

1. Intro: Black British music videos from the ends?

It is a bit predictable, perhaps, that this first book-length study on Black British music video opens with one of the most significant moments in recent British music history, Stormzy's 2019 Glastonbury performance. During his headlining performance at The Farm, the grime MC went on stage wearing a stab vest that street artist Banksy had designed and sent to him as a surprise before the set. With a spray-painted, worn-out version of the Union Jack on the vest, Stormzy's performance critically intervened into British performance history, which, prior to Stormzy's concert, had framed British music of national significance almost exclusively as White. Iconic performances that featured the flag on stage range from The Who's Pete Townshend, John Lennon, and David Bowie to Noel and Liam Gallagher, Axl Rose, and Spice Girl Geri Halliwell – and occupying center stages with the Union Jack as garment was a privilege designated for White bodies alone. In 2017, then, Skunk Anansie's singer Skin claimed the Union Jack as a cultural symbol for the Black British community and wore it as an oversized coat during a performance at the Brixton O2 Academy. Wearing the Black Union Jack at Britain's largest music festival and on Glastonbury's Pyramid Stage, however, is an unprecedented claim to this national symbol in Black British music history.

As I am transitioning from Stormzy's performance into this book, I would like to direct attention away from the stab vest and towards another significant part of Stormzy's Glastonbury performance: the stage set. Stormzy performed in front of a multi-level structure resembling a council estate, realized by creative producers Amber Rimell and Chris "Bronski" Jablonksi from Tawbox as well as set designer Misty Buckley. In drawing on a council estate building as inspiration, the creators not only tried to make the Croydon-born MC "feel at home" but "wanted to take south London to the farm" (Hitti n.pag.). The structure on stage was clad with multiple screens and featured sliding doors, allowing to alter its appearance various times and letting the dancers and performers appear and disappear at designated points during the performance. At some point, the structure would take the shape of a prison, for instance, emphasizing, among various other facets, the carceral character disenfranchised estate spaces sometimes assume for its Black and multiethnic communities. While it is, of course, not new that stage sets feature LED screens, lighting, or tools

alike to transform the scenery according to the different tracks or choreography, I would like to draw several questions from Stormzy's performance and the stage set which provide an entryway into this book: What does the stage set, which transformed several times throughout the performance, tell us about the relationship between Black British culture and the representation of inner-city space? Which role does the audiovisual play in reshaping spatial representations within Black British culture today? How does the performance connect to Black British audiovisual texts, and music videos in particular, and how they have engaged with the city?

The idea that the stage set translocates South London to Glastonbury Festival is significant: It showcases that Black British music performances and the audiovisual aesthetics which feed into them seek to de- and re-code spatialities. Stormzy's performance unhinges the codifications of 'urban' cultural forms as strictly bound to the physical space of the inner city. In other words: The city is transported and performed at a farm in Pilton, usually coded quite differently than the inner city, with Stormzy's performance enacting South London through the council estate set elsewhere. What is more, Stormzy's Glastonbury stage set itself extends formal experiments in Black British music video from the 2000s onwards which have increasingly sought to grasp council estates not as static, concrete, and brutalizing but as malleable, unruly, and emancipatory inner-city forms (see chapter 2). As such, the stage set exemplifies that estate spaces – and hegemonic formations of urban space – have been accessed, claimed, and re-configured within and through Black British music video culture. As such, the live performance makes visible how significant music video and audiovisual practices have become for reimagining urban space in contemporary Black British culture.

Within a mediascape becoming increasingly audiovisual and fueled by the internet and online content, it has become challenging to grasp the medium music video today. The contemporary moment is marked by an affluence of audiovisual media and content. Social media and streaming platforms, for instance, are increasingly turning audiovisual: extended audiovisual content is embedded on platforms like Instagram, which was predominantly visual at first and mostly contained pictures, and video loops now accompany tracks on formerly music streaming sites such as Spotify. Because of this audiovisual influx in nearly all spheres of everyday life, scholars in music video studies have been preoccupied with making sense of its evolving forms in recent years. As music video theorist Carol Vernallis notes in her seminal monograph *Unruly Media: Music Video, YouTube, and the New Digital Cinema* (2013), amidst the manifold cross-pollinations between music video and other digital media, we might have to settle with the most precise definition of contemporary music video simply as "a relation of sound and image that we recognize as such" (11). With regard to the medium's evolution and the unruly forms it has produced throughout its history, audiovisual scholar Mathias Bonde Korsgaard observes that "[t]he 'mediality' of music video is flexible and historically unstable, and therefore

any definition of music video as a medium will only partly fit the body of work it is supposed to cover.” (30) In the medium music video, sound-/songscape, image, and lyrics grapple with each other, creating an intricate, multi-layered web of relations between these elements. This key characteristic, if not *the* defining feature of music video, has fascinated scholars ever since the art form has emerged as part of music television and has let them come up with various creative approaches in describing how music videos create meaning. In trying to make sense of the relational copresence of song and image, Vernallis has proposed to conceive of them as “partners”. In her words, we might best “sit with them on the couch and imagine them in couples therapy.” (Vernallis, *Unruly Media* 209) Vernallis borrows this image in her *interpersonal* approach to music video in attesting to the often conflicting, yet productively tense relationships between its different elements.¹ Korsgaard’s relational, audiovisual approach to music video in *Music Video After MTV: Audiovisual Studies, New Media, and Popular Music* (2017) acknowledges as its key characteristic that music video produces meaning not solely through a visualization of music, which had been attributed to the medium in earlier studies, but also through a simultaneous musicalization of vision (65).

Based on these findings on music video’s generic instability and the relationality between music, lyrics, and video, I also connect with this book to Diane Railton and Paul Watson’s more *political* understanding of music video in their book *Music Video and the Politics of Representation* (2011). While music video is thus “a distinct media form with its own patterns of production, codes and conventions of representation, and complex modes of circulation” (10), according to Railton and Watson, it also serves “as a key site through which cultural identities are produced, inscribed and negotiated” (10). Based on these premises, this book makes the argument that Black British music videos have produced audiovisual responses in relation to exclusionary visions of the neoliberal city within their imaginaries. As such, Black British music videos partake in claiming, accessing, and re-configuring inner-city geography, infrastructure, and architecture amidst the on-going neoliberalization of urban space in Britain. This observation also acknowledges that the city has not only been consumed but accessed and shaped audiovisually over the past decades.

The aim of this extended introduction is twofold, and it is roughly divided into two parts: Firstly, I will chart research in the field of grime studies and British music video studies to contour Black British music video as an object of study and a rich, future field of academic inquiry. In so doing, I will also draw on some central developments in terms of production and distribution of digital music video after the turn of the century, which have enabled Black British artists to build substantial creative industries. In so doing, I will also clarify my use of key terminology and address some of the contexts the very term ‘Black British music video’ echoes and evokes. In the second half of this introduction, I will then unpack the various layers of meaning the term ‘infrastructure’ holds for the readings of the Black British mu-

sic video selected for this study and how they engage, I suggest, a shared imaginary of the neoliberal city. As it becomes clear, in as much as Black British music video productions since the 2000s have crucially been shaped by inner-city geographies, neoliberalizing infrastructures, and their built surroundings, the selected music videos themselves find creative recourse in notions of the architectural and infrastructural. Black British music videos intervene into the neoliberal city, which emerges as a shared imaginary and constitutive outside from the music videos in this book, through their audiovisual form and offer to be read jointly as a form of audiovisual infrastructure. In so doing, Black British music videos and the constellations which emerge between the videos do not only represent processes and actions *within* the city but sustain disruptive and alternative configurations of the city through their audiovisual forms.

Charting Black British music video

Over the past two decades, Britain has witnessed a stark increase in music videos produced by Black British musicians, directors, and fellow creative collaborators. The rise of these music video productions since the early 2000s is inextricably tied to grime music crystallizing into a distinct genre roughly around the millennium; music video, as this book attests to, in turn, has strongly impacted on grime culture as well.² Grime's story starts sometime in the mid-1990s, and yet it is far older than that. As both "a sonic document of the post-industrial working-class city" and "a sonic document of black Atlantic life" (James 94), grime music harks back to a fertile Black British sonic history dating to earlier forms of reggae which travelled to the UK with people from the Caribbean in the late 1940s and early 1950s.³ Around four decades later, grime artists would consume reggae and the British varieties of dub in their parent's flats, often, as in the case of grime MC Wiley, listening to their fathers, relatives, and friends jamming and making music together (Wiley 9–10; 39–40). Grime founds upon and borrows from various musical genres, including dub, UK garage, 2-step, jungle, and drum'n'bass (e.g. Charles, "Central" 91–94; Hancox *Inner City* 33–54).⁴ As such, grime also flows with the stream of Black musical forms that make audible the transformative aesthetics of the Black diaspora. When Paul Gilroy wrote in *The Black Atlantic* in 1993 that "[t]here has been no contemporary equivalent to the provocative, hermetic power of dub which supported the radical Ehtiopianism of the seventies or of the anti-assimilationist unintelligibility of bebop in the forties," (100) he could not potentially anticipate the impact that grime would develop from around the turn of the century until today. Dub poet Benjamin Zephaniah sensed the traction grime was about to gain around ten years later: One of the characters in his young-adult novel *Gangsta Rap* (2004) observes that "hip-hop is about to go big in Britain and we want to be at the forefront of this." (107). In Af-

ter Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture? (2004) Gilroy notes, however, that “[g]iven the extent of Britain’s deepening economic and social divisions, it is perhaps surprising that the convivial metropolitan cultures of the country’s young people are still a bulwark against the machinations of racial politics.” (132–33) Since its emergence in the early 2000s, grime has evolved from a very localized musical sub-culture – as it has frequently been called the ‘new punk music’ (Adams, “English Punk” 481) – into a mass-cultural current. In almost twenty years, the genre that was “never supposed to win – let alone last this long” (Patterson n.pag.) has been proclaimed dead and revived, with its post-2010 reincarnations perhaps being even more vocal in articulating political concerns than in the beginning.

