artists here to do some performances?

Local children: That would be sick! That would be wicked!

Soweto: Do you think that would work though? Because you know how the badness happens around here...

Local children: It's true ghetto!

Figure 24 Jazz is Gangster: Scene 1 - Conversation with local children

The opening scene, then, provides an insight into the prevailing identity of the flyover, a 'true ghetto', a space of 'badness', and serves to highlight the challenge Soweto faces in first re-imagining the space, and then actually transforming it. In the next scene we see Soweto in the sharp contrast of black and white walking out of one of the graffitied subways as he questions what he should call the project. At the point in time when this was shot, Soweto was thinking of calling the event 'B19' (the postcode of the flyover), but expresses concern that this will threaten the project because of the association with gang rivalries in the area.



Soweto: Should I be running the risk of calling my project B19 when there is this new postcode rivalry?

Figure 25 Jazz in Gangster: Scene 2 – Fear of gang violence

Not only is the possibility of Soweto's idea threatened by its prevailing identity, it is threatened by the very real presence of gangs in the area that actively use the flyover space to hang out in and deal drugs in. Because of its location on the boundary of different areas, it is also a kind of frontline, hence Soweto's reluctance to refer to the event using a postcode.

The film moves on to the most troubling scenes, where the viewer is given a close-up perspective of the flyover and the subways that feed in and out of it. Here we are presented with a dystopian vision of abandonment and dereliction; a space used only by local deviants and avoided by everyone else. In one of the subways, Soweto looks to the camera; body slouched, with a repressed demeanour, and asks the seemingly obvious question, "*why would anyone come to a concert here, in this desolate, dangerous place?*"



Soweto: This is public access, its whack! Whaccsess! I mean, you could slip on this. Its nasty, vermin comes down here; used condom; and well junkies just get busy here.



Soweto: It's not the kind of place you wanna bring your family on a nice day

Figure 26 Jazz is Gangster: Scene 3 - Subway dystopia

Soweto, again, reveals the stark reality of abandonment; the litter and graffiti tags are the symbols of an undesirable and fearful urban space. But it is in the face of this that Soweto launches the project of re-reading, re-visioning, and re-narrativising. In the following scene,

the camera shoots to an image of Soweto stood at the top of the ramp at the south end of the flyover having emerged from the *darkness* of the subways into the *light* of the open area.



*Yeah man, I can see it now, whizz around, see for yourself. It's huge!
It's right position is where were gonna bring this stuff,
It's even gonna be better than Dave Chappelle's block party
We can't afford Gill Scott, but we got me
And we've got other MCs right here from Hockley
It's gonna be sick though! [Laughs]
There's gonna be at least 3000 people sitting in rows
And they'll be considered the cool, yeah!*



Figure 27 Jazz is Gangster: Scene 4 - Utopian vision

In the above scene Soweto begins to invent change as he actively de-territorialises the flyover by changing both his use of space and his position in space. He *abandons* the abandoned subways and puts himself at the top of the ramp under the flyover – his new stage – and as he stands there he casts his arm and his gaze across the open space and imagines his audience. The change also occurs in terms of how Soweto uses language, in the first scenes, he speaks normally; he asks questions; talks to the camera; tells us his fears. In this scene, however, he changes his language and speaks in poem, a slow rap, a stream of consciousness in lyric-like form to get across his vision. In other words, he begins to enact the possibility of the flyover being a space of art and music. Again, he abandons normal language and replaces it with lyric and poem – symbols of other possibilities in that space.

In the final scene (below), Soweto continues to traverse from imagining his utopia to enacting it. We see Soweto continue to re-enact the flyover as a real stage. He goes from a poetic vision into actually using the subways and the ramp as his very own stage as he starts rapping (making and performing music) in these spaces. He acts out, and performs, these spaces in new ways which cut-across their normal use. He sets in motion a rereading of these spaces not as a desolate space, void of culture, but as a space in which to perform art and celebrate local music. He takes this first step and by attempting to engender his vision for this space, Soweto is enabling ‘possibilities’ to become ‘transformed by giving them different starting places’ (Gibson-Graham, 2006:152). The message of the rap that Soweto performs in one of the subways (below) is also an invitation to the different areas of Birmingham to join him in the new ‘starting place’ – on the stage and in the audience. It is an invitation to “be creative!”



*I'm walking outdoors, walking straight,
Looking into the camera right before
And I will make an announcement coming out of this public house.
Yeah, you probably lock them indoors
Can't breathe in this tunnel, 'cause the air quality's poor
And I'm like, what's it for?
It's really hard to see.
I write beats well from here, Aston, to Nechells.
Ok Ya'll 'cause cats be blasting like handguns.
Be creative! From Edgbaston to Handsworth...*



Figure 28 Jazz is Gangster: Scene 5 – Performing a new stage

From this platform of the *Jazz is Gangster* film which tells the story of where the Flyover Show started, I want to turn my attention now to think about how the Flyover Show has attempted to reread the Birmingham musicscape, especially in terms of how it challenges the question of *where* live music belongs in the city.

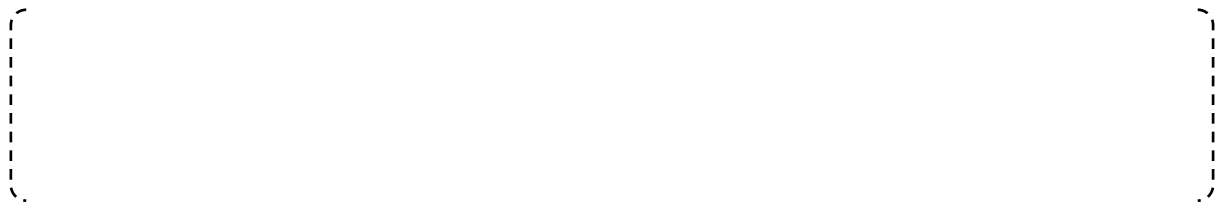
Re-narrativising the place of music

To begin, I want to highlight two quotes from interviews I accessed online with musicians who performed at the 2011 Flyover Show. The comments reveal the Flyover Show as a catalyst for the rereading of multiple texts. Moreover, they help to make sense of how the Flyover Show acts as, what Gibson-Graham call, the ‘raw material’ which enables possibilities to emerge and for new connections to be imagined and made. These short excerpts provide an insight into how the Flyover Show, even in a minimal way, has sparked new questions about how people relate to and imagine different places and practices.



Both comments indicate the fact that the Flyover Show has played with expectations about where music should be, or even more specifically where different types of music such as ‘high art’ or festivals should be. The second quote in particular demonstrates how the Flyover Show enables texts such as ‘high art’ and ‘low art’ to become ‘unread’ (“stripped away”). In

this sense, the Flyover enabled a reimagining of the place of music. In particular, discourses of ‘high’ and ‘low’ became derelict and in their place the flyover emerges from dereliction. What was once presumed to be derelict – the Hockley flyover – has become renewed as a site of musical promise. In turn, what was once presumed to be enlightened and true – the distinction between high and low art – has become derelict. These comments from the musicians tap into what appears to be one of the driving forces behind Soweto’s vision for the Flyover Show – the idea of refusing to be seduced by a normalised hierarchy of musical spaces which defines the value of music in relation to where it takes place. They also tie into Soweto’s own understanding of performance and space, as he explained here:



Not only is the Flyover Show grounded in a politics of validating the art but also the spaces in which the art has come from and is performed in. Hence, the struggle against musico-spatial norms was fundamental to the Flyover Show from its inception.

Related to Soweto’s politics, in their own work Gibson-Graham make use of something called the ‘Asset-Based Community Development’ method (see Kretzmann et al., 1993). They explain how the method takes ‘the familiar image of the half-empty glass and likens it to the (self)images of many communities who are defined by what they lack and what they therefore “need”’ (2006:145). This ‘glass-half-empty’ approach to non-standard communities, they argue, promotes and invites ‘solutions from the outside’ (2006:145). Moreover, it allows those on the outside to enact meanings for these texts with an emphasis on negativity and lack. The alternative – a ‘glass-half-full’ approach – however, ‘emphasizes the assets and capacities of community members, associations, institutions, and infrastructure’ (2006:145).

From this perspective, communities are envisaged as being ‘built on their assets, not on their needs’ (2006:145). I contend that Soweto’s approach to the Flyover Show and to the place of music in the city enacts this ‘half-full vision’ (2006:145).

For Soweto, it was important that the Flyover Show was a celebration of the assets that the local community already had, and that the event be defined, narrativised, and given meaning not from the outside but from within. He was also very concerned to recognise what was already present in his area in terms of artistic talent. Soweto noted how, for example, ‘living in the same block as me is another jazz musician, poets, play writers, actors, dancers and all sorts of creative types. We really need to celebrate their work in the community’ (Soweto Kinch, 2008). In saying this, Soweto dislodges the capacity to define the community in terms of needs and was instead trying to validate the talent and art that people in and around the Hockley flyover were creating. In this way, Soweto challenged how art is valued and fought for his art and the art of those around him to be understood not in accordance with what they lack or how they deviate from creative norms, but in terms of the simple fact that it has been given meaning and value by those who produce it.

I argue that Soweto goes a step further, he seeks not only to highlight what there is already, but he seeks to encourage people to create more. He did so, again in a way that did not seek validation or help from the outside but, instead called for people to create something for themselves, to refuse the identities given from outside, and to seek identities created from within. He refused in other words, to act in accordance with a territorialised understanding of where music belongs or who it belongs to. In the quote below, Soweto develops this message in relation to, and in opposition to, a discourse in which young black people, especially those who live in the areas surrounding the flyover and/or those who engage in rap/urban music, are susceptible to being identified with criminality, gun and knife violence, and gang culture.

For me, this statement from Soweto is extremely powerful because it so strongly refuses the narrative which dominates young black people's lives in certain parts of Birmingham. It shows an understanding of the black experience in a way that dominant interventions can fail to do. But it also pushes a new narrative into view, one which is positive and productive. Soweto has used the Flyover Show as a space in which to realise and promote this message; it gives this message a material space in the city. In turn, notions of the flyover as abandoned, of a community in need, and of black and urban culture as deviant, are being re-narrated through the Flyover Show. As Soweto explains, the Flyover Show offers a new and positive message:

Soweto, through his music and through the Flyover Show, is pursuing the realisation of this message by revealing that spaces have the potential to be reclaimed and reread – to become sites of artistic and cultural creativity and experimentation. The Flyover Show 'unmaps' and 'unmoors' both the place of the show – the flyover and the surrounding area – and the communities, that the flyover represents and in doing so it 'allows for new moorings and mappings' (2006:xxxiii). Moreover, understood as a cultural political rereading of place and subjects, the Flyover Show 'is [a] site of becoming, [an] opening for politics' (2006:xxxiii).

As Soweto points out in his summary of what the Flyover Show achieves, the aim is not simply to put on an event, it is about creating an opportunity to question and re-imagine the place of music.



The Flyover Show was an experiment with space and culture, and with possibilities. In the next section, I continue the theme of thinking about music in the city's deprived areas but I focus more explicitly on rap music as a space of resistance.

SECTION THREE: CREATIVITY AND THE MUSICSCAPE

In this final section I explore rap music in Birmingham as a space of resistance through the lens of 'creativity'. I also use the discussion as an opportunity to highlight resistance as a space of paradox and problems. Gibson-Graham describe creativity as 'bringing things together from different domains to spawn something new' (2006:xxxii). Creativity, in this sense, is as a kind of test site, it is about making connections between otherwise disparate or different things to construct new realities, new combinations of ideas and practices to confront problems and to engage in struggles. Here I want to think about creativity in terms of the bringing together of music and black urban experiences in Birmingham. Moreover, I want to think about rap music, in particular, as a platform from which different individuals and groups have engaged in struggles against urban deprivation (in its many and varied guises).

In Chapter Five I explored the geographies and cultural politics of rap in Birmingham, and I tried to emphasise the very entangled and complex nature of the issues at play in rap music in its urban context. Related to that discussion, we may imagine something like a tangled ball of knots. Such an image represents the fact that there are very few ways in or out of thinking about what is a deeply paradoxical and insistently complex space. But within that tangle of rap music, black experience, exclusion, and violence, during my research I also saw emergent shoots of difference and of resistance in the rap musicscape.

This section, then, is partly about continuing to explore the narrative of rap music in Birmingham that I developed in Chapter Five. Previously, the discussion was framed in terms of rap's marginalisation in Birmingham. But there is more to rap's story than its marginalisation, and here I want to think about rap music both as a space of resistance and as a tool of resistance, and to connect it into a wider discussion of resistance. To some extent, aspects of a resistive narrative, especially ideas about change and challenging cultures of violence, can be found in so much of the rap being made in Birmingham. But such narratives are also often deeply entangled within the kinds of issues I explored in Chapter Five wherein rap is used in different ways to perpetuate violence (both as a means of defending against geographies of violence and to territorialise the marginal city). Nonetheless, rap music in Birmingham is a varied terrain and within it there are moments where the narrative of resistance is clearer and more emergent.

Here I explore two different examples of these emergent political creativities in rap music. First, I examine rap music as a space for thinking about, hoping for, and expressing ideas about struggles and change. I identify and discuss several examples of rap songs made in Birmingham which include various types of message about hope and change. The first discussion provides a platform for exploring a more enduring example of where rap music has become a space of resistance in Birmingham. The second example is the film, *1 Day*, a hip-

hop musical made in Birmingham about the city's gangs. In particular, I explore the musical and political activities that have emerged in the wake of the film, including the making of a documentary film released in 2012 about gang tensions in Birmingham titled *One Mile Away*. The example of these two films reveals how the bringing together of disparate practices, ideas, and actors can be used to carve out a space of difference, alterity, and possibility, and how music can be used as a tool and space of experimentation within that process.

Rapping-Thinking: Rap on struggle and hope

Here I want to make sense of rap as both a tool and space of resistance through what is probably one of the most poignant as well as most common traits in rap – rap songs of hope, or what might be referred to as rap as ‘story telling’. Here the creative act is about rappers, especially young black men, bringing together their music and their black urban experience to produce a space of reflection and of hope.

In the final part of Chapter Five I explored two roles that rap music can play; I explored the notion of rap being an emotional weapon and rap being a means of territorialising urban space. Here I want to think about another role – rap as a space of political thought. What I mean by this is not about rap having an overtly or explicitly political message which accords with a political ideology. Instead, I approach rap as a space of political thought by thinking about how rap music is being used to engage with thoughts both about political realities and possibilities. That is, I am interested in rap's role as a space of reflection on personal and shared struggles, but also as a space for hoping that change can happen and that the injustices which are part of the black urban experience – be it police brutality, deprivation, or gang violence – can be challenged and overcome. It is a discussion about the idea that rap, as a space of cultural and political resistance, can be about having the opportunity to reflect upon, and express, a particular narrative of life – about having a voice.