Although grime music produced nearly everywhere in the country and even appropriated in other places around the globe today⁵, it shares an intricate relationship to the spaces where it first originated: council housing estates, and East London’s council housing estates in particular – as chapter 2 in this book details more thoroughly. Grime shares a special connection with inner-city spatiality, infrastructure, and architecture. The genre developed out of the spirit to (re)claim space and to revolt against spatial confinements, and it continues to speak up to authorities who have tried to police the scene from the start.⁶ Almost twenty years into its adulthood, grime has spawned various offspring, most notably the now increasingly demonized genre of UK drill⁷, and other, experimental artists regarded in this book, including grime punks Bob Vylan, genre-bending musician Kojey Radical, and trap metal artist Scarlxrd have established their own aesthetic grounds somewhere in grime’s shadows and along the generic streams of Black diasporic music. With the #Grime4Corbyn and #Grime4Corbyn2.0 campaigns launched during the 2017 and 2019 national elections respectively, grime has also assumed political impact in the recent past, arguably mobilizing young voters across the country to vote (Perera 2018). In 2019, then, Britons saw Stormzy win two BRIT awards (beating his friend and part-time collaborator Ed Sheeran to it) and headline the aforementioned Glastonbury Festival. As this short historical account of grime music shows, seven years later there is thus ample need to assess the state of Black music, and music video, in the UK.

Given the relevance of grime, drill, and other emerging genres in the UK, it is not surprising that scholars have started exploring grime and other Black musical forms and scenes in the UK from various directions, adding to the innumerable journalistic accounts which have accompanied grime since its early stages. Joy White’s *Urban Music and Entrepreneurship: Beats, Rhymes and Young People’s Enterprise* (2017) remains the most profound sociological study of local grime music scenes in Britain thus far, preceded by Richard Bramwell’s *UK Hip-Hop, Grime and the City: The Aesthetics and Ethics of London’s Rap Scenes* (2015). Monique Charles explored the relationship between religion and grime in her PhD thesis titled “Hallowed Be Thy Grime? A Musicological and Sociological Genealogy of Grime Music and Its Relation to Black At-

lantic Religious Discourse".⁸ Jeffrey Boakye's *Hold Tight: Black Masculinity, Millennials & the Meaning of Grime* (2017) provides a rich musicology of grime tracks as it seeks to contextualize the songs in short chapters, and in its appendix the book also features essays on diverse related topics such as masculinity and Whiteness in grime. In 2018, Dan Hancox provided yet another substantial engagement with grime in *Inner City Pressure: The Story of Grime*, which emphasized the genre's musical lineages, its relation to London's cityscape as well as how British politics have affected grime and vice versa.⁹ Photographer Olivia Rose and journalist Hattie Collins's *This Is Grime* (2016) features plenty of interviews with grime artists, documenting the scene from the inside. Simon Wheatley's *Don't Call Me Urban* (2011) and Ewen Spencer's photographic volume *Open Mic* (2005) contain visual accounts which capture the emerging grime scene and culture in the early noughties and after, respectively. Lately, grime artists themselves have started to narrate their experiences within the scene, including the autobiographical accounts *Eskiboy* (Wiley, 2017) and *Grime Kids* (DJ Target, 2018) as well as Stormzy and Jude Dawson's co-written *Rise Up: The #Merky Story So Far* (2019). Literary fictions such as Guy Gunaratne's *In Our Mad and Furious City* (2018), Alex Wheatle's *Crongton* trilogy, and Olumide Popoola's *When We Speak of Nothing* (2017), to name but a few, make creative contact with grime, while estate films such as the *Kidulthood* trilogy, *Shank* (2010), and the series *Top Boy* (2011–2013), recently revived by Netflix (2019–) also engage with grime music and culture. Even before these approaches of grime in academia as well as creative writing and filmmaking, there has been an extensive body of work, far too numerous to list at this point, produced on post-2000 Black British music in magazines, websites, and blogs.

While grime music has increasingly been recognized as a pertinent musical genre and artistic scene in the past decades and scholarship on Black British writing and film abounds today, Black British *music video*, the object of study in this book, remains strikingly absent within academia. Apart from a few individual scholarly contributions or music video analyses as part of larger works (Lindner 2014; Bramwell 2015; Woods 2018), snippets in Jeffrey Boakye's *Hold Tight* and despite a growing interest in grime as a *musical* genre, Black British audiovisual culture and music video is still treated as somewhat of a metaphorical undeserving, 'popular' stepchild. Malcolm James's *Sonic Intimacy: Reggae Sound Systems, Jungle Pirate Radio and Grime YouTube Music Videos* (2021), however, is an in-depth account on the mediality and materiality of grime online music videos and how shifts from sound system culture to online content and digital streaming affect the politics and ethics of sound within bass culture. With *Brithop: The Politics of UK Rap in the New Century* (2021), musicologist Justin A. Williams provided a profound monograph as to how British rap music – including examples from grime, Scottish rap, and musical styles from the middle eastern diaspora – and several music videos challenge the imperial nostalgia, 'rapping back' to dominant political discourses. The academic neglect toward contemporary Black British music video culture is surprising given

that music video, as this book shows, has provided an important means for Black musicians, directors, and other creatives in the United Kingdom to articulate political concerns, negotiate cultural affiliations, and explore the formal dimensions of music video and audiovisuality since the early 2000s. This book partakes in filling this research gap as it identifies Black British music video as a valuable, academic field of inquiry. In so doing, this first book-length account contributes to writing a cultural history of Black British music video that, by and large, yet remains to be written – and it does so, perhaps paradoxically at first glance, in reverse. Although “Black diasporic music videos were well established before the advent of YouTube” (James 82), the history of Black British music video *prior* to the turn of the century was difficult to trace for me, mostly due to a lack of archival material.

Over the past three decades, music video studies and audiovisual studies have grown into vital scholarly fields¹⁰, which are, however, as Emily Carson and Justin Smith point out, “dominated by US perspectives, just as popular perceptions of the medium have been shaped by MTV.” (1) This also holds true for research in Black music video, and the ever-growing body of work on US hip hop and R&B music videos, for instance, is far more substantial than it is for *Black British* genres. Caston and Smith note that up to 2017, “nothing has been published on the industry or its contribution to the British creative economy” (1). Detailed and nuanced analyses of British music video, genres, and their attendant economies that complement Caston’s substantial and pioneering work, remain desirable. The lacking scholarship on British music video also results from restricted access to the music video industry (Caston, *British Music Videos* 11–14). To level this scarcity of research on British music video, Caston and colleagues founded the Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project ‘Fifty Years of British Music Video’ in partnership with the British Film Institute (BFI). In 2017, partial outcomes of this research collective were published in a *Music, Sound, and Moving Images (MSMI)* special issue. Caston’s own monograph *British Music Videos, 1966–2016: Genre, Authenticity and Art* (2020) remains the first systemic and book-length account on both British music video industries and British genres of music videos. The book arrived fifty-four years after the first instance of British music video she locates, when bands such as The Kinks provided TV shows “with specific ‘filmed inserts’ which they had shot on location and edited independently” (Caston, *British Music Videos* 4) when they could not perform in person.

Alongside her monograph, Caston has also published a DVD collection of British music videos, *Power to the People: British Music Videos 1966–2016* (2020), featuring more than twenty music videos which, by and large, can be considered Black British. Among these are earlier music videos like Grace Jones’s “I’ve Seen that Face Before (Libertango)” (1981; dir. Jean-Paul Goude), Seal’s “Killer” (1991; dir. Don Searll), and the 1995 music video to Tricky’s “Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos” (dir. Mike Lipscombe). Newer ones include So Solid Crew’s “21 Seconds” (2001; dir. Max & Dania), Dizzee Rascal’s “Sirens” (2007; WIZ, see also my detailed analysis in chapter 2 of

this book), and several music video for/by electronic music artist and choreographer FKA twigs, which is one of the few Black British artists whose work has been considered quite regularly in the field of music video studies and popular music studies (e.g. Barrett 2016; Derbas 2016; Fairclough 2017). While Caston's collection, at least to an extent, acknowledges the presence of Black British music video, the DVD box and this book – a small archive in its own right – also exemplify the need for future archival research and collection-building with respect to the specific history of Black British music video.