Stylistically, rap music is often quite directly narrative-based, and so it is used by many rappers to tell their story. Here I want to think about how the story-telling style of rap is used to explore the dual notions of struggle and change. Such ideas are often expressed and rapped about in songs with titles which suggest a kind of reflective narrative such as ‘my life’ or ‘my story’ or ‘the truth’. My argument is that these kinds of rap songs have an element of refusal in them – a refusal to be passive in the face of the injustices and violence that exists in their environment. In addition, the rapper’s songs are about voicing concerns in their own language and from their own perspective and not relying on others to tell their story for them in ways that do not account for their experiences.

The songs and lyrics I explore here share similar narrative elements about how, from a young age, the rappers have been exposed to negative experiences, including drugs, knife and gun violence, fear, disrupted education, exclusion, police brutality, absent fathers, imprisonment, death, and looking up to gangsters as role models. The point is that, unlike the kinds of rap songs I explored in Chapter Five, the stories of these experiences are told in a way which does not glorify these narratives, but instead, which presents them simply as; ‘*this is my reality*’. Often the reflection on reality is allied with an expression of a desire for change. At the same time, these songs are often laden with contradictory notions of both pride and regret about the past, as well as a mix of fear and hope about the future. An additional and significant observation from this research is that the language and vision of change in these kinds of rap songs is often limited and the hope for change is often held back by a sense of impossibility. This is important not only because it makes change appear less possible, but it also makes rap less visible as a space of resistance, difference, and political creativity.

Here I examine a number of rap songs, each of which highlights a different aspect of this form of political creativity. They are all posted on YouTube and are created by rappers from Birmingham.

This first rap song is called *Story Teller*, it is performed by three rappers. This song is representative of many rap songs that I have encountered in my research. The primary element of the song includes each of the three rappers telling the story of their street lives – their experience of growing up in the city and being part of Birmingham’s gang culture. This practice of narrativising street life is a common trait in many of the rap songs I have encountered. Often rappers will express in different ways ‘where they have come from’ or ‘what they have been through’. Crucially, how these stories are told varies; some are more boastful, some are more regretful. In a sense, the boastful versions of ‘story telling’ play the role of making the rapper look or feel hard (as explored in Chapter Five). In the cases where rappers are more regretful, often the ‘story telling’ is a platform for thinking about their individual and shared struggles and about wanting to change their lives.

In the song *Story Teller* there are elements both of boasting and regret, but where regret is expressed so too is a desire for change. This co-presence of regret and boasting captures a key paradox in rap, and it is something which is arguably driven by a sense of fear. By creating the rap song as a space of hope and thought, it may lose its efficacy as an emotional weapon for defending against violence or as a way of territorialising urban space. In other words, it may make the rapper appear weak. This tension often remains unresolved. Hence, in many rap songs, as in *Story Teller*, there are the contradictory elements both of regret and hope, and boasting and aggression – this makes the rap song a paradoxical space and difficult to identify in terms of resistive politics. The figure below is an excerpt from *Story Teller* which includes the more regretful lyrics and those which express a desire for change. The rapper is rapping about how his father was sent to jail and how that resulted in a loss of discipline in his own life. He raps about the different things he has engaged in such as committing robbery,

joining a gang,³² being excluded from school, and seeing friends sent to prison. Following this he raps about not wanting to end up in prison and trying to ‘make the right moves’ to change his life.

Story Teller

Now you're in jail, swear down fam, I miss ya
Used to have me on lock down
Swear my life changed when you got locked down
I was out here robbin' things just to get the pounds
Throwing up signs, wouldn't do that if you was around
No one to watch me, so I felt free as hell
Started getting money felt like I was the man now
Every week catch me in town splashin' out
Done a mistake and the feds raided mum's house
Growing up, got stories to tell
Got kicked out of school, then I [blank] as well
I was graffin' fam, the roads was doing me well
Then I found out my bro was gettin' ten in jail
... can't do the same, so I'm tryn'a make the right moves
If I make it, swear I'm 'a bring my fam through
I'm just story tellin'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zSDmSKFLcs#t=129>

Figure 29: ‘Story Teller’ song lyrics

The rap expresses a struggle, it has a regretful tone, and it admits and acknowledges the perpetration of violence and harm, but it also ‘asks’ for difference, a way out. As I noted however, these lyrics are rapped in the context of a song where other rappers are talking about their continuing desire to seek revenge or use violence. The point, which this particular song illustrates well, is that expressions of a desire for change are difficult moments to see and hear in rap, they are often drowned-out by the *noise* of other more obvious and entrenched

³² ‘Throwing up signs’ is a reference to making gang signs using your hands.

practices of street life. Nonetheless, rap music, despite its dominant modes of perpetuating violence, is being sought out and used as a space in which to voice struggle, regret, and hope.

The next example is a song titled *My Struggle* and it is about the murder of a friend of the rapper. The loss of his friend is expressed by the rapper as a poignant moment in his life and is used as a platform from which to reflect on his own life and to express both pain and desire for change. The song highlights the harsh reality that many young people like this rapper experience or live in fear of – being subjected to violence by other young people. *My Struggle* is about the experience of the trauma of youth and gang violence, but also about how such trauma can spark desires for change. The mixed and contradictory feelings that violence and trauma bring about also emerge in the song when he raps about the fact he and others want to seek revenge for his friend's death through further violence. Relatedly, the rapper also continually voices what he sees as the unlikelihood and impossibility of actually being able to change his life.

My Struggle

I lost my boy that I used to call my fam
...And now, I can't believe that he's gone,
Can't wait till I catch dem pricks, their life's gone
...For real, my life's fucked dawg, I fucked up in college
...All I can say that I'm sorry
I'm gonna change my ways mum, please don't worry
I'm tryn'a find a job, dog, to keep me off the fucking roads
...Look, I'm tryn'a live happily, all I need is family
But the feds tryn'a trap me in...
...Yeah the life that I'm living, yeah it's real hard
*...I've got so much pain stuck all inside
I need to let it all out, now I think it's time
...I need to stop all this shit on the roads
Most man nowadays getting stabbed over codes
Fuck the roads! Fuck the codes! I ain't into that gang shit
Most man nowadays talkin' bout how they got hand tings. Gun dis! Gun dat!
...Talk about this shit, that's how I grew up
We used to rob motorbikes, now I'm older
Yo, I used to walk on the road, looking over my shoulder
But that's no good, my life's no good
But try walkin' in my shoes and I will show ya...
...Remember I told ya', I got a big problem, but I can't even solve that!*

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

Figure 30: 'My Struggle' song lyrics

'My Struggle' attempts to make sense of the rapper's own 'struggle', but it is also presented as something which is irresolvable – 'I got a big problem, but I can't even solve that!' This stems from the presence of things which are unyielding in holding the rapper to the struggle – death, the police, gangs, and his past. Within the song he continually critiques his own life and the life and practices of those around him and, as such, expresses a desire to change and for change. Again, despite expressing regret and hope, there is an overwhelming sense of impossibility.

Finally, In the song below titled ‘The Truth’, we see again the themes of critiquing street life and gang culture and violence. But it is also a song which, unlike other similarly themed songs, almost entirely lets go of the boasting elements of the rap song. It admits to the undesirable aspects of life and of being poor (being stuck with ‘beans on toast’). It also attempts to send a strong message to other rappers not to glamorise a life that he expresses as being painful and frightening. Another theme this song more explicitly engages with is the rapper’s treatment by the police and the fear and hatred he has for the police. And finally, without expressing what is beyond it, the rapper expresses the desire for the ‘hood not to define him, not to be his ‘end’; he expresses his want for a future which is not a continuation of his past.

The Truth

*I'm just tryn'a live freely, no more beans on toast, eatin' lobster and sushi
But how am I gonna do that if a ain't got the queen B?
So god tell me am I being ambitious or greedy
...They keep tellin' me, 'Flames you need to analyse your life'
Coz do you really think there's gangsters up in paradise?
They wonder why you hate the pigs
Coz I remember when I was a kid and my house kept gettin' raided
Why for police have I got hatred?
Coz I remember Sims on his blower tellin' me the screws are racist
I was the youngest in the crew, dying to prove I was a man
But seeing my close boy die was never part of the plan
...I ain't tryn'a pretend, I ain't tryn'a let the 'hood be my end
When you're talkin' all this trash talk that's not really what you representin'
Tellin' you; don't glamorise the 'hood dawg
Coz all it is pain and a lot of scars
And just because you had bad past, don't let that shit shape you into who you are*

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nar5DsW28BE

Figure 31: ‘The Truth’ song lyrics

The message that comes out in ‘The Truth’ is one of both regret and caution. But it, like the other songs above, tussles with the tension between a desire for change – wanting to not be exposed to youth violence, death, police, prison, gangs, drugs, hyper-masculinity, and so on – and the seeming impossibility of that change happening. Indeed, in each of the above songs, the nature of how change might actually happen seems to be too invisible/unknowable to be expressed by the rapper. ‘The Truth’ taps into this when the rapper questions whether the desire for ‘lobster and sushi’ (to replace beans on toast) is ‘ambitious’ or ‘greedy’. In a sense, I would argue this is about the questioning of whether the different future (of riches and luxury) he desires is one in which his ambitions are fulfilled, or whether it is more crudely about his own greed being fulfilled. This is important because it feeds into the wider issue rappers confront of trying to imagine alternatives to street life which are not necessarily simply linked to having more money. What these different songs perhaps usefully do is reveal that the lack of/desire for money is only part of their story, other things like being scared of living in their area, of losing friends to knife and gun violence, of being mistreated by the police, and being subject to racism, are also things which need to be changed. In this sense, there is arguably a stronger sense of what these rappers do not want and perhaps a weaker sense of them being able to make sense of, or envisage, a different reality. This is why I present this dispersed selection of songs as perhaps little more than small seeds of hope and resistance; they are the ideas and desires for change but they require more action in order to emerge into anything more substantial, recognisable, understandable, and effective. Nonetheless, I would argue that these songs do represent a space of hope and resistance, but at the same time they also illustrate the sheer difficulty of engaging with, and even simply imagining, difference from within certain spheres of the urban black youth experience. I now, finally, turn my attention to the making of two films in Birmingham *I Day* – a fictional hip hop musical about gangs in Birmingham – and *One Mile Away* – a documentary film about an

attempt to resolve gang rivalry in Birmingham – both of which were directed by Penny Woolcock, and which I argue include moments of music being used as a tool of resistance.

Creativity, Experiments, and a Movement

In a way the film *I Day* and the events that have followed in its wake since its release in 2009 seem to me to be a fitting place to end the discussion not only in this chapter, but across the three empirical chapters in the thesis. This is because *I Day* was very much one of the key starting points for my research in Birmingham. When I began my research, the first Birmingham rap musician I met and interviewed was Urban Monk, who was the music composer for *I Day* – the all important soundtrack for the film was recorded and produced by Urban Monk in his Hockley studio, “The Beat Oven”. When I first met Urban Monk in 2010 it was not long after *I Day* had been released. It was, however, a time of very mixed emotions for him and everyone else involved in the film because *I Day* was banned on release from every cinema in Birmingham and the West Midlands.

I Day is a ‘hip hop musical’ about a day in the life of a Birmingham gang member. It is a fictional story about the everyday lives of black Birmingham gangs told in a mixture of rapping and film narrative – the spoken and acted parts are periodically interspersed with rap songs connected to the narrative. *I Day* was ‘street cast’; the cast of actors in the film were mostly local gang affiliated young black men and women with limited or no acting experience. The actors were in effect playing versions of themselves and the people around them. In addition, because the film was going to use rap music as a central motif for telling and developing the story, musical skill was one of the central requirements of the actors involved. The film was as much about rap music as it is about gangs.

Just prior to the release of *I Day* in November 2009 a police officer from the West Midlands Police approached at least one cinema in central Birmingham and advised the manager that if

they screened the film that it would result in gang violence in their cinema. In the short period between this and the release date, every cinema in Birmingham and the surrounding areas decided not to screen. The banning of *I Day* should be understood in the context of the discussion in the previous chapter. That is, the ban from local cinemas was, at least in part, about the film representing the threat of urban gangs, violence, and otherness, and about the prevention of a transgression of the urban ‘other’ into the normalised city. Here, however, I do not want to focus directly on the question of why *I Day* was banned, but rather on the processes and experiences which fed into the film’s making and the events which have occurred in its wake, including the making of *One Mile Away*, aspects of which I argue involve experiments with using music as a tool and space of resistance.

When the film’s director Penny Woolcock³³ began the production of *I Day* and decided to film it in Birmingham she started the research process in the Lozells (B19) area of Birmingham. Whilst trying to develop the film, however, she struggled to gain the trust of enough knowledgeable people (i.e. local gang members) to continue the production. As a result, Penny cast her net further afield and, in her words ‘crossed over the front line’, to meet gang members in Handsworth (B21). It was in Handsworth that she was able to gain the trust of enough people to begin making the film. Because of this shift in location it meant that the majority of actors and contributors to the film came from Handsworth. This, in turn, meant that it was too dangerous, due to the postcode rivalries, to engage other young people from areas of Birmingham such as Lozells or Aston in the film. Consequently *I Day* was cast and

³³ *I Day* was written, directed, and produced by Penny Woolcock, who had previously directed a number of award-winning fictional and documentary films. Penny’s continually growing passion for the issues (gang violence and black urban deprivation) that she addressed in *I Day* are part of the reason why her films and the events around them have arguably become sites of resistance. Penny’s passion for exploring and making sense of the urban black experience did not stop at the making of *I Day*. In 2010 Penny began making a documentary film, eventually titled *One Mile Away*, about the story of two gang members in Birmingham attempting to resolve the postcode wars. Again, like *I Day*, rap music was a central element in the *One Mile Away* story (released in 2013). Penny Woolcock’s biography can be seen at <http://www.curtisbrown.co.uk/penny-woolcock/>

filmed entirely in Handsworth. Despite this, Penny managed to personally stay in contact with some of the people she had met in Lozells during her initial research period, and in 2010, one of the gang members from the Lozells side, Shabba, contacted Penny and asked her if she could help with and document an attempt to bring about a truce between the gangs in Birmingham. Penny agreed and this became the subject of the documentary film *One Mile Away*, which again used a mixture of rap music and documentary to tell its story.

Gibson-Graham describe the technique of ‘creativity’ as ‘bringing things together from different domains to spawn something new’. This is a helpful theoretical approach through which to understand the films *I Day* and *One Mile Away*; both involve the bringing together of things from different domains – i.e. Penny Woolcock, Birmingham’s urban gangs, street life, film-making, rap music, and black urban experience – which has spawned something new – a multifaceted and multidirectional movement towards changing and providing an alternative to gang violence and deprivation in Birmingham.

I Day began as an experiment in film-making and as an opportunity for rappers and gang members in Birmingham to engage in a productive and creative practice. The film’s release and subsequent ban meant that it mutated into a space of controversy and tension but also a catalyst for debate and thinking about struggles and possibilities, especially for those who had been involved in the film in different ways. As *I Day* itself faded into the history, as it were, what didn’t fade and what in fact grew and found new opportunities were the relationships and new subject positions that the making of *I Day* had brought about. The film enabled many of the actors, whose identities prior to the film were tied to the streets, to inhabit new identities.