The scarcity of material prior to the turn of the century can also be explained with a lack of access to production and distributions channels on the part of Black British artists: Until the early 2000s, Black Britons have been granted comparatively limited visibility within the rather White arena of British music video productions. Caston notes that “[d]uring the 1990s, many Black British artists felt unsupported by the labels, particularly in music video, where labels were not willing to commit budgets to match the high-production-value US R&B videos.” (*British Music Videos* 98) During music video's first, televisual phase, the hierarchies within the music video industry and TV sector prevented many aspiring Black British artists, and especially those from the working class, from partaking in the business. Black British music videos, e.g. by acts like reggae musician Smiley Culture in the 1980s and rap crew London Posse in the early 1990s, would, compared to their White counterparts, only rarely be aired on television channels. For Black British filmmakers musicality mattered in the way they approached filmmaking and many films display a heightened affinity for experimenting with a more closely-knit audiovisuality. Popular films like Horace Ové's *Pressure* (1976) and Isaac Julien's *Young Soul Rebels* (1991) have featured musical film scenes, and more recent films like Noel Clarke and Menhaj Huda's *Kidulthood* (2006) and Mo Ali's *Shank* (2010) have incorporated scenes in a distinct music video aesthetics, e.g. as plot-furthering devices. Much like BBC's *Top of the Pops* and Channel 4/ITV's *The Chart Show* significantly influenced British music video productions prior to MTV's rise as a global entertainment industry (Caston, *British Music Videos* 106–111), the launch of Channel U in 2003 (founded by Darren Platt and later known as Channel AKA) leveled this lack in representation and helped Black British artists to gain heightened visibility and audibility. Culture writer and author Yomi Adegoke describes Channel U as “one of the biggest influences on Britain's current music scene” (n.pag.) and she highlights the importance of Channel U as making Black British working-class culture visible and audible:

Channel U was distinctly black and British in an era when blackness was considered synonymous with the United States. This was not just in its music but its programming; since the media was so lacking in diverse representations of working-class culture, the station provided on all fronts. (n.pag.)

The channel, which aired music videos by still unsigned artists (Caston *British Music Videos*, 111), helped to familiarize a larger British audience with grime artists and other self-made musicians.

With the advent of digital streaming, music video's post-televisual, "second golden age" (Korsgaard 2), which by and large forms the frame of reference for this book, would not go unnoticed and unexplored in Britain. Alongside more affordable equipment, the internet and especially platforms like YouTube enabled Black British creatives to self-produce, publish, and widely circulate their work as the noughties were progressing. When British music video slowly went digital after the turn of the century, the websites SB.TV (founded in 2007 by Jamal Edwards), Link Up TV (2008, Rashid Kasirye and Enea Tanku) and GRM Daily, founded in 2009 as Grime Daily, and their online presence as websites, channels on streaming platforms, and subsequent social media outlets served as vital means for Black British artists to creatively express themselves, circulate their works, and build a growing audience for their music and videos. Inspired by the US website WorldStar HipHop, Grime Daily founders Koby 'Posty' Hagan, Matt 'Sketchy' Thorne, and Pierre Godson-Amamoo, for instance, wanted to create a website which hosted filmed freestyle performances and interviews with artists. Starting off with old rip-offs from grime DVDs, they would soon discover YouTube as a powerful tool for creating and spreading content, and, in its early stages, home-style music videos provided the main content for Grime Daily. The comparatively new competition between privately-owned online platforms like GRM Daily, SB.TV, and Link Up TV helped propel the different cultural outlets to expand their already existing content, including, for instance, behind the scenes footage from music video shootings. The platforms have been an integral part of British grime culture from its early stages onward, today containing rich archives of songs, videos, and journalistic articles related to the scene and other musical genres that have sprung from it.

While audiovisual codifications and conventions from US American hip hop music videos and other genres were, of course, subsequently (re)appropriated in Britain as well, the formats and aesthetics developed for popular programs on online channels have strongly impacted on grime music video culture and they have been adapted in the following as well: As an example, I would like to use GRM Daily's *Daily Duppy* freestyle sessions, which feature MCs and crews rapping in a recording booth. The signature visual style of the *Daily Duppy* videos are visual edits inserted during post-production, which would have the MC's lyrics pop up as a stylized 'font effect' in the videos on GRM Daily's online channels. We see this signature visual style resurfacing, for instance, in Lady Leshurr's Queen Speech series, in which the font effect (perhaps somewhat of a parallel development to contemporary scribble music videos) as audiovisual graffiti claims both the street as a largely male-coded cultural icon as well as the medium music video as a vessel for Black British, and in her case feminist, articulation.¹¹

As this book in many ways covers ground in the study of Black British music video, I also want to clarify my use of terminology. The overarching term I employ to group the audiovisual texts analyzed in this book, *Black British music video*, is a useful one for me as an analytical category but, at the same time, it is a vexed one – and it is rightly so for various reasons. Music videos, perhaps even more so than related audiovisual media like film, emerge from different, closely-knit webs of co-operation between musicians, directors, editors, and other people involved in their production – and questions of authorship tend to diffuse. As such, I do not intend to tie the label too closely to individual actants involved in the making of these music videos, or their positionalities alone, which themselves can be quite wide-ranging. I might also be using the term ‘Black British’ quite differently than the practitioners themselves. Grouping the videos in this book under the term Black British is a suggestion and but one possible approach among various to make sense of these music videos. Instead, what, first and foremost, constitutes the audiovisual texts as *Black British* music videos are their aesthetics, artistic lineages, and political sensibilities – which most often also cannot be restricted to the British Isles but are informed by postcolonial dynamics and diasporic affiliations, e.g. to the Caribbean, the U.S., and the African continent, floating along the circular routes of the Black Atlantic. While the specific ‘Britishness’ of grime music and related Black British genres has been widely pronounced in comparison to US hip hop – and at times, perhaps, exaggerated so that it almost verges on nationalist tones – many of the music videos selected for this book acknowledge and make apparent that they are not bound to the British Isles geographically but are expressive of transcultural, diasporic flows and postcolonial undercurrents.

Although the term *Black British* is not uncontested, I see in it the most value as an analytical category that also speaks to the attendant, more established fields of Black British writing and film. I am guilty of using the signifier ‘British’ in the title of this book as a not-so “unconscious euphemism” for England (Bramwell and Butterworth 2521f.). The title of this book might thus be considered a misnomer because I am focusing primarily on *English* music videos and all music videos in this book actually engage English metropolitan geographies – ranging from London to Manchester, Birmingham, and Walsall. I share Paul Gilroy’s concern that substituting the term ‘English’ for ‘British’ “is a continual reminder not just of English dominance over Scots, Welsh and Irish people, but also that a British state can exist comfortably without the benefit of a unified British culture.” (*Small Acts* 75) The corpus in this book attests to the fact that a weighty amount of music videos is, in fact, produced in England and that the production is not homogenous throughout the UK. Undoubtedly, then, the strategic choice to label the audiovisual texts assembled in this book ‘Black British’ is a political act – and, as Mark U. Stein points out, the categorization of a cultural text is always a political question (Stein 9). Although not all music videos here engage with national concerns specifically, as the ‘British’ in its title may sug-

gest, this study also intends to open the analytical category *Black British music video* for future research. As a White, cis-male, German scholar working in the field, I do not, by any means, intend the term to carry essentialist implications. Analytical categories can only ever be provisional at best, breaking down and recreating continuously. As diaspora scholar Trinh T. Minh-ha reminds us, “despite all our desperate, eternal attempts to separate, contain and mend, categories always leak.” (94) What I hope, then, is that this book will trigger many more engagements, much-needed criticism, and interventions which make visible the histories, traditions, production contexts, and, of course, the audiovisual forms and imaginaries which have emerged across the last decades of Black British music video-making and acknowledges the work that has already been produced across various unruly archives in the blogosphere and elsewhere. The work in this book, then, must surely be complemented by further studies on Black British music videos which also engage, for instance, Scottish or Welsh audiovisual texts.¹² I am thinking of the Scottish rap and pop combo Young Fathers as well as Scottish grime and drill artists Ransom FA and Paque here.

A few further comments on how Blackness and Black Britishness are articulated and negotiated in music and music video today seem warranted. While it has been argued that enunciations of Blackness in the UK have suffused from a unifying political signifier which was posited against White notions of Britishness and national belonging throughout the 1970s and 80s, the music videos in this book show: Blackness (still) matters. I am not disagreeing with James Procter’s observation who notes in this respect that “the late twentieth and early twenty-first century sees a shift away from an oppositional politics polarising ‘black minorities’ and white mainstream culture.” (8) As such, “the difference between inside and outside, black and white, become unstable as the boundary conditions of the black imagined community are recognised as porous and hazy.” (Procter 8) To some extent, grime culture and Black British music video speak to this moment: Although grime tracks and music videos are Black British cultural texts which stand in historical lineage of Black cultural forms, grime culture has been quite inclusive in terms of racial identifications from the start – also because it emerged in working-class environments which are less segregated along racial lines than along class. As such, “grime could have only risen from the convivial multicultural hybrids of the postcolonial cities of the UK, just as hip-hop rose from the specific conditions of the post-‘white flight’ 1970s Bronx.” (Williams 80) Nonetheless, rapper and critic Akala reminds readers in *Natives: Race and Class in the Ruins of Empire* (2018) that “Blackness continues to represent traditions of resistance and rebellion such that even today, when young people in Britain who are not black wish to participate in an oppositional culture they flock to hip hop and grime.” (122) With that said, this book attests to the fact that understandings of Blackness – and Black Britishness – in music and music video are by no means homogenous or conclusive.