Thus, one of *I Day*’s most significant legacies was a new set of relationships. Of particular prominence was the relationship between Penny Woolcock (the director) and the leading actor

in *I Day*, Dylan Duffus. The strength of the relationship between Penny and Dylan (a young black man, rapper, and ex-gang member from the Handsworth, B21 area of Birmingham) was recognised by a gang member and rapper named Shabba from the rival area of Lozells, B19 who asked Penny to help her confront and even attempt to resolve gang rivalries in Birmingham. This process started with a meeting between Shabba and Dylan, a significant event in itself due to the rival gang loyalties of the two. The relationships which emerged from *I Day* have thus, in turn, become a new space of experimentation and possibility. *I Day* had spawned a new endeavour which became the documentary *One Mile Away*. Like *I Day*, the *One Mile Away* documentary would use music as a central tool for telling the story and for actually involving and giving a voice to the gang members which Shabba, Dylan, and Penny were reaching out to.

An example of where music became crucial to the process of trying to resolve the gang tensions involves what Penny described as a pivotal moment in that process. Asked about whether she and the other people involved ever thought they made a breakthrough in resolving gang tensions, Penny described an occasion when a very high-ranking gang member called Nuggz agreed to be involved in the process and in the film itself.³⁴ His involvement in the film however was entirely musical, it was through music that he appeared in the film, it was how he was given a voice, and was perhaps the only voice he could use. Music was a tool for making a connection with someone whose involvement represented a key moment of progress towards the possibility that the rivalry between the gangs in Birmingham could be resolved.

³⁴ To provide a sense of how hard to reach and how serious Nuggz' involvement in gang crime and violence is he has since been sentenced to 39 years in prison for firing at a police helicopter during the 2011 summer riots.

The *One Mile Away* process became about enlarging the pool of relationships between people in Birmingham who could connect both with each other and into the struggle against gang violence. When *One Mile Away* was released it did not attract the controversy that *I Day* did, but it did become a provocative and powerful space of thought about what is happening in Birmingham because it revealed parts of an otherwise invisible city. But more than this, following the release, the key actors in the resolution process have continued to struggle and fight to alleviate, and provide alternatives to, gang violence and rivalry in Birmingham. A number of the now ex-rival gang members are working together within a social enterprise that they setup under the name *One Mile Away* which uses the film as an educational tool within an educational program they have developed. Within the *One Mile Away* team, different individuals have been inspired by the film (and by *I Day*) to change their own lives and to seek change in their local areas and beyond.

In sum, then, what began as Penny Woolcock's experiment in using film-making, rap music, and fiction to examine and uncover the urban underworld in Birmingham has arguably become an active and effective cultural and political movement to change the urban underworld. I'm not arguing that this is a story simply or only about music, but music has been a crucial part of the picture in the making of the *I Day* and *One Mile Away* films. Moreover, what is interesting is not the argument that music was the central driving force or a magic bullet; it is that music played both central and peripheral roles in all kinds of moments and processes which have shaped this movement for change in Birmingham. In the first place, when Penny was developing *I Day*, music was a central feature of the process. Very few of the people who ended up playing the main roles in the film had any acting experience; instead they were rap musicians with skills and talents in musical performance. In addition, music was also the central narrative tool in *I Day*. But, not only was music key to how the story was eventually told on screen, but it was crucial in telling and making sense of the story of black

youth and urban life in the development stages of the film. As explored in Chapter Five, rap is so much a part of street life, that there is, in a sense, no way to voice its narrative without rap – and this point was acknowledged in the shaping of *I Day*. As Penny Woolcock herself explained following the release of *I Day*:

“I thought about it being a musical as soon as I decided to make it a fiction. I walk past groups of boys in the street rapping to beats on their mobile phones all the time. Hip hop and grime are an authentic expression of street life. It’s the way people tell their stories – it gives a voice to people who don’t have one. I love the rawness and the energy of it and I wanted to understand it better.”

(Penny Woolcock, 2009)

In the process which followed the release of *I Day*, rap music has oscillated between more central and peripheral positions. Moreover, the role and place of music also changed. For example, just looking at the films themselves, music plays a role in both, but the role of the music changes. In *I Day* music is portrayed/used as tool of confrontation and territorialism. In contrast, in *One Mile Away* rap music is used as a tool for expressing a struggle and a message of hope and change, just as in the rap songs explored above. This shift in the use of music is also mirrored in some of the individual rappers and ex-gang members who became involved in the *One Mile Away* process and film. Zimbo, a rapper and gang member who appears in *One Mile Away* is an especially telling example of this. Zimbo is a rapper affiliated to the B6 postcode and is arguably the most well-known gangster rapper in Birmingham in the past decade. He became involved in the film towards the end of the production and was unexpectedly struck by the force of the *One Mile Away* movement. Zimbo became more involved with the film and grew closer to the different individuals involved to the point that he became a key member in founding the One Mile Away Social Enterprise. At the same time, Zimbo is still a rap musician and his changing life from an active gang member to an

educator and community activist is reflected in his music, which in turn is one of his own personal tools for sharing the message of *One Mile Away*.

What the examples of *I Day* and *One Mile Away* reveal is that resistance and change is possible through people working to proliferate possibilities. Both films involve individuals from different walks of life, as it were, coming together to make opportunities for something new to happen. And, in this case, rap music was a key resource in enabling the proliferation of opportunities and moments of change which have happened.

CONCLUSION

I appreciate that this chapter could be seen to have taken a somewhat convoluted route through the topic of music and resistance but there is a good reason for this; resistance, as I discussed in the introduction to this chapter rarely exists in the form of a united marching army in the contemporary political landscape. It is often instead a disparate and fragile thing. Indeed, current understandings of music and resistance are limited within the geographies of music literature and these case studies move forward our understanding of music and resistance not only in terms of the empirical material but in the analysis and interpretation this data through the theoretical approach of Gibson-Graham.

The disconnects that exist between the three examples I explored here reflect a material disconnect on-the-ground in Birmingham's musicscape which, as I demonstrated in both Chapters Four and Five, is continually being carved into normalised territories wherein politically purposeful transgressions between those territories are difficult to achieve. But, to some extent, that is what each of the examples in this chapter has done; they have attempted to de-territorialise the musicscape; to refuse to practice music only in relation to the territories prescribed by dominant powers in the city. Mark Sampson, through both BMN and Iron Man

Records, has carved out new and open territories which he has sustained for over a decade despite the considerable pressures he faces to abandon those spaces. At the very least, Soweto Kinch, through the Flyover Show, transformed how a particular space was understood, imagined, acted in, and he used music as his tool for doing that. But more than this, the map of Birmingham's musicscape is altered because of the Flyover Show. There is the possibility that the presumption about where art belongs has been eroded just a little further by people seeing music being performed and enjoyed under a flyover in a 'rough' part of the city.

And finally, the rappers and the people involved in the making of *I Day* and *One Mile Away*, through their actions and music they have shifted the terrain of rap music's place in Birmingham, how much by it is difficult to know. As I have shown, rap music is a complex space in the musicscape; rap is *the* cultural symbol of Birmingham's black youth underworld and localised gang culture. Rap has itself become a threat, a dangerous space to be in, and it is therefore playing a key role in shaping the marginalisation of so many young people in Birmingham. But despite this and the fact that rap is often a vehicle to the margins, many young people are holding on to it and trying to find new territories on that same vehicle. They are using rap to confront their struggles and to find ways of possibly changing their lives and their situation.

This chapter has not been about 'music the hero' or about music as some kind of previously unexplored tool for challenging the power relations which shape and produce our uneven world. It has been about the utterly complex realities of how music plays in and out of attempts to create difference in Birmingham. The three examples which I viewed through the lenses of 'ontological reframing', 'rereading', and 'creativity' have nonetheless revealed insights in to music's real and potential relationship with a politics of resistance.

7.

CONCLUSION

INTRODUCTION

The argument I developed in this thesis is that music plays multiple significant roles in shaping and producing uneven urban geographies. I did so, via a focus on three specific processes: 1) music and the normalisation of urban space; 2) music and urban marginalisation; and 3) music and geographies of resistance. The first set of findings I presented in the thesis – in Chapter Four – concerned the instrumentalisation of music by powerful and dominant actors in the city to shape urban space in ways that reify their dominance. Therein I examined the place of music in urban cultural policy in Birmingham. I argued that music is being used by public bodies in the city to normalise both the material and imagined place of music in the city.

The second set of findings I presented in the thesis – in Chapter Five – concerned the ways in which music threatens the urban norm and how, in turn, those music cultures which are perceived as threatening are subjected to exclusion. The findings in Chapter Five also concerned the roles that music plays within marginal urban geographies and in spaces of exclusion. To explore marginalisation, I examined the place of rap music in Birmingham. My research has revealed key aspects about the interrelationship between rap and urban violence and the exclusion of rap from Birmingham's live musicscape. And beyond this, I provided new insights into the capacity for marginalised black youths to use rap music to both negotiate and to territorialise geographies of violence in the city.

The third set of findings I presented in the thesis – in Chapter Six - concerned the use of music in struggles and forms of resistance against hegemonic power relations and the production of uneven urban geographies. To explore resistance, I examined the place of music in three distinct contexts of resistance in Birmingham, and in each case I have shed new light on the different roles that music can play in shaping effective struggles against, and alternatives to, oppressive power relations. More than this, the findings in Chapter Six provide a set of detailed insights into how different types and different spaces of resistance can use music in different ways, especially, in terms of 1) creating open spaces of dialogue and idea/knowledge sharing among music practitioners in Birmingham, 2) using music to challenge the presumptions that are made about the meaning of different urban spaces and urban cultures, and 3) using music as a platform to create new and alternative relationships which challenge the conventional socio-spatial connections we are expected to make.

These three aspects of my research all contribute both to my overall argument and to the wider geographies of music field in which this research sits. In this chapter, then, I explore in more detail some of the key findings from the research and reflect on the research process itself. I begin, however, by thinking about what this research has brought together and how the different key empirical and theoretical themes have shaped the development of the thesis.

WHAT THIS RESEARCH HAS BROUGHT TOGETHER

It is possible to understand this thesis in terms of four things that it brings together, these are:

- 1) Understanding the place of music
- 2) Urban geography
- 3) Anti-essentialist cultural politics
- 4) The analytical scheme of normalisation, marginalisation, and resistance

Here, I want reflect on the thesis by briefly discussing these four things to think about how they have emerged from and defined the research process. Following which I will summarise the key findings of the research in relation to the three empirical chapters and finally look ahead to where this research might take its next steps.

1. Understanding the place of music

What is meant by the phrase, ‘the place of music’? For me it captures not something which is simply geographical, but rather something wider about how music becomes part of our lives – socially, geographically, and historically. My interest in this topic stems to a large extent from music’s place in my own life; I am a musician, I listen to music on a daily basis, and I sometimes go to musical performances (I love music). Of course, this more typical description of music’s place in my own life can be almost infinitely added to if I consider the massively complex musical-social network which I connect into, from where my guitar was made, through to being accountable to the Criminal Justice Act (1994) which prevents me from organising open air raves, and from singing hymns in church as child, through to the biological role of music in a human evolution.

To be sure, then, music unquestionably has a place in our lives, but what place it has varies, and it can vary dramatically even within a relatively small space such a single city. It only requires a relatively superficial look at music in society to see that it has so many different places; you might be on a bus and hear music being played on someone’s phone; you might read in the news about the problems with illegal music downloads; you might hear music at start of football games when the players sing their national anthems; you might be kept up at night by a neighbour’s music. Of course, this point that music has all these different potential places in society might seem obvious, but my argument in this thesis has been that the implications of this are much less obvious but nonetheless are often very significant.

The place of music in our lives shapes our lives in small and sometimes big ways. Despite this, however, as I discussed in Chapter Two, there is a sometimes reluctance to take music seriously. This is because so often the place of music in our lives is shaped by its ability to entertain us; music is purposefully sought out as something which is unserious. Hence, there is a degree of confusion when we ask music to actually tell us something serious about the world. But the point is that even when music's place is to entertain, it does not mean it is apolitical or socially inconsequential. Even in the sphere of musical entertainment, important questions about: what counts as entertainment; where music entertainment can take place; or who belongs in those places, are of considerable political and geographical significance. It is not insignificant, for example, that someone may feel out of place in a musical space because of the colour of their skin, or because of where they live, or because of their cultural practices. *The place of music is never passive, it is never meaningless, or without implication.* And this has, in a sense, been the underlying rationale for this research and indeed the first thing which this research has brought to the fore. It has been driven by an understanding that the place of music is significant, and, has attempted to try to understand what significance music has in the specific context of Birmingham.

2. Urban geography

If, then, I am interested in the significance of music, I see music's greatest significance in the contemporary urban environment. I say this because cities are the most significant concentrations of and manifestations of power in human history. Cities accentuate relationships and amplify the implications of power. Cities are constructed as a series of territories – spaces of difference and sameness. But in order to make territories, power needs tools; it needs things which can make sense of a space as a bounded territory; it needs things to make sense of what a space means and who or what belongs in that space. My argument is

that music can and does play the role of that tool. The different territories which make up our cities are always partly constructed through the presence (or absence) of music.

Some of the uses of music to construct territories are perhaps more obvious. Take for example, Broad Street in Birmingham, a territory of the night-time entertainment industry. Music enables that territory. It gives meaning to the space, it shapes expectations, it invites and it excludes. Of course, in this thesis I have also tried to argue that music's presence and power does not have to be as explicit as somewhere like Broad Street. The whole city is partly shaped by music – shopping centres, our homes, our Television schedules, our commutes, our Christmases – this urban matrix makes sense and takes its meaning, in part, from music's presences and its absences, however subtle they may be.

Without music our cities would arguably not exist as they currently do. Cities are what make contemporary powers so dominant, but the city is useful for power only because it can be divided in particular ways; divided in ways which reify power's domain position. My argument is that music is one of the tools which power uses to hold urban boundaries and divisions in place and to make them effective in the everyday life of the city. This is why this research was set in Birmingham and why it is interested in the place of music in the city.

3. Anti-essentialist cultural politics

If music and the city are what this thesis has focused on in terms of the empirical research, then anti-essentialism has been the underlying theoretical framework and political compass in the research process. It has been the filter through which each idea and bit of data has passed. Anti-essentialism and closely related ideas in post-structuralism, in the simplest sense is about refusing to be 'seduced by what seems essential' (Rose, 2002:397). Essentialisation is understood as a reductive act, an act of power to remove difference so that the meanings of things (texts) reflect the interests of those in power. Different essentialist ideologies present

and make sense of the world in different ways. For example, in patriarchy, what it means to be a man or a woman is made sense of in terms of male dominance; in capitalism, what it means to have value or freedom is made sense of in terms of the accumulation of wealth; and in racism; what it means to be white or black is made sense of in terms of dominance of people with white skin. Essentialised meanings are power's truths; whereby the meanings of things are made to appear essential, natural, and uncontested. Moreover, fixity and reduction are always about the creation of the impossible – the impossibility of women as powerful; the impossibility of freedom as uncompetitive; the impossibility of black people as equal.