Blackness and its tense relationship to questions of national belonging, its multifarious historical trajectories, and the cultural memory of earlier articulations form one core subject Black British music and music videos are grappling with today. This is emphasized by Stormzy's performative claim to national significance and the Black Union Jack in his Glastonbury performance – in which Paul Gilroy's book *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987) and various mash-ups of the British flag reverberate.¹³ One poignant example as to how Blackness is positioned amongst discussions of national belonging in grime music is a skit on Dizzee Rascal's album *Raskit* (2017), in which someone is asked if they know Brexit during an interview. After asking back "Brexit, what's that?," the interviewee pauses for a significant moment. They then confront the interviewer with a seemingly surprising realization: "Oh, you mean Brixton." Interwoven into the album, which tackles inner-city gentrification left and right, the skit not only toys with the seeming ignorance of the interviewed person but inscribes into its imaginary the area of Brixton – a site of both historical struggle and community-building – where diasporic claims to Britishness (in the streets as well as symbolically) have been fought out. In so doing, it elevates Brixton to national importance by comparing it to Brexit. In other words: The skit suggests that Brixton, its continuing gentrification in an ever-neoliberalizing London, and the expulsion of the communities which once thrived in this cultural hub, matters more to the Black British working-class community the album evokes than the seemingly all-encompassing political tremor that Brexit is framed to be. Another interesting example as to how Blackness is negotiated in grime include verses in ENNY's "I Want" (2021; dir. Asher Korner), in which the lyrical I proudly enunciates her Britishness along cultural streams that flow far beyond its geographical borders: "I am lost in the stew / I'm lost in a concept of fixing a brew / Identity crisis for me and my crew / We're black and we're British, and African, too, but so far removed." (0:34–0:42) The lyrics, with the music video fittingly taking place at a diner, posit her cultural identity as a 'stew' and a 'brew', emphasizing its *mélange* and the complexity of the ingredients she has to navigate. Yet, Blackness here is posited not distinctly as *Black* Britishness but alongside Britishness in a non-hierarchical lineage of cultural affiliations which are of equal importance and by no means exclusivist. For the lyrical I, it is no question that she is British in as much as she is Black *and* African – even if she is both spatially and generationally "far removed" from the continent. In his biography *Eskiboy*, grime MC Wiley, on the contrary, muses about a utopian home and of buying, building, and creating a place that might accompany his Black selfhood which London (and England or Britain writ large), according to him, does not afford:

But my home is Nowhere. I've got my properties, I've got my bank cards, and I go where I can't hear anything. I'll buy an island and call it Nowhere. Get some electricity on it, and start flexing. You know why I think that is? Because me and my

people shouldn't be here, we should be back in Africa. And we're not. We're scattered across the earth. (246; emphasis in original)

With Africa marked as a home of no return, Wiley's words carry frustration and disillusionment with the way Black Britons are treated in the country. Wiley is concerned with building a novel place and finds recourse in the nihilism of the fictional Nowhere. Moreover, several published tracks and their music videos prominently pronounce Blackness as their titular core theme: Dave's "Black" (2019; dir. Nathan James Tettey, Edem Wornoo, and Dave) and Pa Salieu's "B***k" (2020; dir. Meeks and Frost)¹⁴ muse on the larger significance of what it means to be Black in the UK and elsewhere. In a 2019 interview with *The Guardian* Dave described how he approached the track:

Me being south London, black, and Nigerian, that's what I'm mainly basing it on. It's a good representation of what I associate with and everything that I think, but I don't think that it's universal for the whole black experience, because there's too many different races and dynamics within the race of black. ... Black is confusing. Where does the line start and stop with what is black and what isn't black? (Sawyer, "Dave" n.pag.)

Dave's "Black" is a multifaceted work and addresses, for instance, historical erasure, cultural appropriation, racism, slavery, and the conditions of Black British communities in the country. Pa Salieu's music video draws on Afrobeat influences and features, among various other characters, a person with albinism who is still acknowledged and validated as part of the Black, transnational community depicted in the music video. Ghetts' "Black Rose" (feat. Kojey Radical, 2018; dir. Netti Hurley) and ENNY's "Peng Black Girls" (feat. Amia Brave, 2020; Otis Dominique) are two examples which speak in solidarity of Black women, with the latter providing a stage for an all-Black and female cast.

Amidst current issues like the treatment of the Windrush generation and impacted by a growing political sensibility among younger generations to call out racist violence fostered by the Black Lives Matter movement, a refined, political sense of Blackness – as well as articulations of Black Britishness – are perhaps becoming more pronounced again than they have been around the turn of the century. In her closing remarks in *Brit(ish): On Race, Identity and Belonging* (2018), journalist and writer Afua Hirsch remarks:

Identities are not becoming less important in our globalised world, they are becoming more important than ever. And Britishness is an identity that is excluding a growing number of people who, like me, should be among its core constituents. (318)

While it is difficult to trace a unifying, political engagement with regards to these questions, Black British music video is one of the cultural domains which most loudly *debate* – from multiple points of departure and within various ideological frameworks – what Blackness means in the UK today and in which these negotiations are placed at the forefront. Connecting to these observations, *Black British Music Video*, as per its main focus, makes visible how the select music videos display an acute awareness of the racializing infrastructures in the twenty-first century British city and negotiate its complex relations to Blackness.

Black British Music Video moves along several disciplinary avenues: Technically, I do not understand myself as a music video scholar in the strictest sense, and this book is perhaps also not the typical book one would expect to read in music video studies. Rather, I came to music video studies through grime, Black British audiovisual culture, and via my training in anglophone literary and cultural studies, post-colonial and diaspora studies as well as media studies. While I acknowledge the intricate relationality of music video, at times my analyses may be more firmly rooted in cultural studies and film studies than they are in musicological analysis or music video studies, respectively. As such, this project makes various connections to music video studies but it is less concerned with detailed inquiries into e.g. the production and marketing contexts and music video industries. This book also does neither follow a generic, nor an auteur approach to music video and it does not seek to sketch individual aesthetics in a director's (or editor's) oeuvre – although the *Gesamtwerk* of 'grime directors' like Kaylum Dennis or directing duo The Rest would surely be worth their own studies. Hopefully, these approaches will receive the attention they deserve in future, related studies. The close readings I undertake in this book found upon an understanding of music videos as cultural texts and I read them through a patchy framework which is informed by music video and audiovisual studies, critical as well as cultural urban studies, Black studies, postcolonial theories, queer and trans* studies, media studies, and deconstructionist approaches. This book then offers readings of select music videos, the representations we find in them, and how they, as this book argues, both thematically and formally work to intervene into hegemonic spatial configurations, responding to oppressive, infrastructural patterns in twenty-first century British urban areas.

Although this book heavily draws on grime, as the genre coincided with and cross-fertilized the rise of (digital) music video as a means of Black British expression post-2000, the tag Black British music video, of course, is not synonymous with grime. Beyond grime, this book also draws on a range of texts which somehow connect to the genre but have found their own creative currents and aesthetics. In so doing, *Black British Music Video* aims to make visible patterns of engaging with the city across several genres and subgenres – including grime, grime punk, and trap metal – and it also references UK drill, jazz (Samm Henshaw) and soul (Pip Millett), neo-soul/trip hop (Greentea Peng), R&B (Jorja Smith) and other genres. Yet,

the porous container that is Black British music video needs to be filled with many more examples from other genres and artistic avenues beyond this book.

As this project was progressing, I realized that as much as it was developing into a book on Black British music video and its tense relations to the neoliberal city, it was also becoming a book whose chapters opened interesting conversations about Black masculinity. As such, the book also provides some insights into how constructions of Black masculinity are affected not only by and woven into the infrastructures of the neoliberal city but also sustained and undercut within Black music/music video culture. I find that music video has provided a medium for artists and directors to converse about the cultural scripts which write certain performances of Black masculinity into the city's fabric and sustain them as legible. As chapter 2 shows, Jorja Smith's "Blue Lights," for instance debates not only hegemonic co-constructions of both estate spaces and Black embodied masculinity but the representational politics of masculinity *within* grime culture, and Dizzee Rascal's art, as well. Kojey Radical's "After Winter" (chapter 5) and Scarlxrd's audio-visual art (chapter 6) approach Black masculinity via different artistic traditions and trajectories. The Black/ened minstrel dandy in Radical's music video strains binary heteronormative logics and the Black half-ghoul viewers¹⁵ encounter in Scarlxrd's art overperforms Black hypermasculinity, positioning Blackness on the brink of collapse and utmost vulnerable. As such, both portrayals express a certain queer potential through which predominant portrayals of masculinity in Black music video culture are debated. With this book, then, I do not intend to mark the genre Black British music video as male. Although I know that this book does not achieve a balanced representation in terms of gender, I tried to include counterpoints to the large array of male texts wherever I felt I could.

Music video as Black audiovisual infrastructure

While this book has much to say about Black British music video as an object of study, in its analyses and close readings it places particular emphasis on how the Black British music videos assembled for this study intervene into the racialized dimensions of inner-city geography, infrastructure, and architecture, and how they produce alternative spatial imaginaries. In so doing, this book also connects to earlier work on Black British music and music scenes like Caspar Melville's *It's A London Thing: How Rare Groove, Acid House and Jungle Remapped the City* (2020), in which he traces how the three titular music scenes carved out new imaginary spaces and worked to remap the exclusionary London the artists encountered. He writes:

Black music scenes in London, because they were black, were subject to extreme forms of spatialised power, and they responded by making new spaces, where new

ideas about how social space could be organised were front and centre – imaginary spaces with real social consequences, the kind that music can take you to. (Melville 4)¹⁶

As Melville has done with his book, *Black British Music Video* contributes to the larger critical project of trying to make sense as to how Black British music, and in the case of this book *music videos* in particular, have grappled with spatialized forms of violence in the city and responded with their own imaginaries through which alternative movements of the city's "moral and political geographies of everyday life" (Melville 3) may proliferate.

From the vast vocabulary in the study of urban phenomena, the metaphor of infrastructure is especially intriguing to me because it can be applied to multiple dimensions of the medium music video: First of all, in a more traditional sense, the Black British music and music video industries and the artistic scenes with their various production and distribution channels can be regarded a cultural infrastructure. Secondly, as I have found, the music videos in this book are *about* architecture and infrastructure, and they do engage with them both in content and form. What is more, *Black British Music Video* also works towards an acknowledgement of how the assembled music videos, their relations and constellations – as an audiovisual infrastructure – spatialize and mobilize the city differently. As such, Black British music videos, both individually and as a genre, I suggest, also provide counterpoints to hegemonic and exclusionary understandings of infrastructure.

In music studies, the term 'infrastructure' has mostly been deployed to describe the various networks, platforms, and channels through which music is being made accessible, distributed, and consumed. On a macrolevel, the aforementioned websites and online channels have served as crucial infrastructures, enabling Black British musicians, directors, and fellow creatives to self-produce and distribute their work. These websites collected, channeled, and curated the scattered fragments of grime music (video) productions online. Over the past decades, these platforms have created an extensive network and turned into a flourishing creative industry and cultural infrastructure. YouTube, GRM Daily, and other websites have helped to establish a wide-ranging network for Black British music video culture to be produced, published, and acted out, connecting creatives off the paths which the predominant industries and major labels provided. Since 2015, The Rated Awards, an award show created by GRM Daily, has provided a platform to recognize artist who were by then not in any way considered by the dominant music award shows. According to cultural sociologists Andy Bennett and Ian Rogers, artistic scenes, like the grime scene, can be approached as infrastructures as well: "the articulation of scenes and collective scene identities relies not merely on live music spaces but on broader infrastructures of scene, both hard and soft, where instances of scene activity unfold" (105).¹⁷ As such, a "cohesive, dynamic and emotionally embedded

sense of scene” is mapped “onto the physical contours of urban setting.” (Bennett and Rogers 105). Digital music video culture and streaming sites – which can be viewed as alterations and extensions perhaps of the earlier, analogous pirate radio sessions – have provided means for Black British creatives to produce cultural networks and infrastructures on a larger scale which resist spatial restraints and map an alternative and largely digitally-run network onto the neoliberalizing urban cityscape.

With a twist on trans* theorist Jack Halberstam’s question “[w]hat might the abstract and architectural offer in terms of transgender representation” (Halberstam, “Unbuilding” n.pag.) on the gendered materiality of architecture in his essay “Unbuilding Gender”, *Black British Music Video* is my attempt to ask ‘what has the abstract and infrastructural to offer in terms of Black British representation? Within Black British music video, which was greatly influenced by the spatiality and materiality of its production, I see, for one, from the early 2000s onward a strong preoccupation with the architectural and infrastructural as a representational vocabulary and formal grammar. The music videos in this book engage infrastructure in their ‘physical’ (e.g. council estate spaces, roads, public transportation) and more abstract sense (privatization, securitization, spatial segregation). Audiovisual engagements with infrastructure are not only limited to the content level of the videos and their representations but extends to their formal dimension as well: As an example from this book, Jorja Smith’s music video “Blue Lights” (see chapter 2) opens with the shot of a Black body followed by one of a tower block, drawing attention to their material (and bodily) structure. The shot of the tower block at night contains several lighted windows, making viewers aware that what is often perceived as a monolithic symbol in British cultural discourses is, in fact, made up of various flats and structures. Subsequently, as if to provide windows into the individual lives of its inhabitants, the music video features portrait-style shots of diverse Black boys and men of different ages and backgrounds. In this way, the music video compartmentalizes both the archetypes of the estate tower and the Black male body framed in British cultural imaginaries into various fragments, drawing attention to its complexities. The music video subsequently refuses to build up another ‘towering’ structure and places the images/parts of the estate after one another, and in many ways on an equal level, along its temporal progression.

As council estate tower blocks are translated into malleable bars and units in audio and video production software, so, too, then do these ways of cultural engineering and the resulting audiovisual texts, in return, shape the city. Overarchingly, I follow Henri Lefebvre’s understanding of space as socially produced and I view music videos as producing *representational spaces* “linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life, as also to art” (33) and as spaces “directly lived through its associated images and symbols” (39; emphasis in original), reappropriating, transforming, and rupturing the orderly and regulatory patternings of space enacted by societal

institutions and mechanisms. In *Post-Cinematic Affect* (2010), philosopher and visual arts scholar Steven Shaviro argues that music videos are “affective maps” which “do not just passively trace or represent, but actively construct and perform, the social relations, flows, and feelings that they are ostensibly ‘about.’” (6) Shaviro here acknowledges that music videos are not just *about* infrastructural patterns but contribute to producing the city *through* their own audiovisual form. In today’s age, in which the ‘physical’ city and its digital materiality are increasingly conflated and intertwined, “[i]n this environment, where all phenomena pass through a stage of being processed in the form of digital code, we cannot meaningfully distinguish between ‘reality’ and its multiple simulations; they are all woven together in one and the same fabric.” (Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic* 7) Railton and Waston moreover note that in the contemporary cityscape, screens are no longer bound to the cinema or the private home alone “but are now increasingly essential features of the street, the architecture of building facades, and the interior design of public leisure spaces.” (7) With research in cultural urban studies, we can understand the audiovisual text of a music video “both as descriptive models of cities ... and as prescriptive blueprints for cities (i.e. the more recent discussion of texts and their role in blueprinting and scenario building for cities).” (Gurr 195; emphasis in original) Audiovisuality – and the audiovisual representational spaces sustained through music video – actively partake in shaping the ‘fabric’ of the city, they produce space and spacings as part of the city. If, in David Harvey’s reading of the Lefebvrian ‘right to the city,’ such interventions claim “to rebuild and re-create the city” in a “completely different image” (Harvey 138), music videos un- and rebuild the urban fabric through their moving audioimages.

The select Black British music videos in this book articulate their claims to the city and reconstructions of it through a pronounced architectural and infrastructural audiovisual grammar and semantics. I remain intrigued by how grime poet Deborah ‘Debris’ Stevenson described her return to grime as a poetic inspiration for her performance poetry in a 2016 interview: “I felt like I had undergone this slight gentrification of myself by accident. ... I felt like I needed to return to a lot of where I had come from, and part of that journey has been returning to grime *infrastructurally*.” (ICA 2016, also qtd. in Wacker 262; own emphasis added) Stevenson here constructs herself as a gentrified ‘city’ and grime is her infrastructure, an alternative way of conceiving of and shaping the city, herself, and her art, which serves to tear down this internal gentrification again. Through their ways of cultural engineering music videos, Black British creatives also lay claim to the socially constructed and mediated figure of the architect and the engineer, which have in the case of (British) music video, mostly been White (and male).¹⁸ Take for instance, British femcee Flohio’s lyrical assertion in “SE16” (God Colony feat. Flohio, 2016; dir. Alexander Brown) a track/music video which is seemingly anchored in South East London: “Building my own house using nothing but rhythm.” (2:30–2:32) In a sense, Flohio takes the

stance of a builder but is also the architect and engineer of her own ‘house’, which is in this moment the track and music video, sustained and built through its rhythmic patterns and her own flow across it.

In dialogue with literary critic Dominic Davies, who has written about the *infrastructural form* of urban comics engaging the global city, I conceive of music videos as similarly infrastructural. Davies writes:

the co-mixed, criss-crossed and multivalent cultures of urban public spaces resonate with graphic narratives’ formally co-mixed infrastructure of text and image. Moreover, comics’ tendency to splice and visually *re-mix* a range of alternative architectural, social and often subcultural perspectives in conflicting and provocative ways are constitutively *urban*. (Davies 15; emphasis in original)

Similarly, the formal grammar of music videos consists of moving images, frames and cuts, pulsating with and pushing back against sonic rhythmic patterns. While urban comics are texts which, on the page, may mirror the grid patterns of city plans in their infrastructural grammar, we might think of music video, also in their more direct address of the viewer, as taking those plans street view: They position characters within space and *amidst* infrastructures as well as *through* their own networked, multimodal form. If urban comics “decipher through their form the infrastructural production of discriminatory urban environments, while simultaneously suggesting alternative—and if informal, often common—modes of urban habitation and public reconstruction,” (Davies 16) so, too, I suggest, do the individual Black British music videos assembled in this book lay open, stall, and disrupt oppressive and racialized flows, patterns, and infrastructures within the neoliberal city.