Anti-essentialism, then, is about saying that all social truths are contestable, that they are not natural or fixed, or transcendent, but that they are immanent and open to change; and that change begins when these truths are contested, when they are refused, and un-presumed. Anti-essentialism, and post-structuralism, is about creating messiness where power has removed it. It is about reinserting the histories, geographies, and socialities which have been removed by reductionist power relations. It is about wanting see and hear what power has hidden. And it is this anti-essentialist approach, this ontology, which has been at the heart of my enquiry into music and the city.

4. The analytical scheme of normalisation, marginalisation, and resistance

In a sense, if the thesis has been about bringing the place of music, urban geography, and anti-essentialist cultural politics together, then the analytical scheme of normalisation, marginalisation, and resistance has been the mechanism which I have used to do this.

Moreover, in a very practical sense the themes of normalisation, marginalisation, and resistance can be understood as the coordinates I have used for understanding, what I would call, the flow of Birmingham's musicscape. The processes of normalisation, marginalisation, and resistance are continually taking place within Birmingham; they are the forces which take

the city in different directions; they give shape to the city. *Normalisation*, a reductive force of hegemonic power, shapes the city by crushing difference to create channels of normality. *Marginalisation* is the other side of the coin of normalisation, as it were; it is the difference which power removes and hides. Nonetheless, marginality has its place in the city – spaces of excess and extremes on the periphery of urban life. And finally, as normalisation and marginalisation flow in opposite directions, *resistance* attempts to re-direct the flow and rhythm of the city; it pushes against the flows both of normalisation and of marginalisation to carve out new territories, new flows, and new channels.

In essence, the three themes of normalisation, marginalisation, and resistance are my way of dealing with music and the city through an anti-essentialist lens. On the one hand, the three themes are used in the thesis to account for the multiplicity of music's places in Birmingham; they provide the space for music to be different things at different times. On the other hand, the three themes account for the contestability of the city. They allow the analysis to recognise music's dual role in essentialising and fixing the city, and in decentering the city.

The bringing together of these four elements – the place of music, urban geography, anti-essentialism, and an analytical structure of normalisation, marginalisation, and resistance – are part of what make this thesis both original and valuable. But, it is of course the findings in the research which make this thesis a genuinely a novel and a significant contribution to the geographies of music field. And it is to a discussion of the key findings that I now turn my attention.

KEY FINDINGS

Here I will discuss the key findings from the research in relation to the three empirical chapters in the thesis, Chapters Four, Five, and Six, each of which explored one of the three key research themes.

Music and Normalisation

I began in Chapter Five by examining the tensions within the local musicscape brought about by what many of the people I spoke with called ‘tick-box’ cultural policy. This refers to the way in which cultural policy implementation is aligned to the agenda’s of different powerful public bodies in Birmingham (and beyond). With regards to the issue of ‘tick-box’ cultural policy, my findings were clear, there is an deep seated and potentially growing mistrust in the ability of public bodies in Birmingham to relate cultural policy to desires and knowledge of local music practitioners. This distance, or cleavage, is for many people seen as having a serious and significant impact on the quality of artistic output in the city. In some cases, local music practitioners argued that the practices of public bodies such as BCC are actively making it difficult to musicians to pursue and sustain their desired musical practices.

Following my discussion of how local music practitioners perceive the impact of cultural policy on the musicscape, I examined in more detail the kinds of discourses and rhetoric which feed into current urban cultural policy in Birmingham. My focus was on the particular discourses around the notion of ‘creativity’. In a sense the purpose of the discussion was to disrupt and decentre the presumptions that are made within cultural policy about what counts as ‘creativity’. Moreover, I was especially interested in interrogating how the geographies of creativity have been shaped by essentialist rhetoric. Within the discussion I wanted reinsert some of the mess (the difference) which is covered up and hidden by a rhetorical veneer of ‘creativity’. As much as public bodies in Birmingham attempt to represent spaces in the city

such as Digbeth as creative, the reality can often tell a different story. Myths about Digbeth as an ‘organically grown’ space of urban creativity become undone when we consider the fact that so called ‘creative’ spaces and business in Digbeth have been strategically subsidised by public money in Birmingham in order to achieve key targets in cultural policy strategies. My argument, then, was that Birmingham’s cultural, creative, and musical geographies are being intervenient in and normalised by powerful public bodies and in relation to essentialised notions of what counts as creativity.

Finally, in Chapter Four, I discuss my findings with regards to the place of live music in producing normalised urban and cultural geographies. The focus of the discussion is on what I term the production of Birmingham as a band-centric musicscape. My findings addressed the question of who is entitled to what Tricia Rose calls the ‘public stage’ (1994:100). This entitlement to the public stage matters because, Rose and others argue that access to the public stage is about making sense of who the city belongs to – the city belongs to those groups in society who are represented in the performances and sounds that are put centre stage. I draw on the example of the Birmingham’s annual music festival, ArtsFest, and show that for the past six years, the headline act at the festival has been a white guitar band. My argument is that there is a presumption about this entitlement of white bands to epitomise what kind of music is valued in the city.

To be clear, the findings in Chapter Four about the relationship between music and the normalisation of urban space cannot necessarily be understood in isolation, they make sense only really in relation to the findings presented in Chapter Five, which is concerned with the questions of what is not included in normal spaces, and where difference is removed in the process of normalisation.

Music and Marginalisation

As I said above marginalisation is like the flip side of the normalisation coin. It is about abnormality in the city; it is about the difference which power has no place for in the normal city. When these differences return they are unwelcome, and they are seen as transgressive. In Chapter Five, I explored these issues in relation to the marginalisation of rap music. I explored rap music's transgressions into, and exclusion from, the normal city, as well as rap music's place in the shaping margins.

Like some of the exceptional research that has been done on rap music (see especially Rose, 1994; Forman, 2000; and Krims, 2007), my own research revealed rap music to not only be a highly complex cultural space, but also one which is extremely significant in terms of the urban black experience. My voyage through the difficult terrain of rap music in Birmingham began in Chapter Five with an examination of the period of rap music's history in Birmingham from the early 2000s to the present day. The story begins with the eruption of the garage music scene (a British style of rap music). As the garage scene developed however, its connections into Birmingham's gang culture began to increasingly surface at garage music events and on multiple occasions garage events turned into the sites of gang violence. I examined some of the different social, spatial, and emotional reasons why this happened, before exploring what kinds of responses the violence received.

The key finding in the first section of Chapter Five concerns the role that the space of the nightclub has come to play in shaping how the threat rap music and gang violence is perceived in Birmingham. I think about the nightclub in two ways. First I explore the nightclub as somewhere that rap music and street gang culture meet. I examine why the nightclub can become a violent space when these two things meet. Crucial to this was the rap music itself and the effect that the music has on the emotions of audiences at rap events –

bring about feelings of anger and aggression, which in turn resulted in incidents of violence. Related to this, I also explored the discursive construction of the nightclub (and the rap event) as a meeting place, or gateway, between the normal city and the urban 'other'. Repeated incidents of gang related violence in clubs have been widely reported in the local media, and as such the nightclub has, I found, become a key spatial focus in terms of shaping how the threat of gangs is perceived. In particular, a paradigm has emerged in which the perceived solution to gang violence is to prevent gangs accessing the city's nightclubs. Rather than wanting to solve gang issues as such, there has been a strong focus on preventing the transgression of gangs into the normal city, and the nightclub is seen as a key site of transgression. Hence, rap music has over the course of the past decade been subject to exclusion from the city's mainstream live musicscape. Rap music does not have a normal place in the normal city.