If, as anthropologist Brian Larkin asserts in the essay “The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure” (2013) that infrastructures are in their most concise definition “matter that enable the movement of other matter” (329), I am interested in the forms of collective memory and spatial resistance these texts, both individually and through their relations, mobilize as various unruly counterpoints across the neoliberal city, traversing the city’s infrastructural and spatialized violence. Scholarship in the field of Black geography, which has thought to highlight how racialized forms of violence are produced and retained spatially (McKitterick 2006; Woods and McKitterick 2007; Neely and Samura 2011; Shabazz 2015; Brand 2018), provides another avenue of thought through which we can grasp the music videos in this book, and the various relations which open between them, as a Black audiovisual infrastructure and mnemonic mobilizer. In her article “Roads, Routes, and Roots: The (Im)Possible Spatial Mnemonics of Black Infrastructure,” (2018) geographer Symon James-Wilson calls for an understanding of infrastructure in Black (diasporic) cultures which refuses to be tied to the traditional vocabulary and tools in infrastructure research and urban geography. James-Wilson points out with regard to Black

geography: “While Black peoples have historically been positioned as ‘out-of-place’ or ‘placeless’ in Geography, black infrastructure and black geographies suggest that the discipline might engage with Black spatialities differently.” (n.pag.) In her article James-Wilson makes the case for understanding songs and musicians as Black sonic infrastructures which mobilize memory and carry forms of resistance across generations and space. She delineates her understanding of what she terms “the spatial mnemonics of black infrastructure” as follows:

the spatial mnemonics of black infrastructure refers to the spatialized forms of collective remembering and forgetting Black people have carried on slave ships, on terrestrial and Underground railroads, by foot, by freight, via airplane, and in a present day context, on social media sites and music streaming apps. ... Spatial mnemonics of black infrastructure might also include an array of other place-making practices and sensory geographies that include: the visual, the guttural, the olfactory, the visceral, the emotional and the bloody. (James-Wilson n.pag.)

Acknowledging music video as a Black audiovisual infrastructure – and part of a larger Black mnemonic infrastructure – then provides a pathway for these audiovisual texts “to enter into, and challenge, traditional geographic formulations without the familiar tools of maps, charts, official records and figures” (McKitterick xxii). As we will see throughout this book, Black British music videos both individually and conversing across texts, mobilize forms of resistance to spatialized and infrastructural violence and collective memory across space and time. How then, this book asks, do Black British music videos set into motion the spatial parameters, demarcations, and codifications affecting urban space in Britain?

Understanding songs and music videos as Black audiovisual infrastructure which mobilizes collective memory and forms of resistance across space and time, reverberates, most succinctly, perhaps, in hip-hop culture, to which the Black musical and audiovisual forms in this book connect. Hip-hop emerged in the 1970s Bronx, in part as a response to the spatial confinements of its surroundings. The term hip-hop itself, as music journalist Jeff Chang has noted, can be traced to house parties and youth dances played at local churches, often referred to as “hippity hops” or “hip-hops.” (n.pag.) Hip hop potentially denotes an epistemology of movement: “As for ‘hip,’ the scholar Clarence Major has linked the word to the Wolof verb *hepi* (‘to see’). ... Hip-hops, we might imagine, could literally be places of vision, and where masses could feel free to move.” (Chang n.pag.) With hip-hop music and culture as a response to the spatial segregation and confinement in New York’s Bronx, its core practices, the sampling and looping of breakbeats as well as the MCs flow across it, spatialized the city differently, playing it back and rewinding it seemingly without an end as a space-clearing gesture toward unrestricted movement. In this sense, however, hip hop and the Black technology of cutting and mixing are an expres-

sion of and sustained through the underlying infrastructure, or un/infrastructure, perhaps, of diasporic Blackness: disjointed routings across space which refuse to be firmly and orderly located but thrive through their disjuncture, frictions, and scatterings.

While many of the music videos in this book engage with distinctly *British* cultural imaginaries, ideological narratives, and material conditions, they display a sensibility that Blackness extends beyond these geographical boundaries and as such, it may be the very un/infrastructure of Blackness, the dis/orderly and fugitive, which provides a counterpoint to the exclusionary visions of the city which neoliberal urban transformations and their imperial underpinnings have produced. In approaching Black British music video, audiovisual scholars Alessandra Raengo and Lauren McLeod Cramer observe in their instructive essay “The Unruly Archives of Black Music Videos” that “[c]ontemporary Black music videos form linkages across the field of Black visual art at the same time that they play in the unruly archives of Black sound.” (144) In as much as Black diasporic sound and music have “mobilized an alternative episteme of the ear” (Perkinson 85) which interfere with highly racialized, ocular forms of knowledge, music video, with its visualization of music and musicalization of vision, creates a tense form in which these epistemologies clash and are potentially rerouted.

The neoliberal city as shared imaginary

This book moves with its music videos within and across what I will refer to as *the neoliberal city*, which emerges from the music videos as a joint imaginary of hegemonic formations within the cityscape sustained by uneven development and territorialized spatial segregation. This neoliberal city, as it can be mapped from within the music videos, is traversed by various violent, racializing infrastructures which seek to structure and order it at the expense of minoritarian being and for the benefits of the few and private capital investment. With *Black British Music Video*, I supplement already existing scholarship on grime music (video) culture with a comprehensive study as to how Black British music videos, as individual audiovisual texts as well as relationally and collectively as an audiovisual infrastructure, for one, intervene into how the neoliberal city is experienced and, secondly, seek to produce alternative spatializations through which urban space can be remapped.

As such, the music videos frequently make visible the “planned violence” (Boehmer and Davies 2018) of twenty-first-century neoliberal urbanity in the UK. Working from Johan Galtung’s idea of ‘structural violence,’ i.e. violence “built into the structure” of society that “shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances” (Galtung 170–71), Boehmer and Davies note that forms of planned violence, which manifest, as they suggest, most strikingly perhaps in

postcolonial cities (and transplantations thereof), often “remain invisible, deeply embedded within the spatial and infrastructural configurations of contemporary city life.” (Boehmer and Davies 9) In the edited collection *Planned Violence: Post/Colonial Urban Infrastructures, Literature and Culture* (2018), Boehmer and Davies, together with their contributors, explore how “the infrastructures of literary form and genre speak to and move against the violent restrictions of urban infrastructures” (4) and ask how cultural texts “excavate, expose and challenge such violence” (5). Similarly, Black British music videos expose the infrastructural violence within the neoliberal cityscape through their fictionalizations, and they bring to the fore various racialized, classed, and gendered dimensions inscribed into and fostered by neoliberalizing processes in the twenty-first century British city. We can see this, for instance, in Bob Vylan’s music video “Northern Line” (chapter 4), which audiovisualizes what philosopher Gabriel O. Apata terms ‘racial suffocation’ in a pandemic London cityscape. The music video urges viewers to witness the aftereffects of racialized violence inscribed into the cityscape erupt as its Black British protagonist is chased through a deserted tube station by his own psychological anxieties.

Like my use of the term ‘Black British’ in this book, also ‘neoliberal city’ is a disputed term. As political scientists Gilles Pinson and Christelle Morel Journel note, “[t]o a certain extent, expressions such as ‘neoliberalism’, ‘neoliberal city’ or ‘neoliberal urbanism’ are misleading since most of the scholars are studying a process – and more precisely *processes* – rather than a state.” (140) I do not intend my use of ‘neoliberal city’ in this book to refer to a finished state. Rather, I use it in awareness of the on-going neoliberalizing processes which continue to shape formations and imaginations of cityscapes across Britain. I use ‘the neoliberal city’ as an umbrella term to map a common imaginary of hegemonic urban formations which the music videos in this book take to task and which encompasses various neoliberalizing processes and infrastructures. Most importantly, these include austerity politics, the increasing deregulation, privatization, and gentrification of formerly public space and property, far-reaching securitization (including surveillance techniques), state-sanctioned punitive measures which police space and people situated within them as well as resulting neocolonial, segregationist patterns within dualizing cityscapes. Sociologist Loic Wacquant emphasizes that new forms of state-sanctioned punitive measures are quintessential to the mechanisms of neoliberalization:

the neo-liberal state bolstered and redeployed its policing, judicial and carceral apparatus to stem the disorders caused by the diffusion of social insecurity at the bottom of the ladder of classes and places, and staged the garish spectacle of *law-and-order pornography* to reaffirm the authority of a government wanting in legitimacy due to having forsaken its established duties of social and economic protection. (1695; emphasis in original)

As such, “the expansion and glorification of the penal arm of the state (centered on the prison in the USA and led by the police in the EU) is not an anomalous deviation from or a corruption of neo- liberalism but, on the contrary, is one of its core constituent components.” (Wacquant 1694) Geographers Steve Herbert and Elizabeth Brown stress that one key characteristic of neoliberal cities is that – not unlike in former colonies – social divisions are built into spatial ones (756). They note that, through establishing property protection, housing zones and policies which “support private property and capital investment, and the increasing regulation of behavior in public space, state intervention shapes the spatial manifestations of urban capitalism.” (Herbert and Brown 765) Such regulatory mechanisms within urban environments and the contest between aspiring “world-class cities” over capital investment in the global neoliberal sphere consequently results in what urban theorists Steve Graham and Simon Marvin have termed ‘splintering urbanism’ (2001), i.e. an “unbundling” of infrastructural networks that stratifies cities through increasingly complex layers of privatization” (Boehmer and Davies 12), which limit and erase the access to public space for unwanted, marginalized communities wanting to exert their right to the city.

The neoliberal city can be mapped as a *joint* imaginary and spatial topos – a constitutive outside – across the various music videos which extends beyond their individual, fictionalized urban locations – e.g. London, Birmingham, Walsall, and Manchester – across England, although neoliberalization manifests differently across the country and within cities in the UK. As such, neoliberalizing processes foster varying forms of uneven development on both national and local scales. As it is the case for England, London and its surrounding areas attract more investment and attention and thus largely benefit compared to the North of England. (Jessop 1735) In London, for example, segregationist patterns across the city fostered by on-going neoliberalization are comparatively difficult to disentangle, with council estates mingling with adjacent, upper-class villas. While “[s]ome cities are divided between distinct geographical binaries”, London “weaves its divisions into a fine mesh, like the netting that stops pigeons gathering underneath railway bridges.” (Hancox, *Inner City* 10) Yet, we can identify, for instance, a geographical imbalance between the inner-city and London’s East End (grime’s first cultural hub) – with Hackney, Newham, and Tower Hamlets consistently appearing among the most disenfranchised local boroughs in the entire country. (Hancox, *Inner City* 13) Although these urban transformations date back to Thatcherite politics and large-scale deregulation in the 1980s, they were crucially shaped and continued by Tony Blair and David Cameron’s legislations. In the context of this book, New Labour’s Urban Regeneration plan and the Tory specter of a Broken Britain provide two powerful political agendas and ideological narratives which legitimized neoliberal policies and further entrenched exclusionary transformations of the city. As Dan Hancox notes regarding the construction of Canary Wharf in London, “[t]he

new millennium began with grime's inner city on one side, and an entirely different, largely new kind of inner city growing rapidly to take its place: expensive, monocultural, private, surveilled and planned from the very top by Tony Blair's government." (*Inner City* 12) As much as grime was affected by the socio-spatial stratifications within London and set out to challenge them, this book highlights how music videos have taken their fair share in undermining how the neoliberal city is imagined and sustained.

It is worth mentioning that the engagements with the neoliberalizing infrastructures of the city this book charts in select Black British music videos resonate with earlier negotiations of metropolitan geographies and attendant spatialized (and racialized) violence in Black British writing and film. This means that, in many ways, the overarching contexts and political, economic, and social issues which the select music videos in this book engage are not entirely new concerns. As such, the music videos in this book stand in a history of struggle against spatialized violence and ideological exclusion of Black British and other minority ethnic communities. In his book *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (2004), John McLeod notes with regard to literary representations of London in Black and Asian British literature that such writing

often bears stark witness to the subaltern lives and fortunes of those rendered other or marginal in a frequently hostile and unwelcoming city where prejudices towards newcomers have been, and still can be, found within employment, housing, government and the Metropolitan Police. (4)

The musicians and creatives in this book – many of them not newcomers but living in London or other cities across the country in the second or third generation – sense a similar hostility, which is, as this book takes as its core premise, deeply built into the structure of a continuously neoliberalizing city. This book then locates the music videos alongside other cultural texts which have worked against racialized power dynamics built into and enacted within the city – and sought alternative articulations of Black British belonging to and imaginings of the city – which has been a primary concern for diasporic communities in Britain for long.

The ends as beginnings: Journeying along

As this book moves along the music videos through the imagined neoliberal city, it starts within those bounded inner-city spaces, which are continuously reproduced by the multifaceted spatial segregation amidst the neoliberal city and maintained as its necessary constitutive outsides: council estate spaces and their multiethnic working-class neighborhood communities. As briefly mentioned earlier in this in-

roduction and unpacked in more detail in chapter 2 of this book, grime music and grime music videos, for example, are inextricably tied in their poetics and aesthetics to council estates spaces.¹⁹ Many youth who have grown up in the inner-city over the past decades, including grime and drill musicians, refer to their respective local neighborhoods as their ‘ends’. Both in everyday speech, across Black cultural textualities, and in scholarship, ‘the ends’ is frequently understood as being expressive of a particular locality and of a *placed*, territorial identity. In her sociological article “Growing Up in ‘The Ends’: Identity, Place and Belonging in an Urban East London Neighbourhood,” (2019) Joy White writes that “‘the ends’ is a colloquial term used by young people in urban settings to denote their local neighbourhoods.” (“Ends” 17) These locations, then, provide “comfort zones where those that reside within them may acquire social and cultural capital.” (White, “Ends” 21) Its usage in British inner-city slang, and also in many lyrics, is similar to that of the term ‘hood’ in U.S. American hip hop jargon, and both terms are used quite interchangeably in Black British musical culture today.²⁰ In grime MC Novelist’s self-directed music video “Endz” (2015) this sense of a territorial, placed identity becomes apparent:

I come from the ends
 My mandem grew up on the ends
 All day I’m in the ends
 Waste mandem can’t come to the ends
 (0:56–1:02)

While the lyrics in the music video do not disclose the exact location of these ends, its visuals locate them in a neighborhood in South East London (as per a ‘SE4’ graffiti sprayed on a wall). As the lyrics tell listeners, the lyrical I remains within the confines of the ends and does not – or is not able to – leave them. At the same time, however, outsiders cannot (or are not allowed to) come to the ends. Such territorial framings in grime music and music videos have led scholars like Emily Caston to point out that grime “abounds with neighbourhood anthems” (Caston, *British Music Videos* 127). Even though I acknowledge the validity of such readings, especially since I see many music videos working through the harsh realities of ‘postcode wars’ taking place across British cities as they reproduce their territorial affiliations, this book provides an intervention as it adds to this perspective alternative readings of the ends as both spatial configuration and approach to the city which, by and large, emerge from the music videos in this study. This book, then, seeks to make visible nodal points in select music videos which allow to conceive of the ends not primarily as a territorialized, bounded space but as fugitive lines of flight which strain the seemingly territorial boundaries of the concept and cut across the demarcations produced through the city’s neoliberalizing geography.

When I first began researching the term ‘ends’, E.M. Forster’s novel *Howards End* (1910) came to mind, which I had taught in a class on Edwardian Fiction while this project was developing. In the novel, *Howards End* is the name of a fictional colonial country estate which belongs to the wealthy Wilcox family. The affix ‘End’ can frequently be found in the name of British country houses or heritage sites such as Audley End in the near of Saffron Walden, Essex. The term ‘ends’, as it has resurfaced in Black British inner-city language and culture, thus also carries imperial implications: While it can be regarded a signifying practice on the term, elevating council estates to the status of heritage sites and making visible the very classed and racialized dimensions of these spatialities, its palimpsestic character also echoes the violent, historical legacy of British country estates vis-à-vis Blackness. Black British music videos have addressed this tension: Dizze Rascal’s “I Don’t Need a Reason” (2013; dir. Emile Sornin), a Black neo-Victorian take on the multidimensional estate signifier, features an all-Black cast in a country house. Through video loops, which strain a linear sense of time, grotesque bodily movements, and afrosurrealist imagery, the video brings to the fore the absurdities of rendering estates as historically White spaces. In “Still Broke” (feat. Keyon Harrold, 2021; dir. Jim Pilling) jazz musician Samm Henshaw, featuring as a character in the video, temporarily lives in a historical mansion.²¹ Despite the wealth the building suggests, Henshaw’s character is sad, ‘broke’ as per the title, and, in many ways, unfree. When a Black gardener tells him that he does not actually live in the heritage mansion during the video’s climatic reveal, Henshaw seems to levitate and float out of the building, relieved and happy that he does not have to live in this property with its various imperial undercurrents (3:03–4:03).²² In R&B and soul artist Pip Millett’s “Running” (feat. Ghetts, 2021; dir. KC Locke), the protagonist finds herself entrapped in what appears to be a country estate, haunted by the building and not finding a way out. The music video, which is also reminiscent of Jordan Peele’s horror movie *Get Out* (2017), contains self-reflexive moments focusing on the Whiteness of paintings and art decorating the interior walls, suggesting that such representational spaces cannot house Blackness. In Millett’s words: “Black and free, I don’t think it’s a thing, no, no.” Through the country house, the artefacts, and the paintings it houses, the music video makes visible the “cultural infrastructure” of postcolonial melancholia (Gilroy, *Melancholia* 14) in Britain and its impact on its Black British population, which both spatially and imaginatively entrap and haunt Blackness. These different music videos, engaging the ends via their palimpsestic, historical routings produce anachronistic frictions and debate the vexed relationship between former imperial residences, today still indicative of misguided British longings for a ‘prosperous’ imperial past, and contemporary, disenfranchised inner-city spaces under neoliberal politics.