The second aspect of the analysis in Chapter Five was to explore where rap music goes and what happens to rap in Birmingham when it no longer has a place in the mainstream live musicscape. The research was clear on this; rap music finds its own place in the marginal city. I argue that rap music is used by young black people to both negotiate and to reclaim the marginal city. First, I examine how rap music is used by young black people in Birmingham as musical source for conditioning their emotions as a way of defending against the presence of violence in their everyday lives. Second I examine how rap music is also used by young people to territorialise the spaces around them; how rap is used to reclaim the margins as their own. Moreover, I explored how rap music is used to redefine and reshape the meaning of urban space. For example, I examine how rap songs are used as means to claim particular gang territories within the city.

On the one hand, in chapter five, I revealed how rap music has become a musico-cultural symbol of urban otherness and deviance and its connections with gang culture have played a

key role in the marginalisation of the groups in Birmingham – especially young black men – who identify with rap music culture. On the other hand, I also revealed that the power of rap music is not only used to justify the exclusion of black youths in Birmingham, but it is used by those same groups to both negotiate and reclaim the geographies of street and gang violence which they confront, fear, and perpetuate on a daily basis in Birmingham.

Music and Resistance

In a sense, the key finding in Chapter Six was that resistance has a place and is active in Birmingham and that music can play a crucial and formative role in shaping resistive spaces and politics. Moreover, I examined in detail how music can be used in different ways to achieve different forms of political change. I examined in the first part how music can be used to open up new spaces which are not pre-determined and constrained by dominant ideologies. To examine this I explored the activities of the founder of the Birmingham Music Network and the record label Iron Man Records, Mark Sampson. Both these activities which Mark created and led in Birmingham have been purposefully produced in order to challenge the territorialisation of the musicscape by powerful actors operating in the city. Mark used the BMN and Iron Man Records to reclaim and reterritorialise the musicscape in order to create spaces which were not controlled by powerful actors but which could be shaped by individuals and groups within Birmingham's music community and in order to pursue their artistic interests.

The second example of resistance in Birmingham I explored was the creation of the Flyover Show, an annual music festival, by Soweto Kinch. Frustrated by the negative reading that his area of Hockley and the community within it conventionally receives, Soweto used music to find new meanings for those things. The Flyover Show, I argued, is about seeing something in the culture and geography of Birmingham which is present but is not accounted for, which is

invisible, in the normalised view of the city. It abandons the normal script of culture and space and provides a new narrative.

The final example was an important part of the findings in Chapter Six because rappers re-investigated the place of rap in Birmingham in a light of hope. The narrative that I presented in Chapter Five about rap's marginalisation was one which was full of darkness, in chapter six I attempted to find where there are moments of light in the rap musicscape in Birmingham. I used two examples to explore this. The first was about the use of rap by myriad young people in Birmingham to reflect on their struggles and to create a space of hope. But I also found that within those spaces there is also a lot of fear that change is impossible. The second example about the release of the films *I Day* and *One Mile Away*, in a sense, provided an insight into how change can be achieved within Birmingham's gang territories, how peace between young black men can be pursued and achieved.

WHERE NEXT?

Having summarised what the thesis has achieved in terms of its key findings, I briefly want to conclude by reflecting on some of the potential areas of research which could branch off from this research. The first thing I would say is that the triadic schema of analysis I developed and implemented in the thesis, that is, thinking about music and urban geographies through the three key themes of normalisation, marginalisation, and resistance has relevance to myriad other situations and research contexts. There are important opportunities that could be made from taking this approach to research on music and urban geographies in other settings. This, in turn, could be developed in to a more comprehensive map of what is happening to music in the contemporary city. Naturally within such an extension of the approach there would also be opportunities to compare different urban musicscapes.

But taking the basic thematic approach of this research and applying it in different contexts is only the beginning, I feel, of where the research could be developed. At the end of this research as I reflect on the findings I have discussed in the thesis, two further empirical themes stand out in my own thoughts, the first is about *gender*, and the second is about active *intervention*. To some extent, both themes were part of my existing research but they were certainly more peripheral to other themes. Both gender and intervention can be included in the schema of norms, margins, and resistance used in the thesis, but what might that research look like, why is it important, and what questions will it ask?

Music and Gender. There is an extent to which my engagement with the field in this research was male-dominated. Most of the interviews I conducted were with men, in Chapter Six, much of the rap music I discussed was produced by men. This was not necessarily a conscious decision to do so, since the research reflects a reality of the nature of the music industry, which is disproportionately lead by male figures. In this thesis, I have not engaged directly with the question of the place of women in the musicscape, but in continuing this research it is a question I am both interested in and would argue needs serious and considerable attention. The place of women in society more generally is so pressing a question; it is also highly complex and so it is always an area that is in need of new ways to engage with that question. The place of women is a multi-directional question, in that it has geographical, historical, cultural, political, and economic elements to it. And for the same reasons I laid out in Chapter Two for why music should be taken seriously, music can, I believe, also be a useful lens for exploring the geographies of gender. The field of research would perhaps extend beyond a focus on the urban and the local to other sites, but the practice of music can potentially reveal to us important insights into the cultural politics and geographies of gender.

To be sure, I encountered issues of gender in my existing research. In the narrative of rap, for example, the emotionality and corporeality of masculinity were key elements in shaping the role and place of rap music in Birmingham. In Chapter Four, in my discussion of the band-centric musicscape, again the issue of how music is given meaning through the predominant image of white men playing guitars is crucial in thinking about how the musicscape is gendered. Nonetheless, as I said, gender was not an issue that I had the space or remit to explore in more explicit detail, but it does undoubtedly require further attention.

Music in action-research. What I mean by this term is a more practically oriented question of how to use both music and research on music to come up with ways to address the implications of uneven urban geographies. Perhaps the obvious notion that comes to mind is research informing some form of 'policy'. However, I would be wary of framing a kind of praxis oriented research project in such a way. Part of the reason for wanting to avoid the framing of intervention based research as part of 'policy' intervention is that the terrain of policy is one which is already largely territorialised by hegemonic powers. Policy is conventionally operated in a way that conforms to a more narrow and fixed ontology of culture and politics. An alternative to thinking about intervention-as-policy is to explore the practice of, what is widely known as, action-research.

In a sense, it seems very natural to want to find some practical application for research, and that is certainly part of why I have picked up on this theme here. But there is also another reason which is already threaded into the existing thesis. Key to this research has been the work of J.K. Gibson-Graham, in a sense what this thesis has done is taken different parts of Gibson-Graham's approach and applied them in different ways. The elements of Gibson-Graham's work I adopted in the research were quite simply, in Chapters Five and Six, the analysis of the production of socio-spatial centres and margins, and in Chapter Seven the analysis of resistance and alterity. There is another element which I did not engage with -

political praxis, or rather, action-research, the practical engagement with political action as part of the research process. This practical element applies to their work on centre and margins, and resistance. And given the opportunity, action-research is an element I would be interested in developing in my own future research. Music is a very practical thing, it is accessible and effective as a practice, and as I explored in Chapter Seven it can be and is being used to effect political change in different ways and in different contexts. As such, there are many options to do research which more directly asks questions about what does our research tell us would be a useful and effective way to engage with music in ways that will alleviate social problems and strengthen the struggle against the production of uneven urban geographies. Such research could find applications though practically oriented research. It would be about moving towards research which is about being in the field not as a passive observer, but as an active political subject. Such an approach would inevitably involve confronting and dealing with an array of important and thorny questions about positionality, but it would also join a strong group of academic researchers who are also already dealing with such questions. Action-research as a whole is growing in the social sciences, and there is a real need to ensure that action-research focused on music does not find itself on the periphery. Such an outcome would, I argue, inevitably mean a loss of myriad crucial and potentially important insights which could be part of how we attempt to effect change.

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