During late-night internet searches I also stumbled upon a vinyl record titled “Pon De Ends” (2000) by Jamaican artist Assassin/Agent Sasco. This convergence between Jamaica and Britain – and the imperial underpinnings of the term – intrigued

me. Not being a linguist myself, I approached Paul Kerswill, who has researched the development of linguistic varieties within British cities and London in particular, and asked him about the term. He could not point me towards a clear origin of the term. Similar searches across linguistic platforms which are concerned with Jamaican varieties of English also did not produce significant results. The Backyard Magazine's online patois index, however, lists 'ends' as a colloquial word for "home, familiar place" (n.pag.) in Jamaican patois. The term 'ends', then, is used similarly to the word 'yard'. What I *could* find out is that 'ends' is a common term used both within vernacular inner-city slang across England, and what has been termed 'multilingual London English' especially, as well as in Jamaican patois. Has it travelled to Jamaica with imperialists and migrated back to the UK as repossessed linguistic luggage among people, their suitcases, and recordings from the Caribbean? At some point, I decided not to dig any further and come up with a distinct explanation. Instead, I want to use these fruitful, opaque origins – in a very Glissantian sense – to suggest a notion of 'the ends' as a transitive signifier which floats along the circulatory routings of Black/British/ness and challenges the territorialized framings which the term 'ends' often is said to evoke. As we will find out as this book progresses, I see this potential realized in many of the selected music videos – to varying degrees and in different ways – which allow for a reconceptualization of the idea of the ends not solely as a placed and territorial identity but deterritorializing lines of flight along which conceptualization of space in the contemporary neoliberal city may be unhinged and rerouted.

These ideas on digital music videos and their deterritorializing potential is further underpinned by Malcolm James's research on grime YouTube videos in *Sonic Intimacy*. James notes that in the era of YouTube, "[f]rom city wide call-ins and rewinds, the dialogues of the city were now increasingly online – simultaneously hyperlocal and deterritorialized." (87) This idea of 'hyperlocality,' according to James, describes "the intensification, through social media platforms, of already existing neighbourhood localisms and is evident in many amateur YouTube grime videos." (James 87) Such hyperlocalisms are produced through the patterns of infrastructural violence in the city and fostered by "the limited mobility of many grime protagonists, by the closing down of former sites of sociability – pirate radio stations, record stores, club nights and youth clubs – and by the policing of the remaining available public spaces – street corners, parks and stairwells." (James 87) At the same time, however, James notes that the accessibility of grime music videos online, e.g. on YouTube, reroutes their flows and deterritorializes the dialogues between medium and viewers across space in contrast to more analogous contexts like pirate radio sessions: "[t]hese multiple hyperlinked horizons, interlocutors and social contexts move as digital bits through networked space in several directions at once" (James 88). For now, venturing into this book, I would like to shift attention away from the ends as expressive of a territorial and firmly *placed location* to audiovisual *acts of producing* the ends across

the imagined neoliberal city through which its predominant spatial demarcations and codifications may be challenged and alternative spatializations be sustained.

Moving with music videos, moving through this book

Based on the various theoretical strands outlined in this introduction, subsequently this book moves with the chapters through their shared imaginary of the neoliberal cityscape: In terms of its settings, the book journeys from this introduction to grime music videos and those spaces mostly associated with the genre, council estate spaces and its neighborhood communities (chapters 2 and 3); to an underground tube station (chapter 4); a private, inner-city mansion (chapter 5); and into the gentrifying city center (chapter 6) and thus across the imagined neoliberal city into its heartland. While all chapters can be mapped with the overarching approach this book follows, they also stand as individual case studies which bring to the fore different insights on Black British representational spaces and Black British music video filmmaking. The various cultural imaginaries and artistic lineages, which the case studies in the chapters draw on, warrant individual and extensive contextualization in each chapter. Given the overwhelming amount of Black British music videos produced over the past two decades, this book had to be selective in its scope. I thus tried to bring together examples which, I think, provide valuable insights into how urban space can potentially be remapped with and through Black British music videos. As this book is concerned with music videos which strain the common codification and spatialization of urban space in Britain, I largely refrained from analyzing those music videos, for instance, which, indeed, engage the ends, and urban space generally, in a more territorial sense.

As the first nodal point along the journey through this book, chapter 2, “Unruly council estates”, provides a substantial engagement with the history of grime music and music video culture, highlighting how grime’s emergence around the millennium responded to the spatial confinements affecting East London’s council housing communities at the time. With recourse to Dizze Rascal’s seminal grime album *Boy In Da Corner* (2003) and examples of early grime music videos, I show that grime culture sought to undermine the territorial confinements the continuous neoliberalization of urban space imposed onto them from the genre’s early stages onward. The chapter then reads Dizze Rascal’s music video “Sirens” (2007) as narratively unpacking the boy in the corner trope as it sheds light on the planned violence which affects Black working-class communities within the neoliberal city. Jorja Smith’s “Blue Lights” (2018), which, as I suggest, *audiovisually* samples Dizze Rascal’s music video ten years later, is concerned with deconstructing the towering cultural archetypes of both the estate and the Black male criminal. Reading “Sirens” *against* “Blue Lights” also allows me to make visible conceptual frictions between the

two music videos, their relations and conversations, which also afford a different, infrastructural understanding as to how Black British music videos approach and re-map urban space.

Chapter 3, “Making the manor”, turns to the audiovisual art of grime artist Kano. The chapter offers insights into how the manor, a representational space which binds back yet extends beyond Manor Road in East Ham, in Kano’s work relates to concept of the ‘hood’ and the ends, which this book has set out to explore in this introduction. Understanding Kano’s work as actively debating the very ramifications as to how neighborhood communities may be represented in music video, I suggest that the music videos analyzed in this chapter can be read as producing the manor as an audiovisual configuration, an affective *site of encounter*. Through their intricate *discours* which features various extra- and intra-diegetic camera installations, the music videos “T-Shirt Weather in the Manor” (2016) and “Trouble” (2019) approximate the felt ecology of sound at a sound system concert and a pirate radio session, respectively, placing viewers as part of its implied resident community and enacting the manor as a shared, convivial audiovisual configuration which strains common understandings of resident and stranger amidst urban space.

Moving from the settings in the first two chapters which are, in the common sense of the term, most often associated with the ends, council estates and working-class neighborhood communities, in chapter 4, “On lockdown”, I sketch how several music videos have responded to the intensification of spatialized and infrastructural violence during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially for multiethnic working-class communities and Britain’s Black working-class population. In dialogue with Achille Mbembe’s notion of the universal right to breath and Gabriel O. Apata’s notion of racial suffocation, which use the spread of the coronavirus to point out how the right to breath has been unequally distributed between countries and among their populations, I suggest that the music videos in this chapter, including Bugzy Malone’s “Welcome to the Hood” (2021), Bob Vylan’s “Northern Line” (2020), and Flohio’s “Roundtown” (2021) make instances of racial suffocation audible. Overarching, the music videos in this chapter use the pandemic and the pandemic cityscape as a foil to make forms of planned violence and structural chokings within the public spheres of the city, which have affected Black Britons long before the pandemic and manifest belatedly, more strikingly visible.

Chapter 5, “Kojey Radical’s Black ‘urban’ minstrelsy”, unpacks the layerings of Kojey Radical’s contemporary take on the contested Black minstrelsy tradition. Overperforming Blackness to expose how *inauthentic* stereotypings of ‘urban’ Blackness are, the music video “Bambu” also engages with the codifications of urban space within Black British music video culture as it blends the genres of UK drill music video and fashion film. Radical’s music video “After Winter”, the main case study in this chapter, suggests to read the neoliberalization of urban space and its attendant infrastructures of planned violence in terms of a private mansion. The

video draws on the genre of home invasion films as its intrusion into the private mansion estranges the homeliness and privacy the neoliberal city sustains, as the music video suggests, for the benefits of a White and male entrepreneurial elite along racial, classed, and gendered lines. The music video also allows for a radically different spatialization of the ends: The ends are routed in the music video along the flows of the Black Atlantic as a translocal articulation that connects various locations across space-time. As such, it also allows “After Winter” to make visible the imperial undercurrents which undergird the neoliberalization of urban space in Britain.

The last content chapter, “Birmingham Ghoul” (chapter 6), analyzes the music videos of trap metal artist Scarlxrd. Unlike the other case studies in this book, Scarlxrd’s art actively debates the role of the digital and *digital* music video for articulating Black British cultural identities. His post-digital art and the music video “HEART ATTACK” especially, in which also the city emerges as wired and cyborgian, borrows heavily from the Japanese anime series *Tokyo Ghoul*. In the chapter, I argue that Scarlxrd’s persona and the music video offer a deterritorializing, schizophrenic potential as they seek to produce glitches and audiovisual anarchitectural cuttings through the regulatory flows and patterning of the neoliberal city as cultural imaginary. In so doing, Scarlxrd’s art adds to the chapters in this book as it brings to the fore the interstitial character of Blackness and suggests that urban space may be reconfigured precisely through a stronger investment in practices of continuous un/building instead of producing new territorializations